ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: TWO MOTHERS AND ONE CHILD: ADOPTIVE MOTHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH BIRTH MOTHERS IN OPEN ADOPTION

Deborah A. Krichbaum, Doctor of Philosophy, 1993

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The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of adoptive mothers with birth mothers in open adoption in order to illuminate these experiences and the understandings which underpin these relationships. In-depth, repeated conversations with the researcher focused on the ongoing, everyday experiences these adoptive mothers have with the birth mothers of their children and provided the text for this study.

The study's research methodology was hermeneutic phenomenology. Themes that emerged from the texts of the conversations were used to reveal the meanings of why each woman came to be in an open adoption, the essence of their experiences being the adoptive mother of a child, and the life they share with the child's birth mother.

The researcher's written reflections explore what it means to be an adoptive mother in an open adoption by focusing on the boundaries that these women experienced with mothers, adoptive mothers in closed adoptions, and birth mothers. Special attention is given to meaning of the experiences of naming the child, being entitled to the child, terms for the child's birth mother, contact with the child's birth mother, and the own-child relationship. The meanings and

understandings revealed in this study were validated intersubjectively with the participants.

The writing reveals the personal biography of the researcher and how her phenomenological work with the adoptive mothers created new possibilities for seeing the adoptive experience. Implications for curricula in family life education include recommendations for exploring the meaning of involuntary childlessness, the meaning of being a family, and the meaning of parenting.

TWO MOTHERS AND ONE CHILD: ADOPTIVE MOTHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH BIRTH MOTHERS IN OPEN ADOPTION

by

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DEDICATION

To Dan and Anna, where it all began, with my deepest affection. Your very presence drew me away from myself into a richer, more rewarding world and to a more authentic way of being.

And to Linda and John, with my deepest gratitude. Without your courageous and trusting offer this research would never have occurred.

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I appreciate the funding given by Gallaudet University to support my graduate study and for the grant which provided for transcription of the recorded conversations produced in this study.

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CHAPTER I. TURNING TO A PHENOMENON IN LIVED EXPERIENCE

My interest in the experience of two mothers and one child is a personal one. I would like to begin by explaining how I came to be interested in the phenomenon. The following account describes my first recognition of how important it is to me to understand this experience.

Orientation to the Phenomenon

Mother's Day, 1987. My first. Anna, just eight months old, stares intently at the white envelope she holds. Newly fascinated by paper of any kind, she tightly grasps both sides of the large, white rectangle. Mother's Day. My first. Her first. Absorbed by the treasure she holds in her hands, she continues to stare at it, unaware of her father's beaming face as he carries her toward me. Mother's Day. Our first together as a family. Prompted and guided by her father, Anna surrenders her treasure to me. Overwhelmed by the rush of feelings I experience, I reach out to take the offered envelope--her treasure, now mine, an exchange I will never forget.

My first Mother's Day experience with my daughter Anna is an important one in my rich and multi-layered memories of her as my daughter, and of myself as her mother. Within these memories of our lives together, it is often the first-time events we have shared that draw my attention--my first sight of her emerging newborn body, her first time in my welcoming arms, the joy of bringing her home, and countless other precious first events that led up to that first Mother's Day and followed thereafter. Important events, especially those representing first-time experiences, give shape and texture to our lives.

Later in the day on that first Mother's Day, I experienced another unforgettable experience, this time via a long distance phone call.

Me: "Hello?"
Linda: "Happy Mother's Day!"
Me: "Thank you!"
Linda: "I wanted to call you on your first Mother's Day."

Simple. Too simple; deceptively simple and therefore false. The conversation I just transcribed on paper seems so totally ordinary, so mundane that it fades into nothingness. In fact, the words that Linda and I exchanged were incredibly powerful, complex, and unusual. Only by re-reading the words of the conversation with a knowledge of our shared history, with an understanding of the connections between Linda, Anna and myself, do the words of the conversation take on their true shape and meaning. Yes, Linda called to wish me a happy Mother's Day. Why is that unusual? Linda is Anna's mother. Why is that complex? I am Anna's mother. We are Anna's two mothers. Linda gave birth to Anna and is her birth mother. I adopted Anna and am her adoptive mother.

On August 22, 1986, Anna was born. Linda and I were there together, working together to bring Anna into the world. I coached Linda in her labor. She coached the doctor that I should be the one to whom Anna was given, the woman she had chosen to be Anna's mother. Shortly after, with Anna in my arms, I carried her to be face-to-face with Linda. Along that path--Linda's womb to my arms--Anna's dual mothers were created and bound together, two women united by a shared dream for Anna's future and the life she will have.

Immediately after Anna's birth, Linda was too exhausted and I was too exhilarated to even consider the complexities of our dual mother status. Only later, with time and with experiences such as Linda's Mother's Day phone call, did questions related to this complexity rise up so powerfully that they demanded confronting.

Yes, Linda called to wish me a happy Mother's Day. What does this say about the relationship that Linda and I share as Anna's mothers? What does this say about what Mother's Day represents? How did I earn the right to be honored on Mother's Day? Is my right the same as a woman who gives birth to and raise a child? What role does birth have in our understanding of the meaning of mother? Of mothering? If there is more than one way to become a mother, is each way equal in the eyes of society? What must one do or be in order to be entitled to celebrate Mother's Day?

Relationships in Adoption

Adoption establishes permanent, legal parent-child relationships between an adult and child. The legal system of each state has the power to grant adoptions; adoption services are offered by adoption professionals who facilitate and support adoptions. An adoption-related language has developed over time as participants in adoptions, adoption lawyers, and adoption social workers have struggled to choose words that reflect the realities they experience.

The Adoption Triangle

In the 1980s it became fashionable within the adoption community to refer to the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the adoptee as the adoption triad.

The term came from the title of a 1978 adoption-related book, The Adoption Triangle, written by Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor. Within the adoption triangle concept of adoption, Anna represents one point of the triangle, Anna's birth parents, Linda and John, represent another point of the triangle, and Dan and I as Anna's adoptive parents, represent the third point of the triangle. However useful the adoption triangle might be theoretically, it is a falsely polar representation of the adoption experience we share.

The Adoption Circle

During the 1990s, some researchers and writers in the adoption field have discarded the term adoption triangle. In its place, the term adoption circle is being used. The adoption circle continues to recognize the roles and relationships of the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees while acknowledging that the members of adoption, within the larger social and legal environment, form an interrelated system. Thus each continues to have a continued impact on each other's lives (Rosenberg, 1992).

Open Adoption

The five of us--Anna, her birth parents, and her adoptive parents--share a dynamic, on-going interaction. Within the adoption community, this too has a designation known as an "open adoption." What does it mean to say that we have an open adoption? That can only be understood in contrast to its opposite, "closed adoption." For almost five decades the standard American adoption policy has been to close off, in fact to sever, the connection between the birth parents and the child, a process Bissett-Johnson (1984) calls "the guillotine effect of adoption" (p. 217). This procedure prohibits birth parents and adoptive

parents from receiving identifying information about each other. As a consequence, they are denied the opportunity to establish and maintain relationships or to provide each other with information during the child's growing years.

An underlying premise of open adoption is that the process of adoption makes a child belong in two families, and as a consequence, joins those two families together (Watson, 1988). Thus an open adoption defies the conventional prohibition against exchange of identities or an on-going contact. Open adoption in fullest implementation presents the opportunity for the two sets of parents to develop relationships with each other and for the birth parents to maintain their connection to the child. Baran, Pannor, and Sorosky (1976) are credited with writing the first article to appear in professional social work journals on the topic of open adoption. In their article they describe the encouraging results they had experienced when they offered open adoption as an option to a limited number of birth mothers. They defined open adoption as the practice of adoption where "the birth parents meet the adoptive parents, participate in the separation and placement process, relinquish all legal, moral and nurturing rights to the child, but retain the right to continuing contact and knowledge of the child's whereabouts and welfare" (p. 97). Rappaport (1992) points out that in open adoption the birth parents and adoptive parents may have direct or indirect contact, but that in either "the type of frequency of this contact is based on the mutual needs of the birth parents, adopting parents and the adopted child" (p. 3).

There is no anonymity in the relationship between John and Linda and Dan and myself. We maintain the relationships we established before Anna was

born by on-going contact through letters, calls, visits, and exchanges of gifts on special occasions. Anna is fully involved in these relationships.

Our decision to choose and to maintain an open adoption has been widely questioned. These questions, and criticisms, come in many guises, but often can be distilled into the same concern: "Won't Anna be confused by having two sets of parents?" We, in turn, admit to being confused by this question. Anna, after all, does have two sets of parents, a fact of her being that we acknowledge and welcome. What to us would be infinitely more confusing would be to require Anna to live as if she didn't have two sets of parents. Obviously, society does not readily accept the concept that a child can have two sets of parents (Melina, 1986).

> A major stumbling block along the way appears to be a general lack of preparation for the notion that a person can have more than one set of parents. By its very unfamiliarity, the idea comes across as strange. For the understandable reason that most families entail only two parents, families characterized by multiple sets of parents tend to be regarded as alien. (Aigner, 1987, p. 4)

What stands behind the questions we are asked, however well intentioned? Do these questions merely represent a confusion about the ways families can be structured? Do these questions genuinely reflect a concern for Anna's welfare or for maintaining the status quo? Are these questions based on an unquestioned belief that the legal relinquishment of a child in adoption requires severing forever the emotional ties between those parents and their child? Or do they reflect a more punitive position, a belief that parents who arrange for their child's adoption should be punished and sentenced to forever wonder the fate of their child?

Is it possible these questions are founded on a fear that the relationship between birth parents and their child is so powerful, so mystical, so elemental--the essence of a blood relationship--that to invite Anna's birth parents into our lives invites Anna to turn away from us? Smith and Miroff (1981) encourage us to take a look at the well-known axiom: "Blood is thicker than water" (p. 25). Andersen (1993) points to the same saying and offers two more: "A chip off the old block" and "Like father, like son" (p. 104). These messages are just some of the countless comments adoptive parents receive from others, all sending the message that adoption is a second-rate way to become a family.

Is the issue simply a question of power relationships and conflicting rights? If so, whose rights are they considering--Dan's and my entitlement as Anna's adoptive parents, Linda's and John's entitlement as Anna's birth parents, or Anna's entitlement? Isn't Anna entitled to have full relationships with all of her parents? Can she do this and grow up undamaged by this complexity? Is it possible together the five of us can forge a way of being together that will allow each of us to be genuinely with each other and yet humanely whole?

Dan and I recognize that by participating in an open adoption we moved away from the shelter of tradition. By rejecting the idea that adoption relationships should be shrouded in secrecy and veiled by anonymity, we have propelled ourselves into a lesser-known territory, one with few guidelines to help us structure our lives to include Anna's birth parents. We have come to depend on our hearts to be our guides.

By opening our lives to Anna and her birth parents, we have also opened our lives to some unanswered questions. I, in particular, have come to realize

that there are many unanswered questions about the nature of the complex experiences we share. The need to answer these questions compels me to understand more about the path that we have taken, a path that is different from the one taken by most adoptive parents.

A Preview of the Methodology for this Study

An important task for each researcher is to make clear not only the research tradition that guides the research but also the assumptions and preunderstandings of that tradition. Why? Barritt (1986) explains in part when he says, "Science is not a single movement. It is actually several traditions" (p. 16). Each research tradition promotes a specific orientation to knowledge. According to Dean (1982), "all research topics and formats are dependent upon the experiences of the researcher and the type of understanding which is sought" (p. 101). Further, each research tradition incorporates a specific way of viewing the world, including assumptions about what counts as truth (van Manen, 1990). In order to better understand the questions I have about adoptive parents and birth parents in an open adoption, I have used the interpretive human science orientation known as hermeneutic phenomenology.

A Preview of Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology "tries to understand the everyday world of experience" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker & Mulderij, 1979, p. 7). According to Hultgren (1987), hermeneutic phenomenology asks, "What is a particular experience like?" (p. 6). In questioning this, hermeneutic phenomenology is focused on the social-interactive world of intentions, communication, acts, events,

and meanings. It seeks that which is universal about an experience in an effort to gain understanding of what it means for humans to experience being-in-the-world, for example, to understand the experiences of adoptive parents in a world where most parents are not adoptive parents. Understanding these experiences gives us a greater understanding of one form of 'Being' or 'be-ing,' in this case what it is to be an adoptive parent. This shared understanding is possible, says Kohak (1978), because of the commonality of human experiences.

> Even at its most ordinary it [life] presents a great deal of evidence that, though lived individually, human acts do exhibit an analogous structure . . . Facts may be culturally variable, but the basic structure of human experience does appear to be profoundly common. (pp. 5-6)

As a research method, hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded, discovery-oriented, exploratory, descriptive, and inductive. It depends on the voices, emotions, and actions of humans involved with a particular type of experience to produce data in the form of rich, detailed, vivid, real texts. The texts are generated by a researcher who is intimately involved in the research in a subject-to-subject relationship with the other research participants. Communication between the researcher and the research participants is assumed to be coherent and the beginning place for the quest for understanding the phenomenological experience is the life-world. Successful phenomenological inquiry "helps us understand and make sense of our lived human experience" (Hultgren, 1983, p. 23).

The Phenomenological Question

To begin my study I had to formulate the phenomenological question which would clearly identify the phenomenon I sought to understand. The task

of forming the phenomenological question, according to van Manen, is "largely a matter of identifying what it is that deeply interests oneself and of identifying that interest as a true phenomenon, i.e., as some experience that human beings live through" (1984b, p. 43). I knew that I wanted to better understand the complex experiences I have had with Anna's adoption, but struggled to identify which aspect of those experiences representes a real difference.

For a period of time, I believed that the entire focus of my research would be the entitlement experiences of adoptive mothers. Much later, I began to doubt that entitlement should be the focus of my research. Why? Because the entitlement question, while interesting, did not continue to genuinely engage me. Again and again I returned to Psathas' idea (1973, quoted in Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 31) that "phenomenological inquiry begins with silence." Bogdan and Biklen explain that this silence should be thought of as a mental space in which the researcher has mentally pushed away the distracting ideas that are clamoring for attention. By focusing ever more closely on distinguishing between distracting ideas and the essential idea the researcher is able to identify the real research interest. In spite of my reflection I could not find this sense of silence. Instead, I found countless questions, each demanding attention, a chorus of questions rather than one research question singing out in the silence. I returned to the writings of van Manen. According to van Manen, a phenomenological study "is a being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something" (1984a, p. 84). Van Manen also suggests that "the more thoroughly and the more persistently we pose a phenomenological question, the more deeply the question begins to reverberate in our living understanding" (1984a, p. 16).

Reverberate? Is van Manen's conception of the core research question reverberating somehow different from the silence Psathas wrote of and that Bogdan and Biklen explained?

When I immersed myself once again in my experiences with adoption, I discovered a research question central to my unique experience: What is it like for an adoptive mother to live in an open adoption with a birth mother? The first time I expressed this question, I found myself rocked by how powerfully the question reverberated in my mind.

> Reverberated? No.
> Shook. Shook me down to my very core--
> The core of my being.
> And shaken, I stood stock-still, taking stock.
> And in the silence and stillness came a knowing,
> Yes, a recognition of that which I had never known.
> Linda and I are bound together,
> More irrevocably,
> More for better or worse,
> Than any other adult relationship open to us.
> Each of us is part of one whole:
> She is what I could not be;
> I am what she could not be.
> Each of us is incomplete without the other,
> Yet independent of each other.
> One, yet two.
> Combined, yet separate.
> A paradox waiting to be solved. (Krichbaum, 1989)

What is the relationship adoptive mothers have with birth mothers? Finally I experienced both van Manen's concept of reverberation and Psathas' concept of silence. Struck silent, I was left with a certainty that I had found the appropriate question to begin my phenomenological quest. "Speech may fail a man (sic) when he is stunned. . . He stands there struck--and nothing else. He does no longer speak: he is silent" (Heidegger, 1959/1982, p. 114). I had found

the phenomenon I must know, the question that truly engages me, an understanding that eludes me. "To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being" (van Manen, 1990, p. 43). And so I began exploring the world of adoptive mothers in my search for understanding how adoptive mothers live in the world together with their children's birth mothers.

The Significance of the Question

Understanding how adoptive mothers live in the world with birth mothers is important for me as a person. It is also significant in its implications for birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. It is also relevant for a better understanding of family relationships and roles, adoptive and otherwise, and useful for those who work with families.

Understanding Motherhood Experiences

Although the decision to become a mother is an intensely personal choice, it has profound implications. "Who has children and why has always been and continues to be one of the most important questions that humanity confronts" (LaRossa, 1986, p. 37). American society is extremely pronatalistic, so much so that it is simply assumed that a woman, especially if she is married, will become a mother (Chodorow, 1976; Dally, 1983; Woollett & Phoenix, 1991). The assumption of motherhood affects how a woman is perceived by society and indeed how she perceives herself. Every woman's decisions regarding mothering are embedded in "an intricate web of experiences" (Robb, 1988, p. 38), her

decisions shaped by the expressed and implicit expectations of the society in which she lives.

In viewing mothering from a historical perspective, Chodorow points out that recently "women's mothering role has gained psychological and ideological significance" (1976, p. 4). Still, little is understood about the world of mothers, especially the world of adoptive mothers. Birns and Hay (1988) led a group of researchers to examine the existing research on mothers and concluded that "we know relatively little about the subjective experiences of motherhood" (p. 281). Phoenix and Woollett (1991) also emphasize how little research attention has been devoted to mothers, stating that "women's experiences of motherhood and feelings about being mothers are rarely directly explored" (p. 2).

Understanding Adoption Experiences

Because the federal government stopped reporting adoptions in 1975, there are no precise figures on adoption frequency. Therefore, all accounts of the number of adoptees in the population are estimates. Of the total population in the United States, few are adopted. American adoptions are currently dominated by stepfamily adoptions, with adoptions by non-relatives estimated to occur infrequently (Suplee, 1990). The result is that less than one percent of today's newborns are adopted (Bartholet, 1993). Because adoption occurred more frequently in the past and because many who are adopted are not newborns, the overall percentage of adoptees in the population is somewhat higher. Caplan (1990) reports that at least two percent of the population--approximately 5 million people--are estimated to have been adopted by someone other than a relative. Despite these low numbers, Kirk (1981) believes that 20% of the U.S. population

has some direct connection with adoption. When the percentage of adoptees in the population is so low, how can this be so? Reitz and Watson (1992) point out that adoption creates an extended family system involving a myriad of members, including:

> The family of origin of the child's birth mother; the family of origin of the child's birth father; the family created by the birth parents and their child; the adoptive family into which the child is placed, and the family of origin of each of the adoptive parents; and the families that each of the birth parents may form later if they choose not to marry each other. (p. 12)

Understanding Adoptive Mothering

Adoption continues to be an acceptable method for achieving motherhood status, albeit a nontraditional one. However, studies focusing on women of childbearing ages indicate that "fewer than one in twenty married women adopt a child by the time they are 40-44 years of age" (Bachrach, 1986, p. 243).

While some women seek mothering through adoption by preference, the majority of woman who adopt do so because they and/or their partners are infertile (Brinich, 1980). Infertility is estimated to occur in 10 percent of couples (Miall, 1986). For these women, adoption may offer the only path to motherhood.

Regardless whether women choose voluntarily to adopt or turn to adoption as an alternative to infertility, several writers suggest that adoptive motherhood should be more closely examined. Birns and Hay (1988) call for research on the subjective experiences of many different types of mothers, including adoptive mothers. Rosenberg (1992) calls for research that explores the "thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" of adoptive parents (p. 14). Brodzinsky and Huffman (1988) point out the lack of research in the area of transition to family life via adoption.

Understanding Adoptive Mothering in Open Adoptions

Since the first professional article on open adoption by Baran, Pannor, and Sorosky appeared in 1976, there has been an escalating controversy over the desirability of confidentiality and anonymity in adoption. In 1990, Baran and Pannor reflected that when they wrote that article they did not originally "perceive how threatening change was to the institution of adoption" (p. 316). Adoption professionals acknowledge that the number of adoptive parents and birth parents who have chosen open adoption has grown during those same years. Opinions vary widely as to whether open adoption offers adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents viable alternatives to the "social, emotional, and legal problems related to confidentiality" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 8). Unfortunately, research focused on open adoption has not increased in proportion to its practice. "There has been some research on adoptee's need for background information, but very little documentation on birthparent feelings, adoptive parent feelings, or adoptee's feelings toward openness in adoption" (McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988, p. 31).

Understanding Parenthood Issues in Education

Many adoption writers and researchers stress that adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents have all experienced loss in association with adoption (Krugman, 1967; Martin, 1988; Reitz & Watson, 1992; Small, 1987). Rosenberg (1992) explains:

> While some fertile parents adopt by preference, most adoptive parents must give up the expectation and rewards of bearing their own biological child. Relinquishing birth parents lose the child they have borne. Adopted children lose the connection to their birth parents. All members of the adoptive family system are defined by their "differentness." (p. 13)

While these losses are central to the issues of adoptive parenting, issues of loss are central to all parenting. "No issue is more universal to all families, nor more important to adoptive families, than that of loss" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 131).

To the extent we can better understand the dimensions and impact of adoption, we in the field of education will increase our ability to understand the ubiquitous issues encountered in family life--adoptive or otherwise--and increase our ability to assist parents be more effective. Lifton (1988) reminds us that adoption "speaks not only to those directly involved in it, but to all of us who are continually exploring the taproots of the most primal of relationships--the one between parent and child" (p. xiii). Adoption issues are both universal and unique--unique in the sense that the issues vary according to the specific life experiences of individuals in adoption, yet universal in the sense that their issues represent characteristics of the complex dimensions of families. Reitz and Watson (1992) point out that adoption sheds light on the "universal human themes of abandonment, parenthood, sexuality, identity, and the sense of belonging" (p. 3).

In addition, the number of non-traditional family structures are increasing. These are the result of not only the legal act of adoption, but also of the social acts of single parenting, divorce, and stepparenting. Advances in medical treatment of infertility have introduced a wide array of parenting relationships based on reproductive intervention. These changing forms challenge us to consider what is really essential to our understanding of family relationships. Miall (1987) suggests that we need to explore "the meanings our social institutions attach to the nature of the family unit and human kinship in general" (p. 39).

Adoption Language and Terms

Writing about adoption can be very demanding for those of us who truly care about both the process of adoption and the persons involved in adoption. Changes in society and culture make a difference in adoption language, as does time. An excellent example of this situation is the terminology used to describe a child who is born to a single woman. Many of the terms historically used, such as bastard and illegitimate child, are derogatory and stigmatizing. These terms and many others are currently in disfavor, reflecting the increased acceptance of single parenting and the growing number of single mothers (Vogel, 1988).

The language used to write about adoption can be problematic for even the most careful writers and so the task of choosing the right words has not been an easy one. I have heeded Watson's (1986) advice to search for words that are "descriptive without being pejorative" (p. 6). I have made every effort to choose words that accurately describe adoption and my understanding of it. I hope the words I have chosen are socially-historically correct and emotionally and morally sensitive.

Specific Adoption Terms I Will Use

I will frequently use the following terms in my writing. I am defining them so that readers of my work can better understand my intended meanings.

Adoptive Parents

In everyday life I refer to people who have become the parents of a child through the legal process of adoption by the unadorned terms of mother, father, and parents, rather than adoptive mother, adoptive father, and adoptive parents.

For clarity I will use the modifier, "adoptive," in this dissertation to avoid confusion between the child's two sets of parents. Spencer (1979) warns that while the term adoptive parents "correctly delineates postnatal parenthood and clarifies the absence of an ancestral relationship, such a label places in doubt the authenticity of the family tie" (p. 457). I intend no such interpretation and act in the simple hope of avoiding unnecessary confusion.

Birth Parents

One term I have given a great deal of thought to is the choice of an appropriate name to designate the original parents of a child who is placed for adoption, especially the woman who conceives and delivers the child. There are many terms that might be used: first mother, bio-mother, biological mother, birth mother, natural mother, other mother, and real mother. However, not all of these terms are equally acceptable.

The term birth mother is widely preferred by adoptive parents. Reitz and Watson (1992) point out that this term is problematic because it is ambiguous. Any woman who gives birth to a child is a birth mother, yet birth mother is being used to describe only women whose children have been adopted. And while birth mother is widely used by members of the adoption circle, some women who have placed their children in adoption object to it's use. "I hated the term 'birth mother' right away. It sounded like we were brood mares and implied that the relationship to our children ended at birth" (Schaefer, 1991, p. 182). Another alternative preferred by some adoptive parents--biological mother--is also not well received by those it labels, who reject it on the grounds that it is cold, unfeeling, and implies a mechanical-like relationship with the child

(Melina, 1989). "'Biological' seems to deny the emotional experience of bearing a child and giving birth" (Lifton, 1975, p. 275). I am not comfortable using this term.

Traditionally the term "natural mother" has been used, and is often the legal language used in state adoption laws. However, many adoptive parents object to the term. Why? Because they dislike the possibility that they will be perceived as the corollary of natural, as "unnatural parents" (Rundburg, 1988, p. 3). Many adoptive parents protest that they are not unnatural parents. After much thought, I must disagree. The very process by which we became parents, through adoption, is neither natural nor the norm in our society. Natural, according to Webster's Unabridged International Dictionary (1971), is defined as in accordance with or determined by nature; based upon the operations of the physical world; begotten as distinguished from adopted" (p. 1506). To use the term natural parents does not deny that we adoptive parents perform the social, psychological, and physical parenting after the child is placed with us. I privately prefer "natural" in simple recognition of what seems to me to be undeniable, that the first parents of an adopted child are the natural parents of the child.

Yet, after long consideration, I have decided that I accomplish nothing if I alienate adoptive parents by using a term that many actively reject. I recognize that "birth mother" is the currently favored term and will be used throughout my writing. Martin (1988) points out that two forms of the term are widely used: "birth mother," or "birthmother." Broadhurst and Schwartz (1979) warn that we should not dismiss what may appear to be seemingly meaningless variations

lightly, "Not only is it what you say and how you say it; how you spell it can be significant too" (p. 8). Is "birth mother" or "birthmother" more correct? Does using one or the other indicate a different perspective? Birthmother follows the pattern used with grandmother and stepmother. Birth mother, the form I prefer, follows the pattern used with adoptive mother and foster mother.

Other Adoption-Related Terms

Adoption. Adoption is a legal process that transfers the parental rights and responsibilities from the child's birth parents to the child's adoptive parents (Cole & Donley, 1990). According to Reitz and Watson's suggested new focus on the meaning of adoption, adoption creates a "new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both" (1992, p. 11).

Adopted child. A child who joins a family through the legal process of adoption rather than by birth (Siegel, 1989).

Adoptee. Another term for adopted child, often used to refer to adults (Siegel, 1989).

Adoption circle. A systems-approach concept of adoption that places the interactions of the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptee in the larger context of social and legal environment (Rosenberg, 1992).

Adoption kinship network. The network of relationships formed between the members of the adoptive family and the birth family by the legal act of adoption. The adoptee joins these families together and is a member of both families (Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Adoption triangle. A widely used term indicating the major participants in adoption. Each of these participants--the adoptee, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents--occupy the points of an imaginary triangle (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978).

Agency adoption. An adoption where a public or private organization arranges for a child to be placed with adoptive parents following the termination (either voluntary or involuntary) of the parental rights and responsibilities of the birth parents. The agency has the exclusive right to determine who will be the adopting parents and maintains the right to revoke the adoption up until the time the adoption is finalized by a judge (Arms, 1989; Rappaport, 1992).

Amended birth certificate. A legally altered birth certificate that is issued by the state after an adoption is finalized by a judge. The adoptive parents' names are substituted for the birth parents' names and the adoptee's name is changed (Siegel, 1989).

Anonymous adoption. This is also called confidential adoption or closed adoption. Both indicate an adoption where the adoptive parents and the birth parents do not meet or exchange identifying information and thus preclude any direct, on-going contact.

Entitlement. Entitlement involves an adoptive parent's sense of having the right to act as the parent to the child. Entitlement has both legal and emotional components (Burgess, 1989, Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Finalization. The point in the adoption process where the adoption becomes final and the placement is considered permanent (Rundberg, 1988).

Foster care. Foster parents assume the custodial responsibility for children of parents who are either temporarily unable to care for those children or when their parental rights are being transferred by court order to a social service agency (Cole & Donley, 1990). Foster parents do not have legal parental authority over the children who are in foster care.

Identifying information. Generally this is taken in adoption to mean the exchange of full names and current addresses between adoptive parents and birth parents. It may include other types of personal information that can be used to identify and locate a member of an adoption process.

Independent adoption. An independent adoption is one that is arranged independently of an adoption agency. The largest proportion of these adoptions, an estimated 75%, are stepfamily adoptions (Cole & Donley, 1990). The remaining independent adoptions are non-relative adoptions that occur when the child is placed directly by the birth parents with the adoptive parents. These adoptions are also called private adoptions, but this term is misleading because an agency of the state oversees all adoptions and a judge must grant the adoption petition (Charney, 19895; Martin, 1988). Most states permit independent adoptions if they satisfy the state's statutes that regulate adoptions (Charney, 1985; Rappaport, 1992).

Loss. The emotional response to having something of importance is taken away, destroyed, or misplaced (Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Motherhood. According to Phoenix and Woollett (1991), this term first emerged during the Victorian Period and refers to the qualities and tasks of women who are mothering. Rich (1976) reminds us that motherhood is a social

institution and therefore is not to be confused with the specific practices associated women's experiences of pregnancy, child birth, and raising children.

Mothering. A woman's day-to-day activities while providing for her child's physical needs; especially those activities which meet her child's emotional needs (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991).

Non-relative adoption. These are adoptions where the adoptive parents were not previously related to the child. Most of these adoptions involve infants (Rosenberg, 1992).

Open adoption. An adoption in which the birth parents and adoptive parents have direct contact with each other and exchange names, addresses, and other identifying information so that avenues of communication and information are accessible through the placement period and afterward (Pannor & Baran, 1984; Rappaport, 1992; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Openness continuum. This is the possible range of information exchanged and the amount of contact between adoptive parents and birth parents during the adoption planning process and afterward. On one end of the continuum is confidential or anonymous adoption; on the other end of the continuum is fully open or fully disclosed adoption (McRoy, Grotevant, and White 1988; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Openness in adoption. This refers to adoptions that permit the birth parents some degree of contact or communication with the adoptive parents and/or the adoptee short of exchanging identifying information or on-going contact. The degree of openness or anonymity varies. This type of adoption is

also called semi-open adoption (Rappaport, 1992; Reitz & Watson, 1992; Silber & Dorner, 1990).

Psychological parent. This is a term introduced by Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit (1973) to assist professionals in making decisions related to child custody. The psychological parent is the one who provides for the daily needs of the child and is emotionally attuned to the child's development.

Relinquishment. The act by which birth parents transfer their role as the custodial and social parents of a child to another person or to an agency (Watson, 1986). This terminates the legal rights of the birth parents.

Reunion. This occurs when an adoptee and a birth parent separated by a confidential adoption are reunited, either in person or by other forms of communication (Martin, 1988).

Sealed records. All states restrict access to the court papers related to adoptions. In 48 states these records are made available only to an individual who has been granted access by the court order, including adult adoptees. In the other 2 states--Kansas and Alabama, adult adoptees have the right to examine their records but all others must be given permission by court order (Martin, 1988).

Search. This refers to efforts by adoptees to discover information about their birth parents and their adoptive history or by birth parents to find out about their children who were relinquished through adoption. All searches involve a quest for information; some searches involve a desire to communicate with and/or meet (Martin, 1988).

Semi-open adoption. This is another term for openness in adoption, indicating that some degree of limitations are placed on any information and contact between the adoptive parents and birth parents (Rappaport, 1992).

Assumptions and Preunderstandings

In the next section of this chapter I will present my primary assumptions and preunderstandings about adoption. Why? The danger in any research is that the research will be unduly influenced by what the researcher already accepts as true. Interpretive research, where the researcher is intimately a part of the interpretation, can never be value-free or totally objective. Therefore, a central concern is how interpretive researchers can best guard against being unduly influenced by their preunderstandings and beliefs.

Denzin (1989) emphasizes that the researcher must reveal assumptions before undertaking an interpretation. Morgan (1983) states that when we reveal our assumptions what we are really doing is exposing "the formative influence of the presuppositions and practice through which we structure and filter our everyday experiences" (pp. 382-383). Van Manen (1990) agrees, suggesting that we identify our assumptions "not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character" (p. 47). In phenomenology this is known as "bracketing." Bracketing leads to a shift in focus of the researcher (Kohak, 1978). Morgan (1983) explains the role of bracketing in this way:

> Science searches for knowledge that is certain and reliable by suspending belief in certainty as a means to this end. Indeed, the hallmark of

> knowledge deemed "scientific" is that belief has been suspended in the way things are, at least temporarily. Under positivism, suspension of belief usually takes the form of hypothesis testing, in which rival hypotheses are subjected to systematic doubt and their respective merits determined through the exercise of reason and disciplined observation. Phenomenological research strategies "bracket" or suspend belief in the way things are or disrupt taken-for-granted settings to reveal the formative influence of the presuppositions and practice through which we structure and filter our everyday experiences. (pp. 382-383)

The process of bracketing in no way suggests that a researcher's beliefs and assumptions are eliminated. That is impossible. Rather, the researcher brackets assumptions and preunderstandings to call attention to them. "The first questions for any phenomenological study are for oneself: what are my prejudgments? What personal commitments do I bring to this study? What do I know about the subject that could influence what I see?" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 9). Bracketing also serves another purpose. Bracketing offers the researcher's beliefs and assumptions for public scrutiny and allows readers to judge for themselves whether or not the researcher has competently presented enough evidence to support the findings of the research. This is important in phenomenological research because the reader must evaluate the merit of the reflection. A reader must "judge the accuracy of the information collection procedures given the problem, and accuracy of the description against one's own reality and the quality of the insights, given what is found in the research" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 14). In the next section of this chapter I will articulate my preexisting beliefs and assumptions about adoption and then about the primary participants in adoption: birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents.

Assumptions and Preunderstandings About Adoption

I agree with Bachrach (1986), who believes that "Adoption. . . has profound significance for the lives of those it affects" (p. 234). I believe that adoption changes the essential identity of each member of an adoption. Rosenberg suggests that it is the "paradoxical relationships" that exist in adoption that explain the deep differences in the lives of all adoption participants:

> Birth parents are at once birth parents but not rearing parents; adoptive parents are rearing parents but not birth parents; adoptees are their adoptive parents' children but not their birth children, their birth parents' progeny but not their children by rearing. Every member of the adoption circle must acknowledge, confront, and master these paradoxes. (1992, p. 15)

I am also confident that adoption casts a wider net of influence and therefore has greater ramifications than may initially be apparent. While adoption obviously influences the lives of the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and the child, adoption also touches the lives of many others. If we consider adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents to be the primary participants in adoption, then Zeilinger (1979) suggests those who might be considered secondary participants:

> There are other parties who are usually ignored but whose involuntary involvement suggest their legitimate, if somewhat peripheral, interests. These are the extended families of the biological parents, of the adoptive parents, and any biological or adopted siblings that the adoptee may have or acquire. (p. 47)

I believe that there is an often overlooked group that has an interest in adoption and that this group might be thought of as a third strata. These are those individuals whose livelihoods involve adoption in some way and therefore have a stake in adoption procedures and outcomes. Some examples are adoption

attorneys; directors and board members of adoption agencies; adoption social workers, therapists, and counselors; adoption researchers; and less obviously, representatives of state governments and courts (Krugman, 1967).

Although advocates for independent adoptions and advocates for agency adoptions generally see each other as adversaries and spend much time pointing out what they see as being the other's potential weaknesses, I echo Martin's view on the differences between agency adoption and independent adoption: "Private adoption offers another way that is neither better nor worse than adoption through an agency--it is merely a different way!" (1988, pp. 74-76).

In addition to involving many individuals, adoption is a life-long process rather than a simple event fixed in time. Kaye (1988) points out the irony of the legal term, adoption finalization: 'The law calls adoption complete when the judge signs the papers; in reality, it has barely begun" (p. 50). Rosenberg (1992) points out that not only is the process life-long, it is also complex.

> It has become apparent over the years that what was once thought to be a problem with an obvious and simple solution in fact involves a very complicated process. The needs of birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees are not completely met with the mutual signing of an adoption agreement. Rather, all members of the adoption circle deal with important issues related to this agreement over the course of their entire lifetimes. (p. 2)

And finally, adoption is further complicated by its multidimensional character. Adoption is a legal process, a social institution that is culturally and historically bound, and a fundamental component of the identities of those involved in adoptions.

Assumptions and Preunderstandings About Members of Adoptions

In this section of the chapter I will share my assumptions and preunderstandings about those whom adoption affects the most--the primary participants in the experience of adoption. Birth parents and adoptive parents are present in each others lives, just as birth parents and adoptees are, whether the presence is imaginary or real. This presence begins when the adoption process is undertaken and continues throughout the lives of the participants (Rosenberg, 1992).

Adoption, as experienced, is both positive and negative. "Adoption is a very good plan for some children, for some birth parents, and for some adopting families" (Watson, 1986, p. 10). Adoption offers the participants tangible and intangible benefits (Brinich, 1980; Kadushin, 1967). Rosenberg (1992) explains some of the negative experiences associated with adoption this way:

> While adoption meets real needs, it simultaneously denies deeply held wishes. Adoptive parents wish they would have borne the children they are raising. Children wish that the parents who bore and who raise them could be one and the same. Birth parents wish the circumstances might have been such that they could have raised the child they bore. (p. 13)

Yet this does not mean that adoption is bereft of gains. "Acknowledging the sadness and pain in adoption doesn't mean denying the joy. And acknowledging the joy doesn't mean we must deny the sadness" (Melina, 1989, pp. 8-9).

Birth Parents

I believe that the great majority of birth parents who make the decision for adoption today do so after considering what is in the best interest of the child. I believe that this decision and the circumstances that surround it are a predicament of monumental proportions. I do not believe that birth parents who

place their children in adoption put that experience behind them and go on with their lives as if it never happened. I believe that throughout their lives a primary concern of most birth parents is whether or not the child is all right and whether or not they are being treated well by their adoptive family.

> In order to conclude that relinquishment serves the best interests of the child, birth parents must believe one of the basic tenets of the adoption system: adoptive parents are better able to provide the child and therefore are more competent. . . However, everyone has heard of or read of incompetent or even abusive adoptive parents. Birth parents take a risk in the relinquishment. They hope that agency home studies are valid or that private matchmakers are acting competently and in good faith. Even when birth parents participate in the selection of adoptive parents, they can only hope that their intuitions and judgements have been good ones. (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 28)

Many birth mothers have expressed an on-going concern for the child's well-being and have reported that their experiences with anonymous and confidential adoption were traumatic (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978). I believe that if given the option, more birth parents would prefer to remain in contact with the child they place for adoption than to have adoption anonymity. I believe, like Baran and Pannor (1990) that "birthmothers, who are comfortable with their decision and able to know how that child is progressing, are better able to move forward" (p. 329). "At the very least, a birth mother deserves to be kept informed of how her child is doing and what her child is feeling and needing as the child grows" (Arms, 1989, p. 420).

Adoption is not a painless alternative; therefore, birth parents have a great responsibility in considering the alternatives that will affect them, and more importantly, their child. I agree with Watson (1986) when he says that "genuine choices must be offered to birth parents along with the information they need as

well as support and help in developing decision-making skills" (p. 10). I agree with Rundberg (1988), who says:

> The first, best place for the child is with his (sic) own family, in his own community, in his own country; that adoption is not appropriate unless all efforts have been made to salvage his family for the child. Adoption is always in substitution of the original, biological home and should not be employed unless it is clear that the child's own family is not likely to be able to provide the care the child needs and is rightfully entitled to. (pp. 17-22)

I also agree with Cole and Donley (1990) that for those who are counseling birth parents the quandary is whether or not a birth mother is genuinely incapable of raising the child or alternately, genuinely opposed to raising the child. However, the way American adoption has historically been practiced has often worked against the birth parents. There are times when adoption is implemented and it is not in the best interests of the birth parents or the child. Aigner (1987) points in particular to "the institutionalized abuse of unwed mothers, the legal disenfranchisement of unwed fathers, [and] the widespread misapplication of termination of parental rights proceedings" (pp. 87-88).

Those birth parents who prefer to raise their child but are confronting serious economic problems should not be compelled to relinquish their children in these situations. It is imperative that we confront the patterns associated with relinquishment, "The flow of children is always in one direction, from the less affluent to the more affluent countries internationally, socioeconomically from lower to middle and upper class within any one country, and from minority groups to the majority group" (Kadushin, 1984, p. 11).

I do not mean to suggest that adoptions are never appropriate. Adoption can be an appropriate alternative for meeting the needs of the child in those cases

where a parent's ability to address the child's needs are not a function of adequate social services. Unfortunately, women who believe themselves to be unready to parent their child are likely to find the force of social pressure against the alternative of adoption. Dally (1983) describes a good mother by saying, "She knows what she is, what she can do, and what is best for her child" (p. 191). A primary consideration for all potential mothers should be whether she is truly ready to take on the responsibility of being a good mother.

> At any point in time, many people are simply not ready to give, able to give, or interested in giving to a child what is required. It is wise to admit it when that is the case, for parenting is best when it is undertaken freely. Pregnancy can be a mistake; trying to raise a child in difficult circumstances can also be a mistake. (Arms, 1989, p. 411)

Women have been and continue to be stigmatized if they choose adoption for their child. In the past this stigma was two pronged, "they engaged in sexual activity and produced a child outside of marriage, and then they gave away their own flesh and blood" (Watson, 1986, p. 6). Although there is less stigma directed toward sexual activity and pregnancy out of marriage today, significant stigma continues to be directed toward relinquishing a child through adoption (Watson, 1986). "Our society holds that women who carry and bear children must want to raise them. While we recognize the major sacrifice made by many mothers who place their children, we see it as an act that goes against nature" (Cole, 1984, p. 18). Bartholet (1993) agrees, adding that "we now bombard birth mothers with the message that they should raise their children themselves at whatever cost" (p. xxi). As a result, "adoption is the least chosen option today when a woman, typically young and unmarried, faces an unexpected "crisis" pregnancy" (Allen, 1989, p. 46).

Adoptees

I believe that the lives adoptees live are more similar to than dissimilar from the lives of nonadoptees. Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig (1992) agree and point to the success of adoptees in all aspects of personal and private lives. However, I believe that being adopted is a significant event that creates a critical difference between adoptees and nonadoptees. "Loss inherent in adoption is unlike other losses we have come to expect in a lifetime, such as death or divorce. Adoption loss is more pervasive, less socially recognized, and more profound" (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig , 1992, p. 9). Why is this true?

> Adopted children. . . not only experience a loss of their biological parents and origins, but also a loss of stability in the relationship to their adoptive parents. In addition, there is loss of self and genealogical continuity. Adopted children also experience "status loss" associated with being different. (Brodzinsky, 1990, p. 7).

I believe, as do Reitz and Watson (1992) that adoptees are always members of two family systems. Of particular concern to me is the way that adoptees as young children make sense of having been adopted. They must resolve why they were relinquished, why they were adopted, and what impact these decisions have on their being. As members of two family systems, adoptees must integrate the fact of their adoptedness into their personal identity. How do young children make sense of the loss they experience in adoption? Reitz and Watson (1992) identify three common reasons young adoptees use to explain to themselves why they are not living in their birth family, including, "There was something wrong with them and their birth families did not want to keep them; there was something wrong with their birth parents and they could not keep them; or they were kidnapped by their adoptive parents" (p. 10). Each of these explanations

has the potential to compound the typical challenges of developing a healthy self-esteem and identity. As Andersen (1993) states, "two identities are, of course, harder to manage than one" (p. 139).

I agree with Melina (1989), who believes that adoptees have the best chance of meeting these challenges if they are accorded the following opportunities: "A right to freely ask questions and express their feelings about being adopted. . . the right to know who they are and how they joined their families, and to grow up knowing the truth" (pp. 5-7). I also agree with Arms (1989), when she says that an adoptee should have the right to "full information about his or her birth parents" (p. 420). But having the opportunity to possess full information does not mean that all information must be revealed at an early age.

> Some of the details will have to wait until children are mature enough to understand the facts and deal with the implications. The important point is that children should never knowingly be told or allowed to believe something that will later be contradicted by truth. (Melina, 1986, p. 5)

While I agree that the opportunities for adoptees suggested by Melina and Arms are important, I believe they do not go far enough. I do not believe that it is acceptable to deny an adoptee the opportunity to know first hand his or her genetic predecessors. Both heredity and environment are important in shaping a child's traits and characteristics. Bermand and Bufferd (1986) indirectly address this issue by explaining the reason adoptees find the identity formation typical of adolescence especially difficult:

> Because of the lack of information about their biological family, they struggle with the problem of integrating their inherited traits into the people they are. With the dramatic physical changes of adolescence,

> adoptees do not have the usual biological reference points. In order to cope with this, adoptees often develop self-images based on fantasy. (p. 5)

I believe that adoptees are entitled to contact with birth parents. I, like Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig (1992) believe that it is a central concern in the life of all adoptees:

> We are often asked, "What percent of adoptees search for their birth parents?" And our answer surprises people: "One hundred percent." In our experience, all adoptees engage in a search process. It may not be a literal search, but it is a meaningful search nonetheless. It begins when the child first asks, "Why did it happen?" "Who are they?" "Where are they now?" These questions may be asked out loud, or they may constitute a more private form of searching--questions that are examined only in the solitude of self-reflection. This universal search begins during the early school years, prompted by the child's growing awareness of adoption issues. (p. 79)

If contact is not provided by arrangements between the birth parents and the adoptive parents, I believe an adoptee has the right to search for his or her birth parents. While this may not be appropriate for all adoptees before they achieve adulthood, Schoborg-Winterberg and Shannon (1988) suggest that this action should be perceived as "a normal process of integrating adoption into their adult lives, rather than a symptom of dysfunction" (p. 66). Even in cases where this is against the wishes of the birth parents or the adoptive parents, I would insist the adoptee's wishes are primary, although I recognize that adoptees might be forced to postpone this action until their adulthood.

Adoptive Parents

Just as adoptees and birth mothers are found in all groups throughout America, so are adoptive parents (Berman & Bufferd, 1986). However, disproportionately more adoptive parents are married and infertile. And despite the fact that adoptive parents experience the same day-to-day activities that

biological parents do, once again the fact of adoption changes the parenting experience, especially the transition to parenting. The transition adoptive parents experience is fundamentally different from the experiences of those who become parents by birth.

One significant difference between biological parenting and adoptive parenting is the tentative, conditional waiting period associated with the transition to adoptive parenting (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988). "It is a nerve-wrenching experience to prepare psychologically for an event which may, in reality, never come to pass" (Smith & Miroff, 1981, p. 18). In part this is because there is rarely any certainty about whether a child will join the family (Brazelton, 1989). Many researchers, including Brodzinsky and Huffman (1988), DiGiulio (1987), Hammons (1976), Kirk (1963), and Smith and Miroff (1981) address why. Potential adoptive parents must resign themselves to the fact that whether or not they will become parents ultimately lies within the control of the decisions of birth parents or an adoption agency. Potential adoptive parents must accept that they will be called upon to prove their potential parenting ability if they want to raise a child they did not give birth to. In addition, potential adoptive parents recognize that they will be awarded only provisional parenting rights during the period when the child first joins the family throughout the specified period of time until the adoption can be finalized. "Parents are painfully aware that the child could be removed from their home during that time against their wishes, even though such occurrences are extremely rare" (Melina, 1986, p. 4).

Even when potential adoptive parents are confident that they will succeed in adopting a child, they are less likely than biological parents to know when a child will join the family (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Hammons, 1976; Kirk, 1963; Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, & Waters, 1985; Smith & Sherwen, 1988). While this unbounded period of waiting is typically experienced as a strain, it has greater ramifications. Unbounded waiting interferes with practical and psychological preparation for the event of parenthood (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988).

Because the potential adoption is tenuous, potential adoptive parents may not let others know. This, in turn, reduces the social support available (Kirk, 1963; Smith & Sherwen, 1988). "The absence of the usual cues associated with pregnancy (e.g., changes in the woman's body shape, clothing styles, etc.) make it more difficult for others to begin altering their perceptions and expectations of the couple as 'soon-to-be parents'" (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988, p. 272).

At the point when the child joins a family through adoption there are no readily available rite-of-passage celebrations. "In adoption there are no ceremonies marking the arrival of the new family member, leaving the parent-couple without these institutional supports for their role and for their child's place in the group" (Kirk, 1963, p. 314). Melina (1986) agrees, "We must adapt birth announcements to our circumstances, try to get our employers to make exceptions to the companies' maternity leave policies, and design our own ceremonies to mark the occasion" (p. 2).

Role models for adoptive parenting facilitate easier transition to adoptive parenthood. Because the proportion of adoptive families in the population is

small, some adoptive parents suffer from a lack of role models. As a result, some adoptive parents may express doubts about the authenticity of adoptive parenting (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; DiGiulio, 1987; Kirk, 1959, 1963; Lifton, 1975; Melina, 1986; Schechter, 1964).

Society seems to suffer from lack of familiarity with adoption role models as well. "Society, as a whole, cannot identify with the adoption experience" (Eheart & Martel, 1983, p. 155). Brodzinsky and Huffman (1988) point out that it is more than unfamiliarity with adoption that affects others' attitudes; it is the attitude that adoptive parenting is inferior to biological parenting. As a consequence, when the decision is made to adopt, the potential adoptive parents receive less support than biological parents receive "from significant others--extended family, friends, neighbors, and so on" (Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, & Waters, 1985, p. 1544). And once the adoption occurs, the responses of others are often inappropriate.

> Typical responses include avoiding the comparison of physical features of the child and parents, over idealization of the adoptive parents, and asking personal questions about the child's biological parents. Extended family members may not know how to approach the adoptive family; they may ignore the subject or make a distinction between the adopted child and other children in the family. (DiGiulio, 1987, p. 562)

These inappropriate comments show ignorance about the "decisions and adjustments children and parents must make when they become 'instant families' through adoption" (Melina, 1986, p. 1). Adoptive parents often hear comments like the following, "You're lucky you don't have to go through pregnancy" (Hammons, 1976, p. 256) or "You seem to love her as much as if she were really yours. How can you do it?" (Schechter, 1970, p. 357). What those outside

adoption do not understand is how much alike our experience is to their experience of biological parenting. "We are all seeking to make our children happy, self-sufficient human beings. We are trying to meet their needs without forgetting that we, too, have needs" (Martin, 1988, p. 241).

Summary

In this chapter I have explained my personal interest in the way adoptive mothers live with their children's birth mothers in open adoptions. I have briefly introduced the differences between adoptions that are open and those that are closed and have defined adoption-related terms that will be used in this study. What are the historical underpinnings of closed and open adoptions? Why is closed adoption practiced and what purposes do secrecy and anonymity serve for those who are involved in closed adoptions? Why is open adoption practiced and what purposes does openness serve for those who are in open adoptions? What are the tensions between the two types of adoptions? These and other questions will be answered in Chapter II, where I discuss the historical foundations of present-day American adoption practices.

In this chapter I previewed the research method for my study. What does a study conducted in the philosophical tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology address? How will I go about creating a space where understanding the experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption can emerge? These questions will be explored in depth in Chapter III.

My assumptions and preunderstandings about adoption, birth mothers, adoptees, and adoptive parents were also detailed in this chapter. Will any of

these assumptions and preunderstandings be challenged by the experiences of the women in this study? I will revisit these assumptions and preunderstandings in Chapter VI, where I reflect on the experience of doing this study has changed some of my views while strengthening others. My preunderstandings and assumptions are particularly relevant to the reader's evaluation of Chapter V, where I reveal my reflections on the experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption.

While my orientation to the question is a personal one and is based on questions I have about my experiences with my daughter's birth mother, this study has broader applications. I have explained the potential relevance this research study has to helping us understand the lives of mothers, adoptive mothers, and adoptive mothers in open adoptions, as well as providing insights into the potential applications to parenting education. What insights do the experiences of these women offer us?

Overview and Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. In this chapter I have explained how I came to be interested in my general research area, the research tradition I will be using, how I developed the research question, and the significance of my research question. I also have defined terminology that is necessary to the study and have presented my preunderstandings and assumptions about adoption and how adoption affects each of the members of adoption.

In the next chapter, Chapter II, I will explore the history of adoption, starting with adoption's earliest beginnings. Chapter II includes important precedents to American adoption. These include the contributions of ancient Rome and England and the early forms of charity offered to dependent children in Colonial America. In addition, I trace how adoption became a legal process in the U.S. and how the tradition of adoption secrecy and anonymity became established. I identify the challenges to adoption secrecy and anonymity, focusing especially on the roles of independent adoption, the search movement, and open adoption.

I describe the philosophical foundations of interpretive inquiry in Chapter III, specifically the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition in the human sciences. I give particular attention to the contributions of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer to the philosophical foundations of this study. The research methodology that guided me in this study is also explained in Chapter III.

In Chapter IV the participants in the study are introduced. Questions raised for me in these introductions, about being an adoptive mother in an open adoption, are presented. These questions and my reflections on them provide the foundation for Chapter V. I present my interpretation of major themes of the study in Chapter V.

In Chapter VI I discuss the insights this study offers about families, adoption, and open adoption. I also reflect on my experiences in this study and how this study has challenged me to rethink my positions on adoption and openness. As is the purpose with phenomenological inquiry, recommendations

are provided that might allow a better experience for all those involved in adoption and in open adoptions.

CHAPTER II. AMERICAN ADOPTION: PRECEDENTS, STATUTES, AND PRACTICES

In this chapter I will present highlights in the history of American adoption. Understanding the social, cultural, and historical foundations of the present-day institution of adoption helps us to better understand the structure of relationships between adoptive mothers and birth mothers in contemporary adoption. Watson (1979) discusses the importance of understanding the historical perspective of adoption this way:

> We ignore history at the risk of becoming its prisoner. We ignore knowledge and experience at the risk of needless error and the repudiation of our professional responsibility. We ignore social change at the risk of becoming anachronistic. As we confront the adoption issues of the day, we know there are no absolute answers and that the solution to every problem generates others to be solved. In such a never-ending process, our two greatest assets are an awareness of the position from which we start and an openness to change. (p. 14)

In the first part of this chapter I will describe adoption-related precedents during the period before adoption became part of the state statutes throughout America. In the second part of the chapter I will explore how adoption became part of the statutes of the individual states. I will also describe how the purpose of adoption and the practices of American adoption have changed over time, paying special attention to the process by which anonymity and secrecy came to be associated with adoption and to be established as standard practice. Cole (1984) offers the following questions as a way of focusing on these changing adoption practices:

> Why adoption? Who places? Who is placed? With whom? How does this transfer take place? How has this been altered by changes in society's

> view of sexuality, parenting without marriage, women's rights, divorce and differing life-styles? (p. 15)

In the third and final section of this chapter I will present past and present-day challenges to the concept of adoption secrecy and anonymity.

Adoption Precedents From Early History

Contemporary American adoption practices and beliefs have their roots in "mythology, history, and fantasy" (Watson, 1986, p. 5). In this section of the chapter I will explain important precursors to American adoption. I will start by describing the specific adoption-like practices from the beginning of civilization, and then move to a discussion of adoption in mythology, adoption in early Rome, and in feudal England. I will also explore the importance of each as a precedent to American adoption.

Adoption Precedents From the Beginnings of Civilization

Adoption regulations can be found in "the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, the oldest set of laws" (Lifton, 1988, p. 12). Numerous researchers and writers (Baran, Pannor, & Sorosky, 1976; Benet, 1976; Kirk & McDaniel, 1984; Rosenberg, 1992) suggest that adoption, as a practice, existed long before that time, ever since the earliest beginnings of humankind. Bronowski (1973) uses inferential evidence to support this claim, based on scientific tests on the skulls of the primitive ancestors of humans known as the Australopithecus. Results of these analyses indicate that the Australopithecus' lived, on the average, less than two decades. From this Bronowski concludes:

> That means there must have been many orphans. For Australopithecus surely had long childhoods, as all the primates do; at the age of ten, say,

> the survivors were still children. Therefore there must have been a social organization in which children were looked after and (as it were) adopted, were made part of the community, and so in some general sense were educated. That is a great step towards cultural evolution. (p. 40)

Assuming that Bronowski is correct, the practice of taking on the responsibility for nurturing and socializing orphaned children occurred at the earliest points of our history.

Adoption Legacies From the Beginning of Civilization

Although humans have a long tradition of providing adult supervision for children whose birth parents have died, it is important for us to recognize that from its earliest beginnings adoption has fulfilled multiple objectives (Bolles, 1984). While these adoption-like practices from earliest human history provided protection "to young children who lacked parents to nurture them" (Baran, Pannor & Sorosky, 1976, p. 97), the survival of each orphan generally advanced the chance that the group would survive (Geissinger, 1984). Therefore, "adoption is one way a society helps to perpetuate itself" (Cole, 1984, p. 15).

The oldest surviving written laws from the 2285 B.C. Code of Hammurabi of Babylonia are remarkable not only because of the early reference to adoption but also because they show how enduring certain adoption issues are (Benet, 1976, Cole & Donley, 1990; Goody, 1969; Howe, 1983). For example, the code outlines problems arising over the issue of fit between adoptees and the adoptive parents, concern for equality of treatment among biological and adopted children, and what should be done when adoptees search for their birth parents or when birth parents ask for the child back.

Adoption Precedents From Mythology

An important foundation to contemporary adoption can be found in ancient tales that have become myths. These myths include the well known Biblical story of Moses being rescued from the bulrushes, a strikingly similar but lesser known story of Sargon (the first ruler of Babylon, circa 2800 BC), and the tale of Oedipus.

Clothier (1939), Klibanoff and Klibanoff (1973), Reitz and Watson (1992), and Watson (1979) have analyzed these mythical accounts of adoption. Watson points out that a repetitive adoption story line can be found in all three. In each, the plot revolves around a young child of lowly background. The child, always a son, is abandoned by his mother in a desperate attempt to save the child from an untimely death. The child is subsequently discovered by a member of a ruling family who takes the child into the household where the child is intended to become a ruler.

Adoption Legacies From Mythology

Why should we understand these adoption myths? They help us to understand motives for adoption that transcend culture and time. These adoption myths present adoption as an altruistic effort undertaken by adults for the good of the child. The mother of the child is presented in a particularly compassionate light. She places the child's needs above her own and abandons her child only because it is the only alternative open to her. Those who adopt the child are also seen in a charitable way, even though there is a self-serving aspect of their actions. By taking the child in they allow him to escape an untimely fate. What about the adoptee? Discussing adoption myths, Reitz and Watson (1992)

add that "although the adoption enables a child to be reared in safety, it does not forestall the need for the adopted child to work out a destiny in the context of his or her origins" (p. 3). Bartholet (1992) adds that "myths involving famous foundlings teach us that children cannot find 'real' parents or permanent homes or a community to which they belong in adoption" (Bartholet, 1993, p. 166).

Turning to the lessons gained from adoption-related myths, once again it becomes clear that adoption serves multiple purposes, this time as "a means of rescuing children in distress, gratifying unfulfilled maternal striving, and acquiring an heir" (Watson, 1979, p. 11). It is the ability of adoption to address multiple purposes that causes it to be complicated and often conflictive. We can logically expect that there will be conflicting interests among the parties in adoptions--the adoptive parents, the birth parents, and the adoptees (Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, Woods, Schmidt, & Tucker, 1985). Caplan (1990) concurs: "Adoption's function of satisfying corresponding, and changing, social and personal needs suggests that the adoption world will always be unsettled, although outsiders may not often notice" (p. 92).

Adoption Precedents From Ancient Rome

Rome contributed the foundation for the word adoption. It comes from Latin, "the root implying choice, option" (Goody, 1969, p. 58). Rome, like the cultures of Greece, Egypt, India and China, often employed adoption for political reasons and religious reasons (Cole & Donley, 1990; Howe, 1983). In Ancient Rome, each man needed a son (Goody, 1969; Kirk & McDaniel, 1984). A son, as heir, was needed to perform three family functions: to maintain the family social

and financial status, to continue the family line, and to perform religious rites honoring the dead, including the safeguarding of ancestral shrines. However, "given the state of hygiene and medicine, the extinction of the line was always a factor to be reckoned with" (Goody, 1969, p. 59). Recognizing adoption could provide the necessary heir when one was needed, laws were passed to ensure that sons could be adopted to fulfill all the requirements of an heir. Adoption became a logical, legal alternative for bringing in a new heir when the death of birth children or infertility caused a man to be childless.

Adoption Legacies From Ancient Rome

The origins of most of the laws in the United States are found in English common law. For reasons I will discuss later in this chapter, English common law did not provide for legal adoption. This meant that early colonial America did not recognize legal adoption. However, some families used adoption-like procedures by voluntarily taking in the orphaned children of their relatives. Still other parents used their wills to request that a specific person watch over their children. Klibanoff and Klibanoff (1973) attribute the use of these adoption-like procedures to the customs of emigrants "from countries where the influence of Roman legal and social tradition was strong, such as France, Italy and other countries in continental Europe" (p. 183). When adoption did become legal in America it was based on Roman adoption traditions (Howe, 1983).

Adoption Precedents From England

English records from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries reveal that few children reached adulthood with both parents still alive, and

many others were orphans (Dally, 1983). It would be natural to expect that the Roman practices of adoption would be found in early England, however, they were not. Feudal England did not follow the Roman or Napoleonic codes of adoption (Cole and Donley, 1990). Why not? English families were not interested in adoption's ability to provide a family priest because ancestor worship was not practiced (Klibanoff & Klibanoff, 1973). In addition, English power and property was passed through the tradition of primogeniture. Eagan (1991) states that "the passing of power and property defines a society and determines its structure" (p. 120). Primogeniture grew out of the feudal system's need to maintain power of the Crown through the control of estates (Benet, 1976). According to legal rules of inheritance, any title, wealth, and property which could be inherited passed directly and exclusively to blood relatives in a strictly determined order. Of particular importance in these inheritance procedures were issues of legitimacy, maleness, and primacy of birth.

> The feudal traditions of England dictate that the rights and property of a parent could pass only to biological children born during wedlock. A child who was born out of wedlock, or who otherwise became part of a family, would never be considered an heir. (Klibanoff & Klibanoff, 1973, p. 181)

The practice of primogeniture meant that adoption would not benefit a family because adoptees were rejected as legal heirs. As a result of these feudal inheritance restrictions, adoption was neither generally practiced nor legally sanctioned in Britain until 1926 (Benet, 1976; Clothier, 1939; Cole & Donley, 1990; Howell, 1988; Klibanoff & Klibanoff, 1973). The English practices of wardship, poor laws, and indenture used as a means of dealing with orphaned children and

children dependent on the community became other important adoption precedents from England (Cole, 1984).

Wardship

In England those orphaned children who had family who would take them in or who were fortunate enough to have inheritances adequate to provide for their support became wards. The courts appointed an adult guardian to supervise these minor children and manage their affairs. This legal procedure of wardship transferred parental rights and responsibilities to the guardian but did not alter family memberships (Dukette, 1984; Klibanoff & Klibanoff, 1973).

Poor Houses and Indenture

Poor houses and indenture awaited those children who were orphaned without money or family willing to take them in or those children who were abandoned by their families. Children who were the result of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy were often abandoned. These children become wards of the parish in which they lived. As such, they lived in the almshouses provided by the parish, which were supported by money collected through poor taxes. When dependent children were old enough to be indentured they were apprenticed to craftsmen for training or to households as servants. By using the indenture process the parish released itself of the burden for providing food, clothing, housing, religious education, and occupational training. The feudal system of apprenticing young children was not reserved only for those who were orphaned or

abandoned. It was routine for the majority of English children. Klibanoff and Klibanoff explain:

> From an early age, most English children, and nearly all poor children, left their homes for varying periods of time to live and work with another family. This practice provided opportunities for occupational training and assured that each child would contribute productively to the economic and social structure when he (sic) grew older. At the same time, anyone familiar with the novels of Charles Dickens knows well, the system also resulted in cruelty and deprivation. But it was an alternative for dealing with children who were without biological families. (1973, pp. 181-182)

Adoption Legacies From Feudal England

The English charity system was designed to minimize the chance that any capable person would be a financial burden to the community. The practices used by colonial America to deal with dependent children were strongly influenced by these same values. Therefore, the charity of colonial America was developed less with respect for the needs of the children involved than for the community's need "to take care of its dependent children as cheaply, as easily and as quietly as possible" (Clothier, 1939, p. 600). Like England, colonial American officials routinely sent orphaned and abandoned children to poor houses, or less frequently, to orphanages. Regardless of which the children entered, their eventual fate was indenture as apprentices or household help (Clothier, 1939). In addition, since the body of English common law that so greatly influenced America's own early laws did not include adoption, neither did the early laws in the colonies (Bolles, 1984; Watson, 1979). Howell (1988) believes that this attitude about who charity should serve also prolonged the absence of legal provisions for adoption, as adoption was viewed as a means by which irresponsible parents could rid themselves of their children.

Adoption Precedents From Caring For Dependent Children

Communities in the United States have always had to deal with children who were orphaned, abandoned, and neglected and the early methods used by colonial America were largely a reflection of the charity practices used in England. However, the Industrial Revolution dramatically changed the situation. Growth from immigration and the increasing urbanization associated with industrialization resulted in overwhelming numbers of dependent children who needed supervision. For example, in 1850 New York City officials estimated that there were 10,000 homeless children roaming the streets.

Industrialization effectively destroyed the apprenticeship and indenturing system. As a result, new methods for dealing with dependent children were needed (Rosenberg, 1992). Officials of public and private charities charged with the care of dependent children created new programs in response to the need to deal with "children of destitute immigrant families who overran the Eastern seaboard in the great migrations" (Lifton, 1988, p. 16). Several programs, including putting out, farm almshouses, orphanages, rural free foster homes, and supervised boarding homes, seem particularly important in what ultimately became a movement toward legalized adoption.

Putting Out

Cities sent children, "put them out," to the home of a contractor who was paid to take in children until they were old enough to go out on their own (Klibanoff & Klibanoff, 1973). There is no doubt that the charity offered to dependent children through putting out was inadequate, especially when the

numbers of children dependent on charity continued to grow but the budgets for providing for them did not. As more and more children became dependent on public charity, each was "essentially sold at auction to the one who would support him (sic) for the lowest price to the community" (Clothier, 1939, p. 600).

Putting out eventually fell into disfavor. Officials complained that the costs, which they perceived as being too high, were not well justified because the system of putting out was not producing productive and moral citizens who would benefit the community. Instead, farm almshouses were introduced by 1824 with the hope that the life offered there would produce better results than those produced by putting out.

Farm Almshouses

According to Clothier (1939), the goal with the rural almshouse was to place children in a setting where they would get a moral orientation and a practical trade which, in turn, would "diminish the pauperism and disease of the community" (p. 600). Unfortunately, when young orphaned and abandoned children were sent to these farm almshouses they were thrown together with adults in warehouse-like conditions, often without regard to gender. Once there, they were easily victimized and exploited by the other inmates, including "drunkards, drug addicts, sexual perverts, and the insane" (Clothier, 1939, p. 600). It took almost forty years for authorities to admit that rural almshouses were unproductive placements for dependent children.

Orphanages

Orphanages were first established in Florence, Italy in the 1420s (Gies & Gies, 1987). Although a few orphanages were already in operation under the sponsorship of religious groups and a few public agencies, the need to provide a more wholesome atmosphere for children dependent on public charity led to more orphanages. Orphanages could provide large numbers of children a supervised environment and a highly-structured routine and this was considered to be more likely places to mold the characters of their young charges. A typical day in an orphanage revolved around "hard work, memorizing the scriptures and singing sentimental songs of gratefulness" (Clothier, 1939, p. 600).

Rural Free Foster Homes

Rural free foster homes became another preferred placement for dependent children. Rural free foster home placements were considered desirable for two reasons. First, they were economical compared to other alternatives because farm families in search of readily available and inexpensive labor were willing to take the children without compensation. Second, the rural environment was considered desirable because farm life was believed to be a more wholesome life than that offered by institutional life (Cole & Donley, 1990). The result was that officials sent children on what became known as "orphan trains" throughout the Midwest (Lifton, 1988). Spencer (1979) reports that 90,000 children were placed this way.

Clothier (1939) describes how one such program, the New York Children's Aid Society under the direction of Charles Loring Brace, worked to

implement rural free foster placements by transporting urban children into rural areas. Representatives of the program visited rural areas throughout New England, the South, the Midwest, and Texas where many farming communities enthusiastically agreed to take in children because they needed additional farm labor. Trains transported groups of children to the preselected towns, where the children were displayed or "put up for adoption" in front of the groups who gathered to choose whomever they might wish. Brace estimated that between 20,000 and 24,000 children between the ages of 2 and 14 were placed in 1859 by his agency alone (Cole & Donley, 1990).

Brace did not limit the Society's efforts to orphans and abandoned children. The program was also targeted toward children from functioning but poor families in New York City, on the grounds that the "crowded filth of city slums could only breed criminals and paupers and that the answer to the problem of delinquency and dependency was placement in a healthy home environment in the wholesome atmosphere of the farm" (Clothier, 1939, p. 601). Many parents complied and thousands were sent away from their families to farm destinations. Similar programs were instituted and implemented by other child welfare organizations.

Supervised Boarding Homes

Clothier (1939) credits Charles Birtwell of the Boston Children's Aid Society for causing a shift from the use of rural free foster homes to supervised boarding homes. Between the years 1880 and 1890 Birtwell was outspoken in his criticism of these deportations, arguing that to truly serve dependent children

well, their new homes should be investigated before children were transferred and should be supervised afterward. As a result, many agencies turned to supervised boarding homes and foster homes as their preferred placement option, disfavoring orphanages and free foster homes.

Adoption Legacies From Caring for Dependent Children

The American use of rural free foster homes and orphanages for dependent children marks a significant change in child welfare programs. Until this time "children were not 'placed out' for their own benefit" (Clothier, 1939, p. 601). Transplanting children from urban slums to rural environments was considered to be in the best interest of the child and the community.

These nineteenth century placements also make it clear that society believed to be in the best interests of these children was a "total separation from an undesirable environment" (Shapiro, 1984, p. 267). The willingness on the part of welfare workers and the parents to uproot children geographically shows how little importance family and emotional connections were accorded. This total lack of concern for maintaining family relationships is consistent with the ancient Roman adoption practice of severing family connections and it shaped the form of early adoption laws in America. The emotional costs paid by these uprooted children must have been enormous.

Passing Adoption Statutes in America

In this part of the chapter I will first discuss how adoption became part of state statues. In the later part of this section I will describe why specific

amendments were added to adoption laws to make adoption anonymous and secret. I will also discuss the impact this has had on individuals in adoptions.

Making Adoption Part of State Statutes in America

Clothier (1939) asserts that some of the children who were sent to the rural free foster homes and supervised boarding homes were in fact adopted by the families that took them in. This may be true, for some states had adoption statutes at the time. Massachusetts became the first state to pass a statute legalizing and controlling adoption in 1851 (Benet, 1976; Rosenberg, 1992; Reitz & Watson, 1992; Watson, 1979). Other states slowly began to follow suit. By 1929 all states had adoption statutes (Baran & Pannor, 1990).

Motivations for Passing State Adoption Statutes

Individual state legislatures passed adoption statutes for a combination of altruistic and financial reasons. Adoption was often presented by legislators as altruistically serving the needs of children. This was true, in part. American adoption statutes provided a way to create families (Benet, 1976). "Orphans needed to have the same advantages as children born into their own families" (Burgess, 1989, p. 16). Adoption provided permanent homes for dependent children and, when compared to the fostering processes previously used, provided them with a legal way to become part of another family. However, state legislators also saw how adoption could benefit the economic interests of the state. Adoption reduced the burden on the state by providing permanent homes for orphaned and abandoned children at no cost (Kirk & McDaniel, 1984; McNamara, 1975; Small, 1987).

Assumptions That Shaped State Adoption Statutes

While the adoption statutes of each state varied, they shared in common a central view about adoption. The American frontier spirit that emphasized what one did was more important than who one's father was created the environment that made these adoption assumptions permissible (Baran & Pannor, 1990). Anderson (1977) identifies some of these assumptions:

> A decree of adoption terminates forever all relations between a child and his (sic) natural parents. The child is severed entirely from his own family tree and grafted onto that of his new parentage. The parents' rights are not merely suspended but completely destroyed, and the rights of the child in relation to the parents are likewise destroyed. (p. 141)

As these assumptions shaped the direction of state legislation, the statutes detailed the specific procedures for providing proof that the birth parents had willingly transferred their parental rights and obligations to the adoptive parents and established a means for registering the transfer (Small, 1987). The procedures used for recording adoptions were actually "modeled after a property deed or bill of sale" (Lifton, 1988, p. 218).

That first adoption statute passed by Massachusetts in 1851 established for the first time a concern for the interest of the child shown through the requirement that the courts investigate and regulate adoptions (Cole and Donley, 1990). However, it was the child's "inheritance rights and external circumstances that were protected rather than the child's emotional and social welfare" (Clothier, 1939, p. 602). It was not until the 1920s that child welfare agencies and social workers took the public position that their responsibility in arranging child placements was "to care for the best interests of the child" (Howell, 1988, p. 170). Accordingly they pressed state legislatures to amend existing adoption statutes to

support this objective. As a result, courts were given the responsibility to evaluate information supplied to them by social workers about the suitability of the potential adoptive parents (McNamara, 1975, p. 130).

The Legacies of the Original Adoption Statutes

While adoption statutes arrived relatively late, "the dominant belief that the full legal relationship was preferable prevailed and still predominates today" (Cole, 1984, p. 16). Compared to the fostering programs that preceded legalized American adoption, adoption offered a child the greater likelihood of a stable home and positive parent-child attachments. Recognition that both are important in child development has grown and has shaped child placement practices today. It is now widely accepted that permanent placement in adoptive homes is a far better solution than the impermanence of long-term foster home care and institutional care (Brinich, 1980; Brodzinsky, 1987; Cole, 1984; Gilman, 1987; Goldstein, Freud, & Solnit, 1973; Rundberg, 1988). For the same reasons, foster care is preferable to institutionalization (Brinich, 1980; Rundberg, 1988).

The legacies from the legal process by which children are attached to adoptive families are less positive. These early statues were founded on the view that genetic connections were not only irrelevant but dispensable. Immigrants "took on new names, new positions, and new responsibilities, and their attitudes toward adoption reflected these changes" (Baran, Pannor, & Sorosky, 1976, p. 98). Lifton (1988) agrees:

> In a nation of immigrants it was assumed that anyone could begin again under any conditions; that if necessary, one could dispense with one's genetic and historical roots as easily as man (sic) had dispensed with his tail. It was an Age of Optimism. (p. 16)

The assumption was that "the legal process of adoption could in fact sever biological ties" (Gonyo & Watson, 1988, pp. 15-16). This led to the belief "that normal, well-adjusted individuals would--and should--know only the parents who raised them" (McRoy & Grotevant, 1988, p. 120). These views had a profound effect on adoption practice. In particular, they set the stage for the establishment of adoption anonymity and secrecy.

Amending Adoption Statutes to Require Anonymity and Secrecy

The original adoption statutes of various states contained no provisions for confidentiality. Adoptions, whether informal or formal, were generally well known within the community. According to Caplan (1990) local newspapers regularly covered adoption hearings and adoptees could get copies of their birth certificates, which in turn gave them information about their birth parents. This would soon change. Why? Reitz and Watson (1992) point to two factors. First, the goal was to protect those involved in the adoption process from public scrutiny. Second, "secrecy and anonymity in adoption came about as adoption changed from being viewed essentially as a legal transaction to being viewed as a social service" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 235).

The first effort to seal adoption records passed the state legislature in Minnesota in 1917 (Dawson, 1992; Ruben, 1989). By the 1920s, five states had sealed-record legislation and five more joined with similar legislation by the 1930s (Dawson, 1993). By 1938 the Child Welfare League of America, a child advocacy organization comprised of adoption professionals, was lobbying state legislatures to amend the existing adoption statutes to mandate procedures that would make

adoption more anonymous and secret (Howell, 1988). They were very successful. While roughly one-third of the existing states required adoption anonymity in 1939, all but two states had anonymity requirements by 1950 (Aigner, 1987; Geissinger, 1984). Today, less than 10% of the states give adult adoptees access to either their adoption records or their original birth certificates (Burgess, 1989; Schecter & Bertocci, 1990; Stiffler, 1992).

Motives for Mandating Adoption Anonymity

Why did adoption professionals want adoption anonymity mandated? Adoption social workers in adoption agencies were responsible for arranging for the adoptive placements of children yet the prevailing societal prejudices worked against adoption. There were two special prejudices at work. First, the economic and ethnic backgrounds of the children available were unacceptable because they "were from poor or immigrant families, against whom prejudice was high" (Cole & Donley, 1990, p. 276). Second, there was an overwhelming concern about the moral backgrounds of the children. "In adoption, American-style, there has always been the taint of 'bad blood'" (Lifton, 1988, p. 16). The general public believed that parental traits could be inherited and therefore the backgrounds of these children were considered "problematic." That adoptable children were born as a result of an out-of-wedlock pregnancy--always the primary source of adoptable children--resulted in them being viewed as potential time bombs for moral failings. "The threat of a genetically defective child innately predisposed toward immorality and possible criminal behavior was very much in the minds of childless couples" (Feigelman & Silverman, 1986, p. 219).

Adoption agency decision makers found they could overcome resistance to adoption of illegitimate children by making adoption more anonymous and secret. An important belief that influenced adoption professionals' move toward adoption anonymity was their belief that environment was more important than heredity and that children did not inherit their "personality traits and conscience" (Kohlsaat & Johnson, 1954, pp. 93). Unless a child was born with congenital defects, they believed that the child's future fate would be determined by experiences in the adoptive environment. This meant they believed that "everything important to the child would happen after the adoption" (Dukette, 1984, p. 236). In this assumption, adoption professionals "shared the conviction of pediatricians, psychiatrists, and psychologists alike that, in general, environmental influences are of paramount significance in the physical and emotional development of children" (Cominos, 1971, p. 73). All this "reflected a shift from viewing illegitimate children as being tainted by 'bad blood' to conceptualizing them as tabulae rasae who should be protected from untoward experiences" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 9).

> Belief in the supremacy of nurture over nature formed the basis for the fantasy that the child's ancestry could be denied. It became necessary to find ways to foster and protect this fantasy. Hence, adoption policy moved toward secrecy and practice moved toward protection. . . The practice of sealing birth and adoption records was an attempt to effect such a break between the children and their hereditary history and genetic origins. (Small, 1987, p. 34)

An additional impetus for the acceptance of adoption secrecy and anonymity was what Schecter and Bertocci describe as the "static concept of the psychology of adoption" (1990, p. 63). This concept predominated the adoption community at that time. Concerns about the success or failure of adoption were

primarily focused on the period immediately before and immediately after the child's placement. "Once an adopted child was placed in the adoptive family, the adoptive parents were encouraged to treat the child as if he or she had been born into the family. The adoption was over once the judge signed the decree" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 5).

There were other reasons that adoption agencies wanted mandated adoption anonymity and secrecy. One reason was to shield members of the adoption from the prevailing stigmatizing social standards (Bartholet, 1993; Dukette, 1984; Rosenberg, 1992). Adoption anonymity and secrecy offered the birth mother the opportunity to hide the fact that she had given birth and placed her child for adoption. Women who became pregnant outside of marriage "were considered sexually promiscuous--tainted" (Cole, 1984, p. 17). Adoption professionals believed that adoptees deserved every chance to grow up in families that would treat them just as if they were biological children and where the community would accord the family "equal status and treatment" (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 321). According to Schecter and Bertocci (1990), adoption workers believed that because adoptive families were just like other families, they should be "protected accordingly" (p. 62). Sealed records offered adoptive parents the opportunity to disguise the fact that their child was adopted, and thus hide their infertility and the stigma of sexual inadequacy that regularly accompanies public knowledge of infertility (Watson, 1979). Some adoptive mothers actually faked pregnancies so that they could more effectively hide the fact that the child was adopted. How? So many children were available for adoption that the women could claim they were pregnant, stuff their clothes to look pregnant, and

then produce an infant at the appropriate time (Plumez, 1982). Adoption anonymity and secrecy was especially espoused as beneficial because it protected the adoptee.

> In many states, hospitals routinely stamped the birth certificate of a child born to an unwed mother with the word illegitimate printed in large red letters. But once the child was adopted, the court replaced this stigmatized birth certificate with a more conventional version that made no reference to the child's biological parents, married or unmarried. (Rappaport, 1992, p. 29)

Adoptees, it was argued, should not be made to suffer for the failings of their birth parents (Baran & Pannor, 1990). Adoption anonymity provided a means by which the child's stigmatizing illegitimacy could be hidden from the public and at times, from the child.

Adoption agencies also benefited from having secret and anonymous court records and sealed internal agency records. Reitz and Watson (1992) point out that they had practical and theoretical reasons for doing so. The practical reason was that anonymity gave adoption agencies a competitive edge over those who performed independent adoptions. "Prospective couples were told that, in independent placements, they would live in continuous fear of having to give the baby back before the court hearing, and in lifelong fear of intrusion by the birthmother who knew who they were" (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 322). Touting the benefits of anonymous adoption when it was clearly in their own best interests would have been particularly callous and self-serving had professional social workers not also believed theoretically that anonymity was truly in the interest of everyone.

> Their conceptual rationale was (1) the adopted children would become more firmly attached to their adoptive parents if they were cut off from

> their original families; (2) that adoptive parents could more fully claim a child as their own when the birth parents were safely removed, both physically and psychologically; and (3) that birth mothers could best be helped to go on with their lives by making a clean break with the children they relinquished for adoption. (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 236)

Adoption Anonymity Amendments

As a result of the successful lobbying by adoption professionals, state adoption statutes were amended to require two procedures that would make adoptions more anonymous and secret. These procedures--sealing adoption records and issuing adoptees a revised birth certificate--became requirements in all but two states and continue in most states today (Anderson, 1977).

Sealing adoption records. To enforce adoption anonymity and secrecy, adoption hearings were held in closed chambers. Each time an adoption was approved, all records related to the adoption were ordered sealed. "They were to be opened only in a life-or-death situation" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 10). This process hid the record of adoption proceedings and allowed the adoption to become "institutionally invisible" (Clothier, 1939, pp. 602-603).

Revising and reissuing adoptees' birth certificates. To further preserve adoption anonymity, the states revised birth certificates. Each adoptee was issued a revised birth certificate, replacing the birth parents' names with the names of the adoptive parents and renaming the child according to the adoptive parents' wishes. This created the illusion that the relationship of the child to the adoptive parents was "as if the child were born to them" (Lifton, 1988, p. 18). The revised birth certificate effectively gave the child "a new legal identity" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 178), a second birth via "judicial parthenogenesis" (Anderson, 1977, p. 152).

Encouraging adoptive parents to hide and lie about the child's adoptive background. Standard adoption practice recommended keeping the adoption a secret, or if that was not possible, to at least minimize and sanitize any information that was revealed (Plumez, 1982). "Parents were encouraged in this secrecy by lawyers, social workers, and physicians involved in adoption as well as by relatives and friends. Nearly all believed that withholding birth information from adopted children benefitted the child" (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 2). As a result, information about the child's preadoptive past or birth family was considered to be, at best, unnecessary and, at worst, dangerous.

Adoption Legacies From Laws Mandating Anonymity

"Whatever the original reason, the sealed record and total anonymity of the birthparents assumed enormous importance as a primary safeguard for adoptive families" (Baran & Pannor, 1990). Why was adoption anonymity so widely accepted? Baran, Pannor, and Sorosky (1976) are particularly critical of the process by which adoption anonymity became standard practice:

> The shift toward closed adoptions occurred in a gradual, continuing pattern without critical evaluation of the changes. There was no attempt to assess the psychological burden of secrecy imposed upon the adoptive parents and adoptees, nor were the feelings of loss and mourning by the birth parent carefully considered. It is difficult to know why a process as final and irreversible. . . was so little questioned by professionals in the field. (p. 97)

I will discuss three outgrowths of adoption anonymity and secrecy that all spring from the assumptions, outlined above, that guided the acceptance of anonymous adoption, matching, incomplete or falsified backgrounds, and total separation of birth mothers from their children.

Using matching to hide adoptive status. Adoption agencies, because they believed that having a child whose characteristics fit well with the adoptive parents would make it possible to conceal the family's adoptive status from outsiders, began to rely on a process that came to be known as matching. How was this possible? In part, it was a function of the great numbers of infants who were available. Matching also solved the problem of how to encourage the adoption of infants, who eventually became the preferred adoptee after World War II (Cole & Donley, 1990).

Adoption agencies were willing to carefully scrutinize infants available for adoption for periods ranging from 6 to 12 months, especially if there was limited background information about them or if they came from backgrounds that were judged marginal; "children with known pathology in their background were considered unadoptable" (Cole & Donley, 1990, p. 277). Adoptive parents and social workers placed great confidence in the ability of medical evaluations and psychological testing to evaluate the infants who were available (Smith & Miroff, 1981; Watson, 1979). As a result, adoptive parents believed what they were promised--a perfect match--and that the infant they adopted would have their "genetic, physical, and intellectual makeup" (McNamara, 1975, p. 3).

Sharing incomplete or false adoptee backgrounds with adoptive parents. Although adoption agencies shared information about physical or social characteristics of the birth parents when they matched the characteristics of the adoptive parents, any differences became a barrier to adoptive placement. Some agencies routinely withheld such information when they believed the placement would be potentially beneficial for both the adoptive parents and the adoptee.

The grounds for withholding information were that it would be "less of an emotional conflict if the adoptive parents are unaware of cultural, ethnic, and hereditary factors that are dissimilar to their own" (Cominos, 1971, p. 78). In fact, some agencies did not limit themselves to withholding information about differences in backgrounds. These agencies suppressed information about the birth parents that might be interpreted negatively by adoptive parents. The following, for example, was a recommendation to hide the fact that a birth parent was emotionally unstable.

> Assuming that the current and potential health of the baby has been thoroughly evaluated by responsible medical consultants, the agency should take the responsibility of withholding, both from the child and the adoptive parents, all facts that experience has shown it would be dangerous to reveal. Secure in the knowledge that personality traits and conscience are <u>not</u> inherited, an agency can and should take the firm position that no personal information is pertinent to the baby's future development. (Kohlsaat & Johnson, 1954, pp. 93)

In addition to suppressing differences in backgrounds and hiding negative information about the child's birth relatives, at times the information given to adoptive parents was blatantly fabricated. One adoption social worker explained the attitude that led to these lies this way: "Agencies weren't averse to telling parents whatever they wanted to hear. If it would make nice, qualified, middle-class prospective parents happy to believe that their new little baby was Polish-Irish, then what harm in making them happy?" (Barry, 1990, p. 24). How little things had changed from the "old adoption catalogues put out by prestigious agencies such as The Willows in Kansas City, which professed, in 1923, to deal with 'Superior Babies' from 'clean American stock'" (Lifton, 1988, p. 17).

Using adoption anonymity to enforce breeches between the birth mother and the adoptee. Agencies used anonymity not only as a means of escaping social stigma but also as a way to break the connection between the birth mother and her child (Borgman, 1982). Adoption professionals extolled benefits of unequivocal breaches between the birth mother and a child placed for adoption. The birth mother was promised her child would be better off if there was no contact between them since "a child's healthy development required an attachment to only one set of parents" (Dukette, 1984, pp. 235-236). She was advised to put the experience behind her and to go on with her life, and was promised that in time she would forget her physical and emotional ties to the child.

Challenges to Adoption Anonymity and Secrecy

In spite of the benefits adoption professionals attributed to anonymity, by the 1950s signs began to accumulate that it was not always positive. As society has continued to change between 1950 and the present, many aspects of conventional anonymity and secrecy in adoption have come under question, and eventually, changed. What are these changes in adoption? They include decreasing confidence in the value of keeping adoptions secret, increased use of independent adoptions, concern over identity formation of adoptees in anonymous adoptions, movement toward reunifications of adoptees and birth parents, and the increased use of open adoption. Each of these changes will be discussed in turn.

Changing Views About Adoption Revelations

By the 1950s standard adoption policies began to be questioned. Two particular problems associated with adoption secrecy surfaced. Reports indicated that adoptive families found keeping the secret a strain. In addition, many adoptees experienced the shock of being told they were adopted by someone other than their parents (Plumez, 1982).

> Adoption papers hidden away were discovered: whispered conversations were overheard; and relatives and friends let out the "awful truth." Once discovered, persons aroused by the revelation of their adoptions turned on their parents with bitterness and anger. They felt sinned against, deceived. They had led fraudulent lives. The tragic results of concealment were righted eventually by social workers who insisted that adoptees be told that they were adopted, best in infancy, we said, in an atmosphere of love. (Burgess, 1989, p. 19)

It was not surprising that adoptions were revealed by accident, Harris (1986) explains, because "adoption caseworkers estimate that for every child who is adopted, an average of 70 people come to know about the adoption. Thus, it is almost impossible to keep adoptions a secret" (pp. 530-531).

Adoption agencies shifted their focus away from <u>whether</u> adoptees should be told about their adoption to <u>when</u> the child should be told about the adoption and <u>who</u> should do it and <u>how</u> the telling should be done. Adoptive parents were told to share the fact of adoption early enough that it would be unlikely that someone else would reveal the fact before the adoptive parents had done so. Pressed by adoptive parents for advice on how to proceed, adoption agencies generally recommended that the way the adoption was revealed should lead the child to have a positive view of the event. This created a dilemma.

> Since adoption practice was based in large measure on the premise that adoption saved children from a bad environment, the dilemma was how to

> discuss adoption with the children in a way that sanctioned the adoptive parents' preeminent right to parenthood by virtue of the rescue, yet did not reflect too badly on the birth parents and do damage to the children's self-esteem. (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 5)

How did agencies and adoptive parents deal with this dilemma? Some agencies recommended leading the child to believe that the birth parents were good, that the circumstances leading to the adoption were positive, that the adoptive parents had personally picked him or her to be their child, and that being adopted in no way made a child in any way different from other children (Kowall & Schilling, 1985). Many adoptive parents constructed adoption stories that deviated from the truth. For example, despite their stories telling how they had chosen the child especially, adoptive parents never really selected the child. While general agency practice of that time did give prospective adoptive parents the opportunity to reject any specific child offered to them, the adoptive parents were not allowed to select a specific child from among all those children that were currently available for adoption. The "chosen child" story eventually fell into disfavor. Why? "It became apparent that this effort to counteract feelings of abandonment in fact contributed to the children's fear that they could be "unchosen," that is, abandoned again" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 71).

Adoption legacies from changing views about adoption revelations.

Adoption revelation is always potentially difficult because it places the adoptive parents in a difficult situation where "they must convey to their adopted child that, although he (sic) was born to other parents who did not want him, he is now their beloved child and shall always remain so" (Brinich, 1990, p. 7). This is not an easy task today, so it is not surprising that adoptive parents in the 1950s

found themselves uncomfortable with the task. Adoptive parents found the telling process difficult, in large part, because adoption agencies had encouraged them to expect being an adoptive parent and having an adopted child would be just like being a birth parent with a biological child, when in fact it was not (Kirk & McDaniel, 1984; Small, 1987). The reason that adoptive parents were uncomfortable with adoption revelations was that they found themselves in a "double-bind situation: treat adopted children as if they were your own, but tell them they are not" (Ternay, Wilborn, & Day, 1985, p. 262).

In addition, while previous adoption policies had promoted the idea that successful adoptive families were just like biological families, H. David Kirk's (1959; 1963) research challenged this perspective (Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Dukette, 1984). Based on his research with adoptive parents, Kirk categorizes adoptive parents according to their beliefs about differences and similarities between adoptive families and biological families. He titles the two ends of the continuum rejection-of-difference and acceptance-of-difference and concluded that the most successful adoptive families were those that readily admitted that they were different from biological families and believed that being atypical did not make them aberrant. Both adoptive children and adoptive parents, Kirk argues, benefitted from this more truthful orientation, while the rejection-of-difference orientation resulted in "unnecessary inequities, felt injustices, and serious social tensions" (Pannor, & Baran, 1984, p. 248). "Since Kirk's study first appeared, adoption practitioners and family clinicians have been struggling to conceptualize adoption in a new way" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, pp. 10-11).

Changing Views About the Adjustment of Adoptees

Historically, the period during which the greatest proportion of adoptions took place was during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Burgess (1989), this was also the period during which "psychological determinism was at its height. Children's behavior, it was felt, could be largely molded by environment. Adopting parents counting on this belief were puzzled when their children did not follow the pattern set before them" (p. 47). By the late 1950s adoptive parents were confronting an unsettling prospect raised in several articles written by therapists and counselors suggesting that adopted children risked suffering adjustment problems. These warnings were based on observations that they were treating adopted children in numbers disproportionate to the number of adopted children in the general population (Dukette, 1984; Watson, 1986). Harold J. Sants (1964) was the first to use the term "genealogical bewilderment" to describe the unique identity problems faced by adoptees, especially adoptees who had reached adolescence, and who knew little or nothing of their genetic past. The question of whether adoptees were "at-risk" captured a great deal of attention and encouraged research, where findings conflicted.

As the professional debates over the potentiality for increased vulnerability of adopted children reached the adoption community, adoptive parents were surprised and troubled. After all, adoption professionals had routinely assured adoptive parents "that if a child felt secure, loved, and included by the adoptive family, he or she would be able to handle knowledge of adoption without undue difficulties" (Andrews, 1979, p. 17). Concerned adoptive parents found it difficult to make sense of the contradictory research findings and even more difficult to

contemplate the possibility that something about having been adopted was harming their children.

Adoption legacies from changing views about the adjustment of adoptees. Today it is widely accepted that adoptees confront special adjustment issues not common to other children and adolescents. "Now we know that the issue of being adopted is one that will be returned to, consciously and unconsciously, at various points in an adoptee's growth and development" (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, p. 7). What seems to be especially problematic for adoptees? "The adopted child must include two separate sets of parents within his (sic) representational world. He must also integrate into his representation of himself the fact that he was born to one set of parents but has been raised by another set of parents" (Brinich, 1980, p. 108). The weight of research indicates that not all adoptees surmount these challenges effectively and as a result some experience social and psychological problems.

Increasing Numbers of Independent Adoptions

By the late 1970s adoption agencies had far fewer healthy, white infants to place. Why? Birth control was readily available, including legalized abortion (Dukette, 1984). In addition, it became increasingly acceptable for single women to raise babies (Berman & Bufferd, 1986), which Cole (1984) attributes in part to the increased divorce rate, "The unmarried parent does not stand out in today's community as she (sic) once did" (p. 18). Confronted with long or closed waiting lists at adoption agencies, many potential adoptive parents began to find children to adopt without depending on adoption agencies. This type of adoption, where

adoptive parents work legally but independently from adoption agencies, is called independent, or private, adoption.

Adoption legacies from increasing use of independent adoptions. The increased use of independent adoption has influenced the entire adoption community, especially adoption agencies. Independent adopters, by competing against adoption agencies for the same babies, have encouraged adoption agencies to carefully examine their policies. Independent adoptions have played an important role in encouraging the acceptance of direct contact between birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees.

Five states prohibit independent adoptions, including Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Minnesota (Cole & Donley, 1990; Rosenberg, 1992). Although most states legally permit independent adoption, each state's laws determine the specific procedures used. State regulations controlling independent adoption practices vary considerably, just as they do with the regulations controlling agency adoptions. All adoptions, independent or agency, require an investigation of the adoption which must be approved by the court before the adoption is finalized.

Independent adoption is currently estimated to account for fifty percent of the infants who are adopted by non-relatives in the United States each year (Ehrlich, 1987). This growth can be accounted for in four ways. First, independent adoption offers an alternative when adoption agencies do not have any children to place or offer only children categorized as having special needs. Second, independent adoption becomes an alternative to those who do not want to be restricted by agency policies, especially when those policies are judged by

the applicants to demand too much in the way of confidentiality or openness, or to be imposed primarily for the purpose of reducing the pool of applicants. Fourth, as more people adopt independently they serve as resources and role models to others who are just beginning the adoption process. Finally, potential adoptive parents turn specifically to independent adoption because they want to make their own adoption arrangements. Rappaport (1990) describes this appeal:

> In licensed agency adoption, all the power lies with the agencies. . . In private adoption, the legal power is primarily with the birthparents and adopting parents. The state does have to give its final approval, but the adoption consent process is a decision only of the birth parents and adopting parents. (p. 5)

There is a great deal of criticism from adoption agencies directed toward independent adoption. Similarly, independent adopters and facilitators of independent adoptions direct a great deal of criticism back toward adoption agencies. Many opposed to independent adoption can never forget the fraud and intimidation that dominated independent adoption during the unregulated period that followed World War I (Cole & Donley, 1990). Serious problems were revealed in 1955 as a result of U. S. Senate hearings on the subject (Howe, 1983). Yet it is important to remember independent adoption is not inherently flawed nor is agency adoption inherently error-free. "Publicized cases of mismanaged adoptions have occurred in both the agency and the independent sector; well-handled adoptions also occur in both sectors" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 174).

Shifts Away From the "As If" View of Adoption

There was also significant erosion taking place with the "as if" view of adoption that promoted the idea that adopted children would be shaped only by the adoptive family environment. "New information about genetic structure and

heredity shifted this view so that both nature and nurture were seen as influential, the balance different for each individual. This new knowledge required everyone to consider more seriously the issues of biology" (Rosenberg, 1992, pp. 10-11). As a result of these changes "there has been an increasing awareness of the continuing complexities that adoption introduces into the lives of those involved" (Watson, 1986, p. 5). Adoption is rarely concealed because adoptive families are encouraged to acknowledge their unique characteristics. This is consistent with the perspective Kirk (1964) argued for in his book Shared Fate, and represents what Kirk calls acceptance-of-difference in his theory of adoptive kinship, expanded by Brodzinsky (1987). Brodzinsky believes that it is possible to acknowledge too much, which he calls insistence-of-differences. Brodzinsky's reconception of adoptive kinships expands the continuum to add insistence-of-difference as the endpoint of the continuum opposite rejection-of-difference, placing acknowledgement-of-differences inside the continuum. Brodzinsky also stresses that adoptive families may find themselves oriented toward different points on this continuum at different life-cycle stages.

Current recommendations also encourage adoptive parents to talk to the child about adoption from the very first so that there is never a time when the child does not know about having been adopted. This presents real challenges to parents because children's ability to understand adoption change as their cognitive and coping abilities mature. According to Brodzinsky and colleagues (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Brodzinsky, 1986; Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984), children who are younger than school age are cognitively unprepared to understand adoption and its implications and

are likely to misconstrue the situation. This means that "telling children about adoption can never be a one-time event" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 6).

Increasing Efforts to Reunite Birth Parents and Adoptees

Aigner (1987) and Gonyo and Watson (1988) identify Jean Paton as the originator of the movement to reunite birth parents and adoptees, known as the search movement. Paton, a social worker, had been adopted during the period when adoption records were not sealed. As an adult, Paton had examined the public records of her adoption. When the adoption laws in her state were amended to seal all current and past adoption records she felt a "sense of loss of control over information that she felt was rightfully hers" (Gonyo & Watson, 1988, p. 16). In response she established Orphan Voyage in 1953, an organization with the goal of working toward open adoption records and reunions of adoptees and birth parents. A year later she published The Adopted Break Silence, which Reitz and Watson (1992) identify as the "first public outcry for openness" (p. 237).

The search movement did not gain popularity until the 1970s. Why not? Aigner (1987) suggests that it was because everyone's attention was diverted by other social movements. Other writers, (Dukette, 1984; Martin, 1988; Sachdev, 1984; Watson, 1979) differ, arguing that prerequisites to the search movement were changes in societal perceptions related to civil rights, institutionalized secrecy, sexuality, and nontraditional lifestyles. These changes were the prerequisites for "saying what one really thought and for expressing innermost thoughts openly and finding one's true identity" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 11). Especially important was the growing interest among Americans in tracing their personal family histories and genealogies. "The United States, long the melting

pot, was suddenly beset with interest in genealogy, ethnicity, and generational connections. Knowledge of bloodlines was not only acceptable but eminently fashionable" (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 324).

Adoptees and the search movement. Bermand and Bufferd (1986) and Martin (1988) believe that two demographic factors influenced the fact that the first group to act toward reunions were adoptees. First, the large number of adoptees from the baby boom years reached adolescence; and second, the first wave of adoptees who had sealed-records were reaching adulthood. Many of these adoptees took an unprecedented course and talked about their pain and confusion related to being adopted:

> Because they were not wanted, because their parents could not have children of their own, because they are "different," because others disapprove of them, because they are ashamed, because they have no idea who they look like and where they came from and who they are or who they will become, because they do not know what happened, because they do not belong. (Small, 1987, p. 39)

Even more surprising was the fact that they had not accepted the expectation that they would "regard the birth parents as if dead--if not literally, then certainly symbolically" (Lifton, 1988, p. 14). Despite everyone's assumption that they would not be curious about their birth parents and the past, they were. Adoptees revealed that "they never failed to be aware that they had other parents, to dream, to worry, to wonder about, and to yearn for" (Dukette, 1984, p. 234). Adoptees' descriptions of their private thoughts during this time are often poignant. One adoptee wrote of her adolescent confusions during that period:

> I had thought of my loss at all times, and since as long ago as I can remember. Every moment, every breath, I was consumed with wondering

> and longing and searching. Each stranger on the street, each house along the road, posed the same questions: Where? Why? Who? (Maxtone-Graham, 1983, p. 1)

The claims voiced by teenage adoptees might have been discounted as mere adolescent struggles had they not been echoed in the articles and books written by adult adoptees. The beginning wave of adoptees whose adoptive records had been sealed at birth were now old enough to act on their own. Many adult adoptees who wrote about their experiences complained about "the adoption process and their lost origins" (Watson, 1986, p. 6). Andersen (1993) explained his experience not knowing about his preadoptive past in this way:

> One does not build a house on a sandbar or a personality on a pile of problematic secrets. Feeling secure about oneself is difficult when basic aspects are unknown and frightening. It is all too easy to worry about what might be at the core of the secrets, with the possibilities limited only by one's imagination. (p. 21)

Adoptees, reflecting back, emphasized that they had experienced difficulty separating reality from fantasy and dealing with feelings of "secrecy, sordidness, abandonment, artificiality, and differentness" (Brinich, 1990, p. 64). To Burgess, a social worker, her well-intentioned advice to adoptive parents had tragic results:

> [We] insisted that adoptees be told that they were adopted, best in infancy, we said, in an atmosphere of love. We social workers still do not realize that we ourselves opened Pandora's Box. By righting one wrong, we created disorientation. In essence, we were saying, "You are adopted. You were born from another woman, not your mother. She was probably not married. We don't know about your father. Your real parents are those who adopted you." The adopted child is thinking, "She didn't want me; she rejected me. I am a bastard. Why can't I be like my friends? There must be something wrong with me: why else did she give me away? Who am I, anyway?" (1989, pp. 16-17)

To try and get information about their preadoptive past, adoptees first turned to the adoption agencies who had handled their adoptions. Both adult

and adolescent adoptees wrote or visited to try and get additional information. Powledge (1986) describes why:

> Many, maybe most, and possibly all adoptees, no matter how comfortable they may be with their adoptive parents, carry with them the questions, "Who is my biological mother?" and "Why did she give me away?" That the truthful answer probably would be undramatic, understandable and easily accepted--in most cases it's an out-of-wedlock pregnancy--is not what's important; what's important is the question and the fact that the adoptee doesn't have the answer. (p. 26)

Adoption agencies were totally unprepared for these requests from adoptees. "Lacking foresight, the policymakers never anticipated the appearance of hundreds of thousands of adoptees who could care less whether or not they were born in wedlock; for whom the unqualified fact of being born was what mattered" (Aigner, 1987, pp. 12-13). Agencies throughout the United States stood firmly on their original promises of confidentiality and rebuffed these efforts. "Attempts to gain information about missing pieces of their lives or to make contact with those to whom they were biologically related were systematically thwarted" (Gonyo & Watson, 1988, p. 16).

Rebuffed, some adoptees turned to the courts to force agencies and states to turn over the adoption records. Judges routinely rejected the requests as mere curiosity (Aigner, 1987; Dukette, 1984) on the grounds that adoption laws "severs forever every part of the parent and child relationship; severs the child entirely from its own family tree and engrafts it upon that of another. For all legal and practical purposes a child is the same as dead to its parents" (Lifton, 1988, p. 14). But, these records "are not sealed simply for the duration of the adoptee's childhood but permanently, to be opened only on a showing of "good cause," which is generally defined as a demonstration of overwhelming necessity"

(Bartholet, 1993, p. 54). Each adoptee was constrained by the very adoption anonymity policies and laws that had been "devised for his or her benefit as a child" (Kirk, & McDaniel, 1984, p. 77). Even as adults, those anonymity laws denied them "information that is literally the birthright of others" (Caplan, 1990, p. 74).

> Adoption records are important. They have been carefully maintained, safeguarded and kept confidential. But for whom are they maintained and whose confidentiality is being safeguarded? The paradox is that under present law, my birth records are being kept confidential from me and not for me. And who has a more legitimate right to know the circumstances of my birth and adoption than I do myself? (Allen, 1983, p. 205)

Adoptees, rebuffed for the second time, did not give up. They turned to each other and discussed how they could search for information about their pasts on their own. In 1972, the second search and open records organization was begun. The Adoptee's Liberation Movement Association (ALMA) was established by Florence Fisher, an adult adoptee who had successfully searched for her birth mother. Fisher's book about her about her experiences, The Search for Anna Fisher, which was published in 1973. The book "dramatically brought the issue of secrecy in adoption to the public's attention" and generated much interest among adoptees about conducting their own searches (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 237). Increasingly "searchers banded together to gain mutual support, devise ways to gain the information they were seeking, and challenge what they perceived as archaic adoption practice" (Gonyo & Watson, 1988, p. 16). As a result of the encouragement available to searchers in these support groups, and because of the techniques that were shared, more and more adoptees initiated searches. Television and newspapers began to write about adoption reunifications. Media

attention to the issue increasingly captured the attention of the other members of the adoption community.

Adoptive parents and the search movement. The response of adoptive parents to adoptee efforts toward open records and searches was often intensely negative. After all, they had been promised sealed records and the sealed record was an "implied promise that their family unit would never be disturbed by the appearance of their child's birth parents" (Aigner, 1987, p. 12). Further, they had been told that their children would not want to know about their birth parents and that they, as the child's psychological parents, would have little need to be concerned about the child's biological parents (Sachdev, 1984). To some adoptive parents, an adopted child's search for his or her birth parents was perceived as rejection (DiGiulio, 1979); for others it was a sign of parental failure (Feigelman & Silverman, 1986); thus, these adoptive parents actively opposed any search efforts on the part of their children. Adoptive parents, explains Campbell (1979), often see "the adoption relationship as tenuous; they seem to fear loss of ownership, loss of loving, and severance of the parental bond" (p. 25).

Other adoptive parents responded more positively, even to the point of helping with the search and joining the search organizations their children had joined. When reunions took place, many of these adoptive parents were able to offer "warm receptions to birth parents, marking the occasion with a personal and heartfelt gesture" (Aigner, 1987, p. 12). The first formal group for adoptive parents, Adoptive Parents for Open Records was formed in 1985 (Gonyo & Watson, 1988).

Birth parents and the search movement. Birth parents were the last members of the adoption triangle to become actively involved in the search movement (Dukette, 1984). Why? Benet (1976) suggests that "the moral views of every society have influenced its practice of adoption much more heavily than have pragmatic considerations" (p. 13). Aigner (1987) describes what it was like to be an unwed mother in the 1940s and 1950s:

> These women bore the brunt of attitudes towards unwed motherhood common in the American 1940s and 1950s. Many have not yet fully recovered from the experience. . . The treatment generally accorded unwed mothers in this country was shameful, cruel, and embittering. . . Unwed mothers of the 1940s and 1950s were maligned and humiliated for engaging in sexual activity that was an accepted part of male behavior. They suffered rejection by their families and were bounced out of schools for becoming pregnant. They were threatened with legal action if they chose to retain custody of their children and were preyed upon by black marketeers, whose ranks were populated by attorneys, physicians, and other professionals, profiting in the sale of infants. They were confined to maternity homes, often no better than prisons, and given prejudicial counseling biased solely in the direction of relinquishment. They had guilt imposed upon them and were offered no hope of sustaining a family on their own. (pp. 5-6)

Because of the stigma associated with the illegitimacy of their child's birth, many birth mothers had kept this area of their life hidden (Martin, 1988). To bring it out in the open was difficult after all the years of secrecy and lies. Several writers (Aigner, 1987; Gonyo, & Watson, 1988; Powledge, 1986) emphasize that birth parents were the last to organize due to the intensity of the stigmatizing experiences they had experienced. Powledge (1986) clarifies:

> For a long time, the biological parents of adopted children didn't protest the role to which the system assigned them: castoff, stigmatized, forgotten, not only denied the right to know how their babies were but also counseled (by certified social workers, no less, employed by the agencies that wanted their babies) to deny the whole process by which they had brought a child into the world. (p. 26)

The first search support organization for birth parents, Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), was organized by a birth mother, Lee Campbell. Even though CUB was set up for both birth mothers and birth fathers, the majority of members were and are birth mothers. As birth mothers came together to share their stories, their tales were amazingly similar.

> Most birth mothers felt they had no options besides a "shotgun wedding" or the stigma of raising the child as an unmarried mother branded with a "scarlet letter". . . Homes for unwed mothers and hospital staff discouraged women from even viewing their babies after delivery. The prevailing attitude was the couples (mostly "girls") had gotten "into trouble" by having an unplanned child and were gotten "out of trouble" through the adoption. Thus, the whole problem was thought to be over and solved with the relinquishment. (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 19)

The women also found they had other similarities. They told of years of wondering about their children, children they had never forgotten in spite of the promises therapists and social workers said that they would forget (Aigner, 1987; Dukette, 1984). One said, "We often don't find out until much later that we are not crazy, just out of our minds with pain" (Camp, 1990, p. 4). Another said:

> Why do they tell me I can never know?
> Why do they think it's best this way?
> For whom?
> I can't believe it would be such a crime if we met.
> I would never do anything to hurt her.
> This endless silence is the worst part of it.
> Never knowing is the hardest part.
> You don't forget, you just stop crying everyday.
> All those expert with their hot air opinions.
> They don't now what they are talking about.
> Who among them has given away a child?
> They'd change their tune.
> They'd change the law. (Duskey, 1979, p. 230)

The inability to forget became a double burden to the many birth parents who decided there was something wrong inside themselves "because an 'expert,'

who should know about these things, had told them the memory would fade" (Aigner, 1987, pp. 5-6). The result has been described by one of them as a "lifelong sense of psychological amputation" (Powledge, 1986, p. 26). "Now, years later, some express bitter resentment at having had to part with their child because of this lack of support. Other birth mothers, however, feel committed to relinquishment as a decision in everyone's best interests" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 19).

Organizing to work together. Recognizing that they could better achieve their goals of open records and searches by working together, some adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents established organizations (Gonyo & Watson, 1988). Examples are the Adoptee Liberation Movement Association (ALMA), Adoption Forum, Adoptees in Search, Adoption Circle, Concerned United Birthparents, Orphan Voyage, Yesterday's Children, and American Adoption Congress (Brodzinsky, Schechter, Henig, 1992; Stiffler, 1992). In addition to supporting search efforts, these groups have attacked several adoption policies: secrecy, anonymity, severing biological connections, and the "as if" illusion of the adoptive family (Cominos, 1971; Kirk, 1963). "Never before has the adoption service faced such formidable challenge and pressure to change its institutionalized assumptions and conventional beliefs" (Sachdev, 1984, p. v).

Adoption legacies from increasing efforts to reunite birth parents and adoptees. The challenges to closed adoption records have "challenged the concept of adoption as a perfect solution and raised questions about existing adoption practices" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 11). The search movement has had varying levels of influence on individual lives, research about adoption, the practice of adoption, and state adoption laws.

The essential message adoptees were delivering was that adoption cannot do away with their birth parents nor their needs to be connected to their own beginnings. "Search may not be the only way to deal with being an adoptee, but it is the most obvious way" (Andersen, 1993, p. 127). As increasing numbers of adoptees spoke out, "clinicians began to question the practice of secrecy and spoke of the psychological need for adult adoptees to know something about their biological roots (Berman, & Bufferd, 1986, p. 3). Perhaps the most consistent change regarding adoptees as a result of these changes "is a growing recognition that adoptees' desire to know and to identify with their genealogical past is natural and desirable for normal personality development" (Sachdev, 1984, p. 300). No longer is the desire for genealogical, social, and historical information interpreted as meaning that the adoptive home was deficient or that the adoptee is in need of therapy. "Today, as more adoptees and birth parents make their views known, people are beginning to see search as a sign of health" (Andersen, 1993, p. 94).

Why did this occur? Arms (1989) suggests that in part this is due to "a growing recognition of the dark consequences of keeping people from the truth, of the harm created in the name of protecting others from what belongs to them" (p. 39). Kaye (1988) agrees, commenting that "virtually all professionals today agree that adoptees need to know, or at least to believe, some basic facts about who their birth parents were" (p. 50). Miall (1989) warns that adoptive parents must prepare themselves for the "possibility of biological parents reentering their adopted child's life at some future date" (p. 47). This was unheard of for almost

50 years, during which time the assumption of the adoption community was that an adoptee's preadoptive past was a closed door.

State legislatures across the country have repeatedly been called upon to address the sealed record issue. In response, more than half of the states have instituted some form of passive or active adoption registry systems (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 178). Passive registry systems have been a disappointment to many who are involved in the search movement because "identifying information is given out only when all parties named on the original birth certificate have consented" (McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988, pp. 12-13). Active registry systems permit adoptees who are at least 18 years of age to file a request for contact. Court appointed intermediaries search for the adoptee's birth parents, who are given the power to decide whether or not the contact will be established.

According to Rosenberg (1992), it is important to distinguish between adoptive parents who are uncomfortable about the possibility of their children's birth parents reentering their lives as the result of searches and those adoptive parents who "find the wish to search a threatening act of disloyalty and lack of appreciation" (p. 136). While many adoptive parents admit to some level of discomfort, increasing numbers of adoptive parents report themselves to be open-minded about the concept of reunions between adoptees and their birth parents. Sachdev (1989) and Smith and Sherwen (1988) found that among the adoptive parents they studied, most were supportive of their children searching for their birth parents and some would offer assistance in the search. At the time the search movement began it would have been unthinkable that adoptive parents,

who were consistently portrayed as being negative and nonsupportive toward adoption reunifications, would participate.

It is more difficult to discuss the search movement's effect on birth parents because birth parents continue to be the least organized and least vocal members of the adoption community. Whether or not contact is desired by birth parents varies. Some birth parents are anxious to receive information about the children they relinquished; others would like to establish contact; and still others "maintain the original contract of confidentiality is sacrosanct and no one has a right to open any sealed record" (Rosenberg, 1992, pp. 4-5).

Those who are interested in being reunited with their children identify several motivations. Many feel that through reunion they will finally be able to alleviate the guilt they feel about having placed their child for adoption (Deykin, Campbell, & Patti, 1984). Many simply want to know whether or not their child is alive and well. Others express a desire to tell the child about their on-going concern and love (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991). Those birth mothers (and birth fathers) who advocate their right to search complain about being cut off from their children. These birth parents recognize the legality of the adoption but feel that adoption anonymity is imposed "to protect the interest of adoptive parents, and they were never given the option whether to remain anonymous or not" (Sachdev, 1984, p. 149). They "are asking to be accepted the way two sets of parents are accepted in a divorce situation" (McGrory, 1990, p. C5). Currently, Concerned United Birthparents "espouses a primary goal of avoiding unnecessary adoptions and keeping biological families together" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 11).

As a group, adoption agencies receive the brunt of the criticism resulting from the search movement. The promises made by agencies to adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents regarding the benefits of anonymity were the focus of much of this criticism. Typical of this criticism is Aigner's (1987) claim that these promises were "never true and at best, such advice was merely well-intentioned" (p. 88).

This has caused a deep reconsideration of the fundamental beliefs that underpin the practice of adoption, both by social workers and by adoption agencies. Some adoption professionals were pivotal in writing journal articles asking the members of their profession to reflectively examine their practices and the philosophies that they were founded on (Schecter & Bertocci, 1990). One social worker reported her self-examination in this way:

> I can recall reassuring heartbroken birthmothers, surrendering their infants for adoption, that when they had other children they would no longer sorrow for their first-born, the ones lost to them. I am not sure I actually believed it but the statement was said and repeated again and again and no one denied its veracity until birthmothers themselves spoke out. "No," they say, "a birthmother never forgets." (Burgess, 1989, p. 83)

Most adoption agencies and professional social workers have responded to the criticisms about their policies on confidentiality by making changes in the amount of nonidentifying information shared with birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees. Beyond this, however, any change that has occurred has varied greatly from agency to agency. Some adoption agencies hold to the ideal of confidentiality in preexisting adoption and defend their beliefs on the basis that openness will have a destabilizing influence on the child. Those agencies stand firm on their position that confidentiality in adoption was in the best interest of

everyone and continued to oppose the movement toward open records and to refuse to facilitate searches. The National Committee for Adoption, a lobbying group representing these agencies, still "advocates the maintenance of confidentiality for birth parents and for adoptive parents" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 11).

Increasing Numbers of Open Adoptions

"'Open adoption' and 'open records' are linked by a common concern about the secrecy in the adoption process and are historically related to each other" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 235). Thus the decade of the 70s is the point at which open adoption began to gain a toe hold. Some adoption agencies and social workers began to move away from absolute anonymity in the adoptions they were currently facilitating. Concerned on the one hand about the increasing use of independent adoptions and bolstered on the other hand by the public's willingness to acknowledge alternate family forms, agencies began to wrestle with how adoptions could be structured to respond to the calls from birth mothers, adoptive parents, and adoptees for greater information.

Currently options regarding confidentiality or openness vary from agency and even within agencies, with many agencies believing that choices about openness serves families better" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 260). Since the 1970s, some agencies have been established for the sole purpose of promoting open adoption. Early agencies that promoted open adoption were located in California, Texas, and Wisconsin and The National Federation for Open Adoption Education began in 1982 (Rappaport, 1992). In 1986, the Child Welfare League recommended that options for openness should be available, and in 1987 the

board of the American Adoption Congress adopted a policy statement signaling support of open adoption as standard adoption practice (Baran & Pannor, 1990).

There has also been an increasing number of open adoptions in the independent adoption community. It is important to stress that independent adoptions are not automatically open adoptions. However, as Ruben (1989) states, "By nature, independent adoption allows for some openness. Usually the birth mother at least gets to choose the adoptive parents; beyond that, the amount of contact is negotiable" (p. 90).

It is important to clarify that for most adoptions, agency or independent, openness in adoption does not include identifying either the adoptive parents or the birth parents to the degree that they will be able to contact each other directly. Adoptions where the parties have identifying information are known as open adoptions. Powledge (1986) cautions us that "there is no official, accepted definition of open adoption" (p. 26). In fact, there is not even total agreement about the most appropriate name. Although an adoption in which the parties have identifying information is most frequently referred to as open adoption, it is occasionally referred to as cooperative adoption or open placement. Whatever term is used to label the process, it was readily practiced throughout America prior to the 1920s and 1930s.

***Open* adoption in the past**. In the past, pregnant women and couples desiring children to raise sought each other out without the assistance of adoption agencies. At times, the couple was related to the pregnant woman, at other times it was a couple in her community. Either way, the couple and woman knew each other and there generally was no effort directed toward

excluding the birth mother from knowing about the child or being in contact with the child while the child was growing up (Baran & Pannor, 1990). This practice was customary in all areas of the United States prior to the period between 1920 and 1930 when adoption agencies became more widely available. Open adoption is believed to have continued longer in remote locations (Martin, 1988). Caplan (1990) points out parallels between this past practice of open adoption and the way adoption has been traditionally practiced by the Black community, "where there is a long tradition of informal adoption of children by relatives" (p. 76). But what about those situations where the woman and the couple were not related? How did open adoption function in these situations? Women who were pregnant and unmarried often teemed up with an infertile couple. The couple took care of the woman during her pregnancy and she gave them her child to adopt.

> A close connection developed between the couple and the unwed mother, which permitted the mother to relinquish her baby confidently, knowing she was providing the child with a home she approved of and felt a part of. . . The adoptive parents could tell the child of its birth heritage convincingly and with first-hand knowledge and understanding. There was an openness in such situations, and a good feeling was transmitted to the adoptee. (Baran, Pannor, & Sorosky, 1976. p. 98)

Basic assumptions underpinning open adoption. "Open adoption has come about largely because of what those who participated in earlier confidential adoptions have said about their experiences" (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991). Thus the growing belief in the importance of adoptees knowing about their genetic ties and the increasing awareness of negative impacts from secrecy in adoption have been an important impetus in the gradual movement toward open adoptions. According to Rappaport (1992), Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor's book, The Adoption Triangle, was instrumental in letting these experiences be known

by presenting a multitude of case histories emphasizing the detrimental effects of closed adoption. Concerns over adoptees' need for information about their ancestry, their genetic make-up, and the circumstances that surrounded their adoption contributed to the move toward openness in adoption and open adoptions. Some writers, researchers, and theorists, including Lifton (1988), Sorosky, Pannor and Baran (1978), and Watson (1988), have suggested that open adoption can help adoptees deal more effectively with their complex identity and loss issues. Many adoptive parents value open adoptions because it means the adoptees will not ever have to undertake a search for their birth parents (Rillera & Kaplan, 1984). Many birth parents have decided they will relinquish the child for adoption only through open adoption.

Open adoption does not deny the child's biological heritage. Therefore, open adoption accepts the obvious fact that the birth parents are "relatives of the child" (Silber & Dorner, 1990, p. 10). Thus, participants in open adoption deliberately include rather that exclude the birth parents in the life of the child. One adoptive family in an open adoption explained their decision this way: "It seems only natural that we would welcome our adopted child's birth parents into our home and family. He exists because they gave him life and nurtured him until his birth. We think of them as relatives" (Sorich & Siebert, 1982, pp. 214-215). Watson (1988) believes open adoption involves a simple, fundamental recognition of the role of each set of parents:

> One family gives them their genes, their ancestors, and their life; the other their nurture, their protection, and the basic environment in which they develop. . . An adopted child always has two sets of parents. . . the adopted child will always be bonded to the birth parents. . . [and] no

> matter how adequate the adoptive parents are, they did not give their adopted children their genes, their ancestors, or their birth. (pp. 26-28)

It is important to recognize that the commitment to have an open adoption that birth parents and adoptive parents make to each other is neither mandated nor enforced by law (Arms, 1989). It depends rather on the faithfulness of the adoptive parents and the birth parents to the ideal that such contact benefits the child, who is viewed as having the right to interaction with the birth parents while being raised by the adoptive parents. It is this spirit of cooperation rather than divisiveness that Gritter (1989) identifies as the dominant characteristic that separates open adoption from confidential adoption. The extent and nature of the relationships between the two families after consummation is left to the participants. "Any agreements about ongoing contact must be extralegal, and compliance must depend on the good faith of those involved" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 267). Yet the cooperative base of open adoption is one basis on which open adoption has been challenged as unworkable because there is nothing to prevent either birth parents or adoptive parents from breaking contract (Baran & Pannor, 1990).

Adoption legacies from increasing numbers of open adoption. There is a growing controversy over openness in adoption practice. While no one would deny that what is best for the child should be the aim that underpins all adoptive actions, there is a great deal of disagreement about whether or not open adoption is in the best interest of the child. "While we know that problems have been associated with traditional adoption, no one has been able to document that open adoption is free of those problems, or that it doesn't create some problems of its

own" (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, p. 189). McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) believe that the conflict over open adoption occurs first, because there is not yet agreement about what open adoption includes or means, and second, because there is no conclusive research on the topic. Reitz and Watson (1992) agree:

> There are many opinions about the value of open adoption, but there is as yet no empirical evidence to support or refute open adoption as a preferred adoption plan. Currently we are dealing with subjective experiences and theoretical formulations, not documented experience. There is no dearth of conceptual support for both traditional and open adoptions. Nor is there a lack of anecdotal reporting to support both positions. (pp. 260-261)

Proponents of confidential adoption argue that adoptive parents bond easily, birth parents resolve the grief better, and adoptees are protected from the confusion caused by dealing with two sets of parents (Rosenberg, 1992; Watson, 1988). Proponents of open adoption argue that "open adoption can eliminate the secretiveness and fear of the unknown that have proved so debilitating for some adoptees. . . And since the relationship between the child and the adoptive parents is based upon openness and honesty, that relationship may benefit also" (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, p. 189). But even those who are generally supportive of the potentials of open adoption report that open adoption has three special challenges: "(1) defining parental roles, (2) defining family boundaries, and (3) broken contacts" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 263).

Caplan's (1990) analysis of open adoption leads him to believe that a position for or against open adoption can be explained by one's fundamental view of what people and the institution of adoption are capable of achieving. Those favoring open adoption believe that "people can handle unfamiliar, even

unprecedented, relationships," while the confidential adoption side, satisfied with the way confidentiality has served adoption, is "not sanguine about the human ability to adapt to open adoption, and sees no need to test it" (p. 79).

There is substantial agreement that open adoption is beneficial when older children and adolescents are adopted. Open adoption permits the adoptee to maintain their identity in these situations (Baran & Pannor, 1990; Baran, Pannor, & Sorosky, 1976; Borgman, 1982; Pannor & Baran, 1984). However, the polarity between the views of those for and against open adoption in infant adoptions makes it difficult to imagine that there will ever be agreement. Based on their interviews with adoptive parents in confidential adoptions, semi-open adoptions, and open adoptions, McRoy, White, and Grotevant (1988) report that the findings of their study strongly suggest that the degree of openness desirable in any particular case is a highly individual matter. Certainly there is no solid evidence in the scant research available to confirm the "best" position on the closed/open continuum. What exists are conflicting theories and widely ranging personal experiences. Watson (1988) agrees:

> As we look at the psychological implications of the two ways of approaching adoption, it is important to understand that we are dealing with theoretical formulations and not established truths. There is no study that compares children in open adoption with those in confidential adoption and suggests that either is better than the other for those involved. (p. 26)

This makes the decisions confronting birth parents and adoptive parents potentially more difficult. Should they choose open adoption, semi-open adoption, or closed adoption? Which is best for themselves? Which is best for the child? Which is best for the child's birth mother? In addition, both may

experience direct or indirect pressure from each other and from adoption agencies or adoption intermediaries to choose a particular orientation (Rosenberg, 1992).

Summary

What does a historical perspective on adoption tell us? "Since recorded history, adoption has been practiced either formally, through established laws or rules or informally by social custom, and has long been seen as an acceptable way of incorporating new members into a family" (Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990, p. ix). But while adoption has existed since the beginning of civilization, it has always been an anomaly, a deviation from the norm that has primarily served the needs of adults (Cole & Donley, 1990). In addition, there is no single tradition in adoption. The goals satisfied by adoption and the ways in which adoption has been practiced varies depending on the point in history and the specific culture.

Klibanoff and Klibanoff (1973) recommend whenever we look back on adoption history that we keep in mind the time and place which gave rise to each specific adoption practice because "the social and legal goals of one civilization or culture are not necessarily those of another" (p. 179). American adoption conventions and procedures, like those of all cultures, reflect the prevailing beliefs about the best ways to meet the needs of children, adoptive parents, and birth parents (Rosenberg, 1992). The entire history of American adoption reflects a myriad of changes in both adoption practices and the philosophy that underpins those practices. Tracing the history of adoption teaches us that there are no unequivocally correct responses to the issues found in adoption. Through historical hindsight we can see the flaws and faults associated with each change

in adoption priority and strategy. Certainly our increased knowledge leads us to believe that adoption is a lifelong experience for all the parties involved rather than a static event in the personal history of each.

Since the middle of this century, we have increasingly focused on the emotional impact of adoption on birth parents, adoptees, and adoptive parents. Increasingly we have come to believe that there is no single model of adoption that can meet the needs of everyone in the adoption circle, for "each adoption is absolutely unique, no matter how much we may yearn to codify and systematize the process" (Suplee, 1990, p. B4).

If each adoption is unique, we need to offer flexible adoption procedures that allow birth parents and adoptive parents "to forge the relationship that works best for them--and ultimately, for the child who brings them together" (Ruben, 1989, p. 96). The impact of adoption secrecy and anonymity points to the potential for unanticipated complications from any unilateral adoption practice imposed on the participants of adoption, even when the practice is instituted through the best of intentions. True freedom to choose, multiple alternatives, and the freedom to choose among these alternatives offers empowerment to the members of the adoption circle.

Implications of This Chapter for My Study

What does the historical tracing I have done in this chapter suggest for my study of how adoptive mothers live with birth mothers in open adoptions? Other than the direct, personal placement of children that occurred early this century, there has been little emphasis on the woman-to-woman relationships between

birth mothers and adoptive mothers. The birth mother finds herself in a situation where she is either unable or unwilling to continue mothering her child. The adoptive mother finds herself in a situation, typically, where she is unable to have a child. Whether the adoptive mother adopts by preference or in response to infertility, she makes the commitment to take over the mothering of another woman's child. Therefore, any connections that adoptive mothers and birth mothers have had have been through the child. Historically the motivations that have pulled women toward adoptive mothering have been unmet needs for a family heir, unfulfilled maternal desires, and a sympathetic or charitable response to the plight of a birth mother and her child. Is the child the focus of the relationships adoptive mothers have with birth mothers? Are these traditional motivations relevant to the experiences of the women in this study? Do these traditional motivations establish expectations about adoption? How do these traditional motives for adoption shape their adoption experiences?

Society has always shown concern for children and yet historical perspective shows us how misguided and self-serving the programs designed to serve children have often been. What concerns for the child influence the adoptive mothers as they experience open adoption? Are these concerns in conflict with the welfare of the adoptive parents or the birth parents? Historical traditions have been mediated by influences of social pressure, and adoption practices have interacted to produce the configuration of adoption as it stands to day. What social pressures have these mothers felt in relation to their adoptions? How have adoption practices influenced their interactions with their children's birth mothers?

History also shows us that there are issues of power throughout adoption. In fact, adoption laws, policies, and practices often favor adoptive parents over birth parents. Some see adoption as inherently exploitative. What are the power relationships between adoptive mothers and birth mothers? How do they originate? In whose interest are they? Are the terms the adoptive mothers use for the various roles in adoption power related? Where did the language originate? How are the power and resources of the birth mothers different from the adoptive mothers? And, if any changes in power occurred, were there specific points at which these changes occurred?

Finally, the move toward openness in adoption occurred as a result of changes in society, changes in adoption research and knowledge, and changes in individuals and families, and changes in attitudes about birth mothers. What led these adoptive mothers to open adoption? Has it been what they expected it to be? How is it different now from the way it was in the beginning? What do they recommend to others considering adoption? Has this changed? How do we come to better understand adoption through this open process?

These are some of the questions that I explored as I became involved in dialogue with other adoptive mothers from open adoptions. In the next chapter, Chapter III, I discuss both the philosophical foundations for the methodology of this study and describe how these dialogues took place along with other procedural issues in the organization of the study.

CHAPTER III.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

In today's postpositivist era, a researcher must choose among the many competing systems of inquiry. Each system of inquiry is aligned with a particular perspective known as either a philosophical or a theoretical orientation. While numerous orientations are possible, a researcher must carefully consider which to use. "The kind of philosophy one chooses depends upon what sort of person he (sic) is. . . It is animated. . . by the soul of the man who holds it" (Fichte, quoted in Howard, 1982, p. xviii). In this chapter I will discuss the philosophical perspective that informs my study, identify the philosophical traditions from which it is drawn, and explain the details of the research procedures and techniques that guided my actions as I conducted this study.

My Philosophical Orientation in This Study

What is a philosophical orientation? A philosophical orientation involves a researcher's fundamental beliefs, principles, and assumptions about the world, about what should be researched, and how research should be conducted (Van Maanen, Dabbs, & Faulkner, 1984; van Manen, 1990). A researcher's philosophical orientation determines which research problems are worth pursuing, how the research will be conducted, and criteria by which the findings will be judged in terms of validity and reliability (Berger, Zeiditch, & Anderson, 1982; Polkinghorne, 1983).

My study is a form of interpretive inquiry. Interpretive inquiry focuses on "the human way of being in the world" (Kohak, 1978, p. 38). Interpretive human

science values understanding brought about through reflection about "thoughts, consciousness, values, feelings, emotions, actions, and purposes" (van Manen, 1990, p. 3). This type of understanding, because it is not directly available, requires interpretation. "The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences" (Denzin, 1989, p. 10).

Interpretive inquiry takes many forms, depending on the specific traditions with which the research is aligned. My research was undertaken in the human science tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology, one of the many human science approaches that seeks to uncover the meaning found in everyday life. Hermeneutic phenomenology tries to reveal that which is hidden or unclear about practical, life-world events. Hermeneutic phenomenological understanding is achieved through interpretation of lived experiences.

I will describe the foundations of my philosophical research perspective, focusing first on human science research, then on hermeneutic human science research, and finally on hermeneutic phenomenological human science research.

Human Science Research

Polkinghorne (1983) traces the human science research tradition back to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) in the 19th century. Until that time scientific study focused on the physical and natural world and was an epistemologically-oriented science that valued building a body of knowledge of objective facts that could ultimately explain the nonhuman world. As researchers increasingly focused their attention on the human and social world, scientists and philosophers

struggled with the question of whether science based on a theory of knowledge was the most appropriate way to study the human and social realms.

Central in the debate over whether the human and social realms are fundamentally similar or dissimilar to the physical and natural realms was Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey and other German anti-positivist writers and philosophers took a stand that the human world needed a different science than the one used to study the natural and physical domain. They increasingly used a term which means human sciences, Geistenswissenschaften, to describe a human domain orientation for research (Howard, 1982). Human science involves the "study of meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p. 181).

Hermeneutic Human Science Research

Dilthey was in the forefront of those who believed that the methods used to study cultural phenomena must be different from those used to study natural and physical sciences (Hultgren, 1989). Dilthey argued that the question was not whether the research methods used to study phenomena in the natural and physical world could be applied to study human phenomena. Clearly they could. Rather, the fundamental question was whether they were the most effective way to build a body of knowledge about human beings. Dilthey asserted that because important aspects of human life are not directly observable, humans are too complex for mere objective observation and measurement to be effective. Dilthey wrote, "Nature we explain, the life of the soul we understand" (cited in Howard, 1982, p. 16). Dilthey turned to hermeneutics as a way to build knowledge through an interpretation and understanding of the complex inner life of humans.

In doing so, Dilthey became known as the founder of hermeneutics (Howard, 1982).

The term hermeneutics means the "study and practice of the art of interpretation" (Howard, 1982, p. xii). Hermeneutics is concerned with "exposing hidden meanings, making the strange or alien familiar and comprehensible" (Hultgren, 1989, p. 42). Before Dilthey, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) introduced the term hermeneutics in his work in philology. Until Schleiermacher, philologists involved in making sense of ancient texts in theology, history, and jurisprudence focused on interpreting the meaning of the out-of-date words used in the texts by examining each sentence and making sure that each word made sense within the context of that sentence and that the meaning of the sentence reflected the meaning of the individual words (Hultgren, 1989, p. 43). Schleiermacher's own philological work led him to believe that any interpretation of text limited to philology's tradition of interpreting was necessarily inadequate because it ignored the true spirit of the text.

> Understanding an author. . . means more than understanding his (sic) words. It means understanding the spirit which initiated and controlled his writing, and for whose representation the writing exists. . . The unifying insight of the author, a totality, must somehow be present in each portion of the work's composition. (Howard, 1982, pp. 9-10)

As Schleiermacher considered how he could respect the totality of the author's work while translating each word, he expanded the part-whole-part process of interpretation used traditionally by philology with each sentence to a part-whole-part interpretation that considered the entire text.

> Of course, the interpreter can only begin with a part, but even there it is the whole he (sic) is looking for, the whole with which the author started and which now lies concealed in the parts. The actual practice of

> hermeneutics becomes a part-whole-part movement, a constant back and forth or dialectical process. This movement, which begins where it will end, is in geometry, a circular movement. It describes the famous "hermeneutic circle." (Howard, 1982, p. 10)

Hermeneutics, since Schleiermacher, has taken a broader perspective. Beginning with Dilthey, hermeneutics no longer confines itself to understanding the author's intentions while interpreting the author's text. When Dilthey fused Schleiermacher's hermeneutics to the human science perspective, hermeneutics became more than a practical methodology. Hermeneutics became a fundamental component of a philosophy of science of understanding. "It asks how is social experience, or a sequence of social interaction, organized, perceived, and constructed by interacting individuals?" (Howard, 1982, p. xiii). Next, I will explain how hermeneutics and phenomenology became intertwined as hermeneutic phenomenology, shifting phenomenology from its original epistemological orientation to an ontological one.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Human Science Research

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) founded phenomenology. Like Dilthey, Husserl was epistemologically oriented, seeking ways to add to the body of human knowledge (Hultgren, 1989). According to Jennings (1986), Husserl was increasingly troubled by the growing status of experimental science and expanding influence of world view philosophy which considered knowledge to be historically relative, varying according to the historical period in which it was situated. Hoping he could guide philosophy back to its original quest for a-historical, absolute knowledge, Husserl presented phenomenology as "the

foundation for a rigorous science of absolute knowledge about the world" (Jennings, 1986, p. 1231).

Phenomenology "begins with experiences as people have them, consciously, though not always with awareness" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 8). Phenomenology then focuses on the meaning structures that humans confer on their experiences. In phenomenology the positivist emphasis on causality is discarded; "the cause is suspended; the experience is what matters" (Kohak, 1978, p. 41). As humans encounter their world, they internally observe, decipher, appraise, and organize their experiences in the process of conferring meaning on those experiences. In other words, humans interpret a meaning structure about the experiences they encounter as they engage their life-world. Husserl believed that everyday phenomena contained consummate, omnipresent truths or principles that give the world its structure. Husserl called these truths and principles Wesen. Kohak (1978) describes how Wesen is correctly translated:

> The term Wesen, usually rendered as "essence," has very different connotations from the English "essence" in ordinary use. . . Wesen, derived from the old Germanic verb for "to be," suggests something overt, directly presented in experience. It is the "was-ing" or "be-ing" of an entity, the way something is, or, more precisely, the typical way at which a phenomenon presents itself in experience. Ordinary English usage comes close to it in phrases like "Isn't that just like a man (or a woman, an adolescent, etc.)," which identify. . . an overt, characteristic way of being, what an X is "in principle." (p. 9)

It is phenomenology's focus on essences that makes it unique among the other human science approaches (van Manen, 1990).

What is involved in becoming aware of the essence of a phenomenon? "Since essences are not seen in the sense that empirical objects are, they must be

brought forward through phenomenological reflection to reveal the meaning structures which are taken for granted in everyday life" (Hultgren, 1989, p. 51). Husserl proposed that consciousness of a phenomenon is more than a composite of sensory perception. Rather, consciousness of a phenomenon is "the broadest sense of all awareness, the totality of our "taking-in," our perceiving, grasping, seeing" (Kohak, 1978, p. 159).

> Essences do not "exist" apart from the conscious experience of beholding them. In other words, essences do not "float around," so to speak, waiting for a mind to behold them and thereby actualize them as real "being." Rather, essences are immanent, meaning that they are grasped in an act of reflective consciousness. (Jennings, 1986, p. 1232)

Husserl's phenomenology had widespread influence in the European philosophical community. Many who continued on Husserl's phenomenological path stayed within his conceptual boundaries and elaborated on his work. Other important phenomenologists, notably Heidegger and Gadamer, rejected the epistemological orientation of Husserl's phenomenology, reconceptualizing phenomenology to be ontologically oriented toward understanding what it means to be human (Hultgren, 1989; Kohak, 1978).

Heidegger's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) began his philosophical studies under Husserl but ultimately reconceptualized Husserl's epistemologically-oriented phenomenology to be ontologically-oriented phenomenology. Ontological phenomenology is existential. "Existential phenomenology is not just concerned with the structure of the lifeworld, but also with one's way of existing within it" (Hultgren, 1989, p. 51). It is a way of understanding what it means to be human in the process of being-in-the-world (Carson, 1986).

Heidegger's ontological phenomenology is oriented to the direct, lived, everyday lives of humans. Heidegger realized that everyday experiences become so familiar that these meanings are often hidden, "grown gray and dull..through routine and repetition" (Dirda, 1990, p. 5). But through summoning memories of experiences and contemplation, the meaning ingrained in those experiences can be realized. Because capturing these human meanings is dependent on language, "human experience is only possible because we have language. Heidegger proposed that language, thinking and being are one" (van Manen, 1990, pp. 38-39). Thus, Heidegger saw that ontological phenomenology must be hermeneutic, because reflection on the meaning that is Being is essentially an interpretive act. In doing so, Heidegger was the first to directly connect hermeneutics and phenomenology (Bleicher, 1987). Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on recovering these meaning structures as a way of understanding the "mystery of being" (Kohak, 1978, p. 192).

> Heidegger maintained that to be human is to be interpretive, for the very nature of the human realm is interpretive. Interpretation, then, is not a tool for knowledge; it is the way human beings are, and experience itself is formed through interpretation of the world. (Hultgren, 1989, p. 45)

Gadamer's Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hans-Georg Gadamer, who studied under Heidegger, accepted Heidegger's conception of an ontologically-oriented hermeneutic phenomenology. When Gadamer's book Truth and Method was published in 1960, it extended Heidegger's hermeneutic focus, further strengthening the bonds between the hermeneutic tradition, rooted in philology, and phenomenology. Gadamer believed it is language that makes possible "an agreement with somebody else

about our shared 'world'" (Bleicher, 1987, p. 3). Therefore, phenomenology depends on language "as the means for communicating, for learning, for reaching agreements" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 6). Therefore, interpretation is only possible because of human linguisticality.

> Language is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. For man the world exists as world in a way that no other being in the world experiences. But this world is linguistic in nature. . . Whoever has language 'has' the world. (Gadamer, 1975/1988, p. 401 & 411)

Under Gadamer, hermeneutic phenomenology became an "ontology of language" where interpretations were given "the ontological task of understanding the nature of human being-in-the-world" (Carson, 1986, pp. 74-75). Ontological understanding is understanding about the lived meaning of experiences, the meaning of being that is Being. Gadamer believed that "linguisticality is the basic mode of human existence, hermeneutics expands the possibilities of communication across the boundaries of space and time" (Dallmayr & McCarthy, 1977, p. 287).

According to Gadamer, a text or a dialogue represents an answer to a question. Therefore, the true task of interpretation is "an attempt to understand the question itself" (Carson, 1986, p. 76). Gadamer (1975/1988) explains:

> Interpretation means that it asks a question of the interpreter. . . To understand a text means to understand this question. Thus a person who seeks to understand must question what lies behind what is said. He (sic) must understand it as an answer to a question. If we go back behind what is said, then we inevitably ask questions beyond what is said. We understand the sense of the text only by acquiring the horizon of the question, that, as such, necessarily includes other possible answers. Thus the meaning of a sentence is relative to the question to which it is a reply, i.e., it necessarily goes beyond what is said in it. (p. 333)

What does this mean in practice? "Each time an interpreter sets out to understand the experiences of another, the interpreter's perspective (Gadamer calls perspectives "horizons") is influenced by his or her "expectations--of beliefs and practices, concepts and norms--that comprise his (sic) own life-world" (Hultgren, 1989, p. 288). Logically, the interpreter's perspective is necessarily different from the vision held by the person whose words are being interpreted. It is the interpreter's task to make sense of the words being interpreted from both the viewpoint of the interpreter and the person who is being interpreted. This is done through language in a circular process known as the hermeneutic circle, a fundamental element of classical hermeneutics.

The process begins with the assumption that within the words the original meaning intended by the speaker or writer is available as an intact whole. However, initial contact with the words offers only pieces of meaning--imperfect understanding. These portions of meaning are representative of the whole but can be misinterpreted because of the differences in perspectives between the interpreter and the person being interpreted. The interpreter must move back and forth between the two perspectives, questioning, and seeking further information that will validate or refute original impressions. Dallmyr and McCarthy (1977) describe the process this way:

> From the perspectives available to him (sic) in his horizon, the interpreter makes a preliminary projection of the sense of the text as a whole. With further penetration into the more detailed aspects of his material, the preliminary projection is revised, alternative proposals are considered, and new projections are tested. This hypothetico-circular movement of understanding the parts in terms of a projected sense of the whole and revising the latter in the light of a closer investigation of the parts, has as its goal the achievement of a unity of sense, that is, an interpretation of the

> whole in which our detailed knowledge of the parts can be integrated without violence. (p. 289)

It is important to understand that phenomenology does not stop with only an understanding of our shared world. Agreement makes possible the understanding of the fundamental meanings of what it is to be human in this world and this has a liberating effect.

> A person who 'understands' a text. . . has not only moved in understanding towards meaning--in the effort of understanding--but the accomplished understanding constitutes the state of a new intellectual freedom. . . Thus it is true in all cases that a person who understands, understands himself, projecting himself according to his (sic) possibilities. (Gadamer, 1975/1988, p. 231)

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Methodology

Compared to some research traditions, interpretive inquiry in the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology does not have a widely recognized or formalized methodology. Van Manen (1990) has identified four research activities that were the basis for my research methodology:

(1) Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience
(2) Investigating Experience as We Live It
(3) Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection
(4) Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing.

In the next section of this chapter I will explain what each research activity involves and how each guided my study.

Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience

Phenomenological research always begins with a question that truly engages the researcher. "In order to make a beginning, the phenomenologist must ask: What human experience do I feel called upon to make topical for my

investigation?" (van Manen, 1990, p. 41). I shared in Chapter I how I came to be immersed in the world of adoptive mothers and how those experiences led me to want to understand what it means to be an adoptive mother in an open adoption. I also explained my personal orientation to the phenomenon. "To orient oneself to a phenomenon always implies a particular interest, station or vantage point in life. So, when one orients to a phenomenon one is approaching this experience with a certain interest" (van Manen, 1990, p. 40). My interest, my personal orientation during my search for understanding adoptive mothers in open adoption was being an adoptive parent in an open adoption and a parenting educator.

The first step in any phenomenological study is identifying the human phenomenon that will orient the researcher in the investigation. How did I choose one phenomenon of adoptive mothering in open adoption from among the abundant phenomena available? Van Manen's (1990) research suggests that the phenomenological question can be developed by focusing on the essential nature of the experience through asking questions about the identity of the phenomenon. Following van Manen's instructions, I asked myself: What is essential to the experience of being an adoptive mother in an open adoption? What is it about being an adoptive mother in an open adoption that makes this way of being in the world different from all other ways of being in the world? The answer to these questions that began my search is that the difference that makes this form of adoptive mothering different from all other forms of adoptive mothering is the relationship the adoptive mother has with her child's birth

mother. My resulting phenomenological question was: What is it like to be an adoptive mother in an open adoption with the child's birth mother?

To begin my search for understanding, I recruited five adoptive mothers in open adoptions who were willing to discuss their experiences with their children's birth mothers. "We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves. . . they allow us to become 'informed,' shaped or enriched by this experience so as to be able to render the full significance of its meaning" (van Manen, 1990, p. 62). Because I wanted the women in the study to have relatively similar adoptive situations, I used the following selection criteria:

- The adoptive mother was married at the time of the first adoptive placement.
- The adoptive mother has been married to the same person since initiating her first adoption.
- The adoptee was voluntarily relinquished by the birth parents.
- The adoption was legally finalized.
- The adoptive family has exchanged identifying information with the birth mother in at least one adoption.
- In at least one adoption, the adoptive family has exchanged calls, letters, photographs, gifts, or visits with the child's birth mother after the child was placed in the adoptive home.
- Each child whose adoption was "open" was the same race as the adoptive parents, was not classified as a "special needs" adoption, and was adopted as an infant.

The women who participated in this study were recruited by either direct appeal or by advertisements for volunteers that ran in the newsletter of Families for Private Adoption, a large adoptive-parent organization in the metropolitan area of Washington, D.C. When I first spoke with each potential participant for this study, I began by describing myself as an adoptive mother who is committed to open adoption. I then explained that my goal was to better understand open

adoptions and that my research would focus on the everyday experiences adoptive mothers have in open adoption, especially their relationships with birth mothers. I further explained that participating in my research would involve a commitment to participate in several in-depth conversations and a willingness to have these conversations tape recorded. I promised that I would protect the confidentiality of the women in my study by using fictitious names and concealing identifying information.

Each potential participant volunteered information about her adoptive situation. When necessary, I asked questions to clarify whether she satisfied the selection criteria. Several women who initially inquired about the study did not meet one or more of the selection criteria and were not invited to participate in the study. I stopped accepting volunteers when I identified five adoptive mothers who were willing to participate and who met the selection criteria. The goal of rich, deep conversations guided my decision to talk with no more than five adoptive mothers during my study. All five of the adoptive mothers who began the study completed the study.

Investigating Experience as We Live It

Each of the conversations that provided the text for interpretation in this study was held in the adoptive mother's home. Before I began the first research conversation with each adoptive mother, I reviewed the purpose of my study and each woman gave her informed consent (see Appendix).

In conducing this research I did not use a structured interview procedure. Glaser and Strauss (1967) warn that such protocols in interpretive inquiry have

the danger of imposing the researcher's order on the participants' experiences and that the researcher's order will be limited by a priori concepts. I wanted to make sure that the participants in this study understood that "in-depth interviews are much more like conversations than formal, structured interviews" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 82).

The conversations provided the "descriptive data" about how these adoptive mothers experienced being in open adoption (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, p. 2). I asked the adoptive mother a factual, social-historical question about her adoptive situation at the beginning of the first conversation. The specific question I asked varied according to how much information I had already learned about each adoptive mother's situation, but generally followed Daniels and Weingarten's suggestion on how to initiate the conversation:

> A good way to open an interview is to ask a question that puts people at ease, makes them feel comfortable with themselves and with the interviewer, a question that calls for a simple, factual response (reflection will come later) that is neither controversial nor intrusive, that is fun to answer, and on which the person being interviewed is bound to have intimate, "expert" knowledge. (1982, p. 318)

After establishing a base of factual information, our conversations turned toward their experiences with adoption, which they related in anecdotal and story form. "The quest begins in descriptions of lived events as told or observed, including the situations in which these experiences happen. . . The importance of language. . . and the meanings to which it gives expression are close to the heart of the matter" (Barritt, 1986, p. 17).

While I would periodically introduce questions, our conversations were guided by the participants' experiences because they were the "experts" about

their experiences (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 11). Often my questions were posed because I needed to better understand what was being said. "Accurate description is the first task in a phenomenological study" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 7). This is important, according to Kohak, because phenomenological lived experience "is always a subject's experience, it is meaningful and intelligible as such" (Kohak, 1978, p. 29).

Our conversations explored their experiences in open adoption, how they live open adoption in the "normal, everyday world" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 2). Consistent with the hermeneutic phenomenological values of openness, our conversations evolved to the place where we shared our intimate experiences in the everyday world of open adoption. Heidegger describes these type of conversations in this way:

> To speak to one another means: to say something, show something to one another, and to entrust one another mutually to what is shown. To speak with one another means: to tell of something jointly, to show to one another what that which is claimed in the speaking says in the speaking, and what it, of itself, brings to light. (Heidegger, 1959/1982, p. 122)

Our conversations averaged one hour, ranging in length from 45 minutes to two hours, according to the amount of time the participants had available on a specific day and due to variations in the range and depth of our conversations. The least amount of time spent in discussion with the individual women in this study was five hours; the most amount of time was ten hours.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection

Following each conversation, I listened to the audio-tape and made note of comments that I wanted to clarify or to reexamine in the next conversation.

Before I returned to talk further with each woman, the tape was transcribed verbatim. Reviewing the written text provided me additional opportunities to note points that I would reintroduce in the next conversation. The texts that resulted from this study totalled almost 1500 pages.

The purpose of my research was to try to understand the experience of being an adoptive mother in an open adoption. But which experiences? "The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences" (Denzin, 1989, p. 10). How was this understanding achieved? Heidegger (1959/1982) tells us that this understanding is always shown through language:

> The essential being of language is Saying as Showing. Its showing character is not based on signs of any kind: rather, all signs arise from a showing within whose realm and for whose purposes they can be signs. . . Even when Showing is accomplished by our human saying, even then this showing, this pointer, is preceded by an indication that it will let itself be shown. (p. 123)

Hultgren (1983) adds, "It is in and through words that the experience shines through" (p. 22).

Beginning with the first tape that was transcribed, I looked for what stood out in the text of the conversations. As additional tapes were transcribed, I began to look for connections between the texts and to reflect on the texts. As I reviewed the language of the texts, I looked for phenomenological themes in the texts of the conversations. What are themes? "Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience" (van Manen, 1990, p. 79). Themes represent what is common about sections of the conversation, what the

conversation brings to light. "Themes. . . represent the significant meanings for subjects" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 7).

How did I uncover these themes? The theme revealing process begins by reading and rereading the transcripts. "Fundamentally, the making-sense process requires time, energy, patience, and resources" (Reason, 1988, p. 36). Sometimes a single conversation suggested one or more themes. Other themes were the result of integrating thoughts from two or more conversations with one or more adoptive mothers. At times the themes were readily apparent; other times they became apparent only after a period of time. According to Palmer (1969), this is not unusual:

> Phenomenology means letting things become manifest as what they are, without forcing our own categories on them. It means a reversal of direction from what one is accustomed to: it is not we who point to things; rather things show themselves to us. (p. 128)

Following van Manen's (1990) suggestions, I shared my themes with each of the adoptive mothers to see if I had accurately captured her experiences. "Both the interviewer and the interviewee attempt to interpret the significance of the preliminary themes in the light of the original phenomenological question. . . The interview turns indeed into an interpretive conversation" (van Manen, 1990, p. 99). I stressed the importance that my themes accurately reflect her experiences in open adoption. Determining whether or not a theme was essential to the experience of being an adoptive mother in an open adoption led to further discussion and clarification. This is the process by which I achieved intersubjective agreement on whether or not the way I presented the theme accurately reflected her experiences.

Once I identified the themes in my study, I evaluated them against the whole of the women's adoptive experiences and reflected on what each theme could reveal about the phenomenon of open adoption. This began the process of reflection. The major task of a phenomenological researcher is reflection. But what is this reflection? Van Manen (1990) explains that "a true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance" (p. 32). There is a particular tension involved in reflecting on the experiences, the tension of whether the meaning is accurate and whether it is illuminating. "To be strong in our orientation means that we will not settle for superficialities and falsities" (van Manen, 1990, p. 33). How did I know when my reflections were illuminating? "If the researcher is able to accept the attitude of a genuine seeker, she can begin to trust her intuition, her power to recognize" (Tesch, 1987, p. 239).

My reflections on and insights about the themes and text ultimately led me to find this study's metathemes. "Metathemes. . . refer to the major dimensions of the phenomenon studied. . . Metathemes, in their polished and final form, are the phenomenological researcher's equivalent to the study's 'results'" (Tesch, 1987, p. 231). The metathemes of my study are the foundation for Chapter V.

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing

The themes and metathemes that were uncovered by this study led to Chapter V, where I offer my linguistic transformations to the reader for consideration. "The judgment about the quality of phenomenological research rests with the reader, to judge the accuracy of the information collection

procedures given the problem, and accuracy of the description against one's own reality and the quality of the insights, given what is found in the research" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 14). While the interpretations of meanings are my own, they come from the "voices, emotions, and actions" of the women in this study (Denzin, 1989, p. 10). I have followed Daniels and Weingarten's guide in determining what portions of our conversations to present:

> An emblematic vignette. . . is symbolically representative of a common pattern or view or argument, an extreme vignette. . . reflects a minority pattern or view or argument and that serves as a counterpoint to the common pattern. . . and. . . an idiosyncratic vignette. . . describes a one-of-a-kind situation of view or argument, in order to underscore the marvelous variety of. . . experience. (1982, p. 315)

Chapter V is where I present what I have come to see about the experiences of these adoptive mothers in open adoption. My interpretations or linguistic transformations are the result of what van Manen (1990) calls "reflective writing" (p. 38). It is reflective writing that makes this study a practice of hermeneutic phenomenology. It is reflective writing that allowed me to see the meaning in these experiences. "Seeing is not a matter of leaping to conclusions on the basis of a casual glance, and neither is phenomenology. Rather, as with all seeing, it is a matter of looking, looking again, then again, each time with greater precision, until we reach a clear, evident grasp" (Kohak, 1978, p. 23). It is hermeneutic in that it relies upon interpretation of the meaning of the text; it is phenomenological in that it uses these meanings to deeply describe the lived experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoptions.

In Chapter VI, I also offer the insights uncovered by me in this study and make connections between what I have found in this study and my experience.

Because human science is a practical science, I also discuss the connections of what I found in this research to the larger world, especially with a view toward those things that might be changed to be more humane for all. "By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped research can lead to better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice" (Barritt, 1986, p. 20).

CHAPTER IV. TWO MOTHERS AND ONE CHILD: BECOMING AN ADOPTIVE MOTHER IN AN OPEN ADOPTION

In this chapter I will introduce the participants in my study and describe how they came to be mothers through adoption and also to be in open adoptions. I will explore what it means to be an adoptive mother who lives with the child's birth mother in an open adoption through the linguistic themes revealed in these women's experiences turning toward adoption and toward open adoption. I will also reflect on what it means to become an adoptive mother in an open adoption by comparing the lived space and lived time experiences of adoptive mothers and birth mothers before the adoption.

Introducing Five Adoptive Mothers in Open Adoptions

As I began the conversations with the women in this study, each described in detail why she decided to adopt and how her open adoption came about. I am sharing their stories because their stories vary considerably and are important in establishing each woman's perspective on adoption and on open adoption. But they do more than that, they let us begin to understand what it means to be an adoptive mother in an open adoption. "Human beings story their worlds. . . Through story and narrative they endow experience with meaning, transmitting those meanings" (Hartman & Laird, 1990, p. 231).

The women's stories are introduced in order of the occurrence of our first in-depth conversations. The names I use for these adoptive mothers, their families, and their children's birth mothers are not their real names. Each of the women in this study was given the opportunity to choose the fictitious names

used in her story. In the few instances when the adoptive mothers did not select a specific name, I suggested names for their approval.

Babs Gardener

At the time our conversations ended, the Gardeners were both in their forties and had been married for more than 10 years. Their daughters, Jenny and Christina, were 7 and 5 years old. An outgoing and energetic woman, Babs Gardener has a busy life that revolves around her children, community activities, and social-action projects. She squeezes reading into every spare moment she has, especially books related to adoption.

Turning Toward Adoption: I've Always Been So Open to Adoption

When I asked Babs to tell me about the events that led to the open adoptions of her two daughters, Babs proceeded to talk easily about the six year period of unexplained infertility that preceded the point at which she and Adam made the decision to adopt. Reflecting back, she commented on how much she had hated the intrusive medical testing. "After a certain point. . . I just wouldn't do it," Babs said. "I just couldn't stand it." But even that doesn't account for how easily Babs changed her focus from trying to become pregnant to trying to adopt. By her own accounts, adoption has always appealed to her. "I don't know why I've always been so open to adoption," Babs mused.

> It may be because my father died when I was tiny, so our family has always been sort of different,. . . and because of my very strong spiritual core. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, adoption throughout the Bible is a very strong message. There's Moses and all that in the Jewish tradition. Then when you get to the Christian tradition, Joseph was Jesus' adoptive father. And there's a phrase that you are adopted as Christ's own. So those are images through my faith that are real strong and positive. So I

have real positive feelings about adoption. I don't think its a second-rate way to have a family. It never had been an issue, not ever.

Turning Toward Open Adoption: It Clicked For Me

When Babs and Adam began pursuing an independent adoption they did so by placing adoption advertisements in the classified sections of several local newspapers, a typical way to find a baby to adopt in an independent adoption. The Gardeners went into their search for a baby to adopt with the intention of having an open adoption. Babs had recently learned about open adoption while talking with an adoptive mother who was in an open adoption. Explaining why open adoption appealed to her as much as it did when she first heard about it, Babs traced her acceptance of the idea back to an earlier experience of one of her friends. Explaining the link, Babs said, "It clicked for me because one of my friends in college surrendered a child in closed [adoption]. . . She was a crazy person by the end of 5 years. She had no idea where the child was."

Becoming Jenny's Mother

Jenny, the Gardener's oldest daughter, came to them within 3 months of the time they began adoption advertisements. Patricia, Jenny's birth mother, responded to the Gardener's advertisement when the end of her pregnancy was very near. Patricia shared that she was in her late twenties and already raising a child from her former marriage. Patricia explained that she was choosing adoption for her soon-to-be-born child because her family would disown her if they realized she was pregnant and not married.

Jenny was born shortly after Patricia initially contacted the Gardeners. During the extended hospitalization that followed Jenny's caesarian birth, the

Gardeners, especially Babs, spent every possible moment with Patricia and Jenny. Babs talked further about their desire for an open adoption. Babs explained, "It was very clear to me from the very beginning that we would never own this child, and that she [Jenny] belongs to two families, and so it [open adoption] came much more easily to me." Thinking back, Babs said, "For me to have said to her, 'Look we really want to be able to do this,' was new to her. She had never even considered this at all." After some discussion Patricia agreed to Babs' suggestion that the adoption be open and the adults promised to keep in contact with each otheren Jenny went home with the Gardeners.

Becoming Christina's Mother

Jenny was approximately 1 and 1/2 years old when the Gardeners heard through a friend about a pregnant woman, Carol, who was looking for a family to adopt her baby. At the time, the Gardeners were still in an on-going relationship with Jenny's birth mother in their first adoption and they confidently pointed to the success of their first open adoption when they contacted Carol. Carol, who was in her late twenties and already raising one child, knew about open adoption and was willing to go through with one. Several months later Carol gave birth to a baby girl and less than 2 days later the Gardeners took home their new daughter, whom they named Christina.

Marie Bishop

"How lucky can you be?" said Marie Bishop, her face breaking into a smile as she discussed the joy she and her husband, John, feel about their two young sons. At the time our conversations ended, the Bishops were in their early forties

and had been married for more than ten years. Their oldest son, Hank, was 4 years old and Frank was 2 years old.

Turning Toward Adoption: I Can Make This Happen

As Marie's conversation moved to the time when she and John began to try to have a family, her face sobered at the memory of a much less happy time in their lives. "We tried for about 5 years to have biological children," Marie explained. The Bishops turned to medical technology to overcome their infertility and, at one point, Marie became pregnant with twins. Describing her pregnancy, Marie said, "They were in-vitro fertilization babies. We were doing in-vitro fertilization and happened to be pregnant on the first try, which was fortunate. And then I had a miscarriage."

Having achieved a pregnancy with the first attempt at in-vitro fertilization, Marie was sure that she could succeed again. Marie recalls saying repeatedly, "I can make this work." Shaking her head at the memory, Marie said, "I firmly believed that if I simply took good care of myself, that if I would persist, I could absolutely, really do it." As months passed and the three subsequent in-vitro fertilizations failed to achieve another pregnancy, John was the first to begin considering adoption. It took longer for Marie to agree. "I finally said, 'I can't physically do it anymore.'" Marie added, "I finally had to come to the realization that no matter how much of a can-do person I was, this wasn't something I could do."

Recalling what followed, Marie emphasized that when she and John switched from pursuing a baby through in-vitro fertilization to pursuing a baby through adoption they were simply changing their tactics.

> The ultimate goal was not getting pregnant, because we knew that didn't necessarily get you a child. So we said, "Okay. We have to look at what the real goal is here, and the real goal is getting a child, so let's look at some other ways to get a child."

The Bishops decided that the most logical alternative was to adopt a child. When the Bishops contacted local adoption agencies, they were astounded to find that waiting lists were 5 years and longer. Marie remembered the agency responses to her calls as being "Okay, we'll send you an application. You fill it out, and we'll call you in a couple of years when we can possibly start your home study." She remembers wanting to say, "No. Excuse me. We're ready for kids now!" Unwilling to sit and wait passively, if wait at all, the Bishops turned to independent adoption. Independent adoption was appealing because they could be actively involved in the search for their child. Marie said, "Why would anybody wait for years if you could just go out and find a baby?" Marie added, "I'm not a waiter. If things aren't happening, well, do something about it. You don't just sit there and wait. So private adoption for me was like a real catharsis." Marie emphasized, "It was the same scenario, I can make this happen!"

Turning Toward Open Adoption: Open Adoption Clarified the Whole Adoption Issue for Us

The laws that regulate adoption in the state where the Bishops live require that adoptive parents and birth parents who participate in an independent adoption exchange full names and addresses before the adoptive parents get custody of the child. The Bishops' attorney told them about this requirement

before they began to actively search for a baby to adopt. Marie explained her response in this way:

> We had been so into the thinking that the way to adopt a baby was through an agency where you talked to some social worker [and] they call you one day and all the records are naturally sealed. I thought that was just the way everything was done. And then when we looked into private adoption, it never dawned on me that it was going to be so different. And then when our lawyer told us that we had to exchange identifying information. . . and our first reaction to that, to be honest with you, was that makes us feel kind of uncomfortable.

While the Bishops' correctly understood that the law did not require them to have ongoing contact, they nevertheless assumed that ongoing contact would be a possibility. The Bishops began to assume that their adoption would be an open adoption. As they began to evaluate how much they were comfortable sharing with each woman who responded to their adoption advertisements, the Bishops pursued only those potential adoptions where they were comfortable offering the birth mother the option of ongoing contact.

> We finally looked at each other and we said, "Hey! If we don't trust a birth mother or a birth couple enough to give them our name and address and some information about our families very early on, if we have that many doubts about them after talking to them two or three times. . . these aren't people we should be dealing with anyway.". . . So, to us, open adoption actually clarified the whole adoption issue for us.

Becoming Hank's Mother

Like most of the other families in this study, the Bishops used newspaper advertisements in their search for an infant. Many women responded to their ads, but for various reasons the contacts did not result in an adoption. Some women called, spoke briefly with the Bishops, and then never called back. Other women, after further consideration, let the Bishops know they had decided against adoption. Still other women, responding to a number of advertisements,

decided to work with another couple. And in other cases, the Bishops were the ones who decided against going forward with discussions about a possible adoption because they were not comfortable offering the option of an open adoption. As each prospective adoption faded away, Marie philosophically assumed that another contact would bring them the baby they longed for. Almost 9 months after they started advertising, Marie was surprised to get another call from Julie. Five months earlier the Bishops had spoken a number of times with Julie and with Julie's 15-year-old daughter, Amy, who was at that time considering adoption as an alternative for her pregnancy. Months before, Amy had called Marie to tell her that she had decided she was keeping the baby. Marie remembered her response this way:

> Well, Amy, it's your baby. We realize that you're 15 and this is real hard for you, too. I wish you luck. But I truly am concerned about you because it's going to be very difficult. I know how tough it's going to be, so if you need some counseling afterwards or something, we know a lot of people who do this work--who counsel young, pregnant birth mothers--and we'll put you in touch with some people. We even know people who do volunteer work occasionally. If you really can't afford it they'll be glad to sit down and talk with you and put you in contact with a support group. If you ever need any help just call us.

Now, hearing Julie's voice again, Marie assumed that she was calling to let them know how Amy and the baby were doing or to ask about the counseling she had mentioned earlier. Instead, Julie stunned Marie by asking if she and John were still interested in adopting adopt Amy's son, now a month old.

As Julie filled Marie in on what had happened, Marie learned that Amy had been deserted by her boy friend shortly after the baby was born. Amy was deeply depressed over his defection and had totally abdicated her parenting responsibilities to Julie. Julie did not feel she could continue to jeopardize her job

by shouldering the baby's care because she had limited financial resources and was the sole support of Amy. At Julie's urging, Amy was once again willing to talk to the Bishops about adoption.

Marie and John agreed to meet the next day with Julie, Amy, and Amy's infant. By the end of the meeting it was agreed that the Bishops would initiate adoption procedures. There were many legal prerequisites that had to be satisfied before the Bishops could take custody of Amy's son. While the Bishops had already completed an adoption home study, state laws required that Amy complete pre-placement counseling, so it was another month before the Bishops took custody of Amy's two-month-old son, who they renamed. They call him Hank.

Becoming Frank's Mother

When Hank was approximately 18 months old, the Bishops began a new round of adoption advertising. In only a matter of months they adopted their second son, Frank. The Bishop's adoption experiences with Frank were very different from those they had with Hank. Frank's birth mother, Tara, was the first person to respond to their adoption advertisements. When Tara finally told her family she was pregnant, everyone agreed she would get an abortion. When the doctor informed them that Tara was too far into her pregnancy for an abortion, Tara never considered keeping her child. Tara and her boy friend, Robert, immediately decided they would arrange to have their child adopted.

Marie and John went to meet Tara and her family and later to meet Robert and his family. They took Hank along. Marie remembers how comfortable everyone felt with each other when they met. "There was never a moment's

doubt in anybody's mind," remembers Marie. Marie is still astounded at how quickly both sides were sure that they were right for each other. Things continued smoothly as everyone got to know each other better during the months until Frank was born. Frank went home with the Bishops from the hospital and within the month the birth parents terminated their parental rights in a court hearing. Tara, Robert, and their families returned to the Bishop's home for coffee after that court hearing. Everyone sat around and talked about their good feelings about what was happening. "As they left they all gave Frank a kiss and said 'We'll see you later,' and 'You be good,'" remembered Marie. "The last thing [Robert's] mother and father said when they left was, 'This is the way adoptions should be, to be able to come over and say hi and see he's okay.'"

Jillian Chambers

Jillian Chambers is a confident, straight-forward woman with a take-charge style. She and her husband, Mac, were in their late-thirties when our conversations ended and had been married for more than ten years. Their sons, Tim and Charlie, were 4 years old and 3 years old.

Looking back, Jillian explained that she met Mac after they had graduated from college and she was in her mid-twenties. When they had been married for three years they began to look forward to the day when she would be pregnant with their child. To their great disappointment, that pregnancy never occurred. Although the Chambers were aggressive in pursuing medical treatment in an

effort to have the biological child they had dreamed about, it eventually became clear that they wouldn't succeed. Describing how she felt, Jillian said:

> I felt really bad because I felt like my husband deserved a little chip off the old block. I just had this picture of this little baby that would be the child of my husband, and my heart would ache at the thought of a cute little guy that had my husband's face with freckles on it, so letting go of that was very painful and difficult.

Turning Toward Adoption: God Has Another Child in Mind for Us

Talking about the period between the time they stopped infertility treatment and the time they decided to adopt, Jillian explained that it was their religious faith that sustained them during this difficult period.

> We were unable to have biological children. We needed to face that, grieve it and go on. . . We did a lot of praying. . . We got to the point where we thought, "Okay, that's not what God intends for us. He has another child in mind for us.". . . We finally decided that if we truly wanted to be parents, adoption was the only way it was going to happen.

Turning Toward Open Adoption: Not Only Was it Quick, It Was Really Good

Jillian first learned about open adoption when she heard about another couple who had adopted recently. The couple was able to adopt a healthy newborn in only 3 months by pursing an independent, open adoption. Describing her initial response to open adoption, Jillian emphasizes that her first impression was different from the one she has now. "At first, I came at it from everybody else's angle, "Oooh, I don't know about this open thing." Explaining, she said:

> Really the only reason I got into it initially was because it was quick. . . I just thought, "Well, I'll do it if I have to, but hopefully they won't want to." My perspective was not that this was a desirable thing, but it was I'll have to do it to get a baby quick, because the agencies were saying 6 years and that sort of thing. . . I decided, "I'll do it, because I don't want to wait and even though I'm a little fearful about this, because it's quick, it's

worth the risk." But then, as I educated myself, I realized that not only was it quick, it was really good. It was real positive.

Becoming Tim's Mother

When the Chambers turned to independent adoption, they hired a free-lance adoption counselor to guide them through the process. Their adoption counselor advised them to skip the usual route of newspaper classified advertisements. She recommended attaching their picture to a one-page resume about themselves and sending the package to places a woman considering adoption might be. Jillian took on the task of generating the addresses of doctors, midwives, and pregnancy counseling centers across the country and sending out the mailings. "I sent out 1,700 flyers all over the United States," Jillian said. "I felt like it empowered me. I was going to search and find my baby."

Shortly after they sent out the entire batch of adoption fliers, the Chambers began to get inquiries. The first serious adoption possibility involved a young woman named Lynn. The Chambers exchanged telephone calls and letters with Lynn and after several weeks arranged to meet her. While Lynn was willing to go forward with the adoption after her baby was born, the Chambers were troubled by a sense that this adoption was not the right one for them. It simply boiled down to an issue of fit and they were increasingly uncomfortable with their sense of the fit between them and Lynn. Turning to their adoption counselor, they found she believed it was important for adoptive parents to genuinely like their child's birth mother. Jillian explained:

> Our adoption counselor was very adamant about that. She said, "Believe me, if you don't like the birth mother, chances are you're not going to be that crazy about the kid." She said, "You really have to like the birth mother. She has to be somebody that you feel good about."

The Chambers turned again to prayer to guide them in this situation. They decided there were two things they needed to do. The first was an "agonizing and heartbreaking decision." They should not continue to work toward adopting Lynn's child. Second, because Lynn had offered to let them adopt her baby, they had a moral commitment to assist her to find another couple who would be interested in adopting her baby. They did the ground work that would help Lynn find a more suitable match. Jillian warned Lynn's counselor in advance so that she could be there to provide emotional support after Jillian called to tell Lynn that they were not going through with the adoption.

> She cried, and I cried, and it was real miserable to do this to her. But I just felt like we had to do it. . . I thought as hard as it is to call her up and tell her this, this is a lifetime commitment we're getting ready to make, and if we don't feel good about it, it would be a mistake for everyone. . . It's a lifetime commitment; it's nothing that should done on a random basis.

Having turned away from the potential adoption with Lynn, Jillian wondered how long it would be before they were offered another baby to adopt. Those fears were put to rest when they began working seriously with Stacey, a young woman who also responded to one of their adoption fliers. After the initial phone conversations, letters, and a visit, the Chambers felt comfortable going forward with the plan to adopt Stacey's child after it was born. In the final weeks of her pregnancy Stacey came from out of state to live with the Chambers and Jillian trained to be her birth coach. Precipitously, all of their plans ended in the unanticipated stillbirth. Explaining, Jillian said, "We thought she had gone into labor, but she hadn't. She had a placental abruption and the baby was

stillborn and she almost died. It was really terrible and we were there the whole time." Jillian added, "It was a real, real difficult time for all of us."

Once again the Chambers relied on their faith to get through this difficult event. After a period of grief, they began to look toward the future. "We felt like the Lord had destined certain children to be our children, and so we were pretty philosophical," Jillian explained. "We had our mind set that the Lord was looking out for us and would make sure that we got the children that we were meant to parent." They began working seriously with Ruth, who had responded to one of the Chambers' adoption fliers during the time they were working with Stacey. In contrast to their first two adoption experiences, the Chambers felt a strong connection with Ruth, who was seventeen, and with Ruth's parents. As they got to know each other better, the relationship blossomed into "a close and loving relationship." Ten tumultuous months after her adoption fliers were mailed out all across the country, Jillian was present at Timothy's birth. Several days later, Ruth handed the Chambers her son in an emotional adoption ceremony held in Ruth's church before family and friends.

Becoming Charlie's Mother

Charlie, the Chamber's second son, also came to them as a result of the original adoption fliers, although the two children are about 1 and 1/2 years apart. Donna and her boyfriend, Tony, were sixteen and seventeen when they contacted the Chambers. Donna and Tony were still trying to find the right couple to adopt their baby, who was due in just a few weeks. Donna wanted an open adoption and was nervous that the adoptive parents would break off contact after the adoption was final, so the fact that the Chambers' were

maintaining contact with Tim's birth mother was reassuring. With little time left before the delivery, Jillian offered to make a videotape so that Donna and Tony could get a better sense of who they were. Jillian immediately sent them a tape that showed Mac and Jillian with Tim in their home and on a typical outing.

Donna called Jillian a few days later to let her know that she was willing to go forward on the adoption. Jillian and Donna talked several times each day during the three weeks between their initial contact and the day Jillian caught a plane to go and be with Donna before she gave birth. Describing their time together, Jillian said, "Donna and I spent 3 days together before delivery and we really clicked. I felt like I'd known her all my life." Once again Jillian attended the birth. Donna delivered a son, whom the Chambers named Charles. Charlie became the Chamber's son 27 months after their first adoption flier was sent out as the Chambers shared an adoption ceremony with the baby's birth family.

Leah Wilson

One of the first things I noticed about Leah Wilson was her quiet air of gentleness and calmness. Leah was in her forties when we ended our conversations, as was her husband Zachary. They had been married for almost 10 years at the time our conversations ended. They are the parents of Jonah, who was 4 years old.

Leah was the only one of the adoptive mothers in this study who has also experienced biological parenting. Having three grown children from her former marriage, Leah has also been a mother for longer than any of the women I talked

with. Once, as she talked about herself, Leah laughingly said, "Oh, I've been a mom forever."

Turning Toward Adoption: There It Was In Front of Us, Just Like a Little Miracle

When Leah and Zachary Wilson first married they had many discussions about adopting a child because Leah could no longer have children. Although Leah and Zachary felt positive about adoption, a major job change for Zachary interfered with any active efforts toward an adoption. That changed dramatically on the day that they received an unexpected letter asking if they would be interested in adopting a baby. The letter which the Wilsons received was from Cindy, an acquaintance of Leah's daughter, Kate. Leah described how Cindy, who was twenty, single, pregnant, had gotten their names, this way:

> Cindy called Kate and said, "I'm in big trouble and I don't know what to do." At first she was going to keep the baby, but the more she talked about it, the more she realized she wasn't prepared to be a mother. Kate said to her, "Well, you might want to consider adoption, and if you're really worried about where the baby would go, my mom and dad are interested in adoption. You might want to write them a letter."

As Leah talked about what it was like when she and Zachary read the letter that made it possible for them to adopt Jonah, her voice broke with emotion. "We let it drift for so long that we really didn't expect for it to happen, and there it was right in front of us. It was just like a little miracle."

Leah remembers being both excited and scared the first time she called Cindy to respond to her letter. "I called her right away because I didn't want her to sit and wonder, and wait, and worry. . . I know it would be a terrible thing to

send a letter like that and not hear promptly back." Leah and Zachary immediately made arrangements to meet with Cindy in person.

> The first thing that we said after we got Cindy's letter is that we have to get together with her and talk personally. That meant going a thousand miles, but we were willing to do that to sit face to face with her and talk . . . We were so nervous then, but we liked Cindy, and we liked what she had to say, and we felt that she was really pretty settled in her thinking.

After talking extensively, the Wilsons and Cindy agreed to proceed with the adoption. Because they lived so far apart, the Wilsons knew that they would not see Cindy again until the baby was born. They planned to take the first available flight after Cindy's baby was born, but in the meantime they relied on letters and phone calls to stay in contact.

Turning Toward Open Adoption: It Just Evolved

As Cindy's pregnancy progressed, the Wilsons began to get the impression that her situation was becoming increasingly more difficult. Leah recalled that period of their life as being extremely frustrating because they were so concerned about what was happening to Cindy.

> Cindy was having difficulty. . . and we were here, and she would call and say, "This is happening and that is happening," and we would just panic because she was having so many difficulties. She wasn't getting good counseling. Whatever she tried, it just kind of went haywire. And then her money was running out, and she was getting bigger all the time, and she was going to have to quit work anyway, so it was really tough.

Worried about what Cindy was going through, Leah tried to find out exactly what was happening. Piecing the picture together from the information they gathered from Cindy's calls and letters, Leah and Zachary came to realize that the man Cindy had been dating had "rejected her totally. . . so she was hurting a lot." Summarizing Cindy's situation, Leah said, "She had no money, no

family support, and just felt very alone." After considering what they had learned, Leah and Zachary made the decision to invite Cindy to come and live with them for the last five weeks of her pregnancy.

Because Cindy was the one to initially contact the Wilsons, they knew that she had their names and address. But having that information is not the same as having an open adoption. Originally the Wilsons did not envision an open adoption for themselves. Despite having invited Cindy to come and live with them, Zachary wasn't sure that this would be an open adoption. "It all kind of evolved from a point where we knew nothing, and we were just doing the private adoption, to where she was coming to live with us, and it didn't make sense not to have an open adoption." Leah remembers saying to Zachary:

> Well, she's living with us. She knows we're here. She can call us anytime she wants to. We're not going to change our number. We're not going to change our address. Zachary, it is an open adoption whether you want it or not. Whatever you want to call it.

During the period while Cindy lived with them, the Wilson's lawyer constantly warned them not to get emotionally involved with Cindy. He also reminded them that there was no guarantee that the adoption would happen. Leah remembers telling the lawyer, "Hey, look. She's in our house. She's part of our family right now. There is no way that I can be indifferent to this person."

Becoming Jonah's Mother

After Jonah was born, Cindy left the hospital and stayed with another family until she was able to return to her home state. Before she left, Cindy bought a present for Jonah because she wanted to leave something here with him that was from her. She also picked out a special card for Leah and Zachary.

Leah had assumed that it would be hard for Cindy to just fly away and leave Jonah, but it ended up being harder for Cindy to leave Leah. Talking about a letter she received from Cindy, Leah said, "She wrote me afterward that it was worse losing me as a surrogate mom for her than it was to give up Jonah."

Melissa Miller

Melissa Miller always astounded me each time she filled me in on what she had been doing since we last talked. A whirlwind of focused energy, she consistently managed to accomplish more than seemed humanly possible. In light of her busy life, it is a particularly deft accomplishment that the home she and her husband, Matt, have created feels like an island of stability where all of their attention is focused on their young daughter, Michelle. At the time our conversations ended, Michelle was 3 years old, the Millers were in their forties and had been married for almost twenty years.

Turning Toward Adoption: I Felt Comfortable With the Way That Would Work in My Life

Matt and Melissa were thrilled to have adopted Michelle after so many years of marriage. While the years the Millers shared before Michelle arrived were good years, they were always shadowed by their longing for a child. "Even when we first married, I wanted kids," explained Melissa. "One of the first things that we did, one of the first trips we took, I brought a book of baby's names to play 'Okay, what do you think about this name?' in the car." Melissa also bought tiny baby clothes in joyful anticipation of the future. At first, the Millers' waiting for the child they dreamed of was measured in months, then in years. After a

period of time, the book of baby names and the baby clothes were packed away so that Melissa wouldn't have to confront them.

Melissa and Matt found it hard to give up their dream of having a child of their own. They put their considerable energy into infertility treatment, each alternative offering them renewed hope, but all to no avail. Three pregnancies had ended in miscarriage. After years of intensive infertility treatment, the Millers arrived at the point where "it came down to either we adopt or we don't have children." For the first time in their quest for a child, they were at very different emotional places. Matt wasn't sure about adoption, Melissa was.

> For me, it wasn't a major issue as far as adoption was concerned. I very much wanted to have my own biological child, but I didn't really have any doubts that a lot of people express, and that Matt expressed, about whether or not having an adoptive child would be the same type of an experience for me. I have enough knowledge of myself with other kids, and we had an adoptive cousin, that I felt pretty comfortable with the way that would work in my life. But I did not want to take the decision as my own. I wanted it to be a joint decision.

After a period of ongoing discussion and intense self-examination, the Millers were once again in agreement and focused together to try to find a baby to adopt.

Turning Toward Open Adoption: We Always Wanted It to Be at Least That Open

The Millers' first attempt to adopt proceeded relatively smoothly. Diane, a young woman who had considered a number of couples running adoption advertisements, selected the Millers to be parents of her child. After giving birth to a daughter, Diane directed the hospital to give the Millers full access to the baby, whom they held, fed, and named. Twenty-four hours later, Diane's boy friend who was totally opposed to adoption, offered to marry her. Diane called

the Millers' attorney to announce that the adoption was off. Describing that point in her life, Melissa said, "I certainly opened myself up for a level of pain that is probably close to what I will ever experience." Having tried for so long to have a child and to have this adoption fall through at the last moment led Melissa to doubt that she would ever be a mother. Melissa fully understands why Diane did what she did, but it was a deeply painful experience that Melissa carries with her still.

It took some time before the Millers felt willing to move forward again on adoption, but eventually they began to search for another baby to adopt. Once again the Millers placed adoption advertisements. Janet, a nineteen-year-old young woman who was living at home with her parents, responded to one of their adoption advertisements. During the several ensuing phone conversations the Millers learned that Janet was in the last trimester of her pregnancy and that she and her parents were interviewing a number of couples as potential adoptive parents. "They wanted to know us," said Melissa. "They wanted to meet us. We had to go to an interview with them before they chose who they wanted." That was fine with the Millers. "In that sense of an open adoption, of at least seeing somebody, we always wanted to do that and have the chance to get to know them, so there was no question that we were going to be at least that open." During their initial interview with Janet and her parents, the Millers indicated that they would be willing to exchange identifying information. "We find it, and would find it, impossible to dissemble," explained Melissa.

Several meetings later, the Millers learned that they had been selected by Janet and her parents to adopt the baby. The Millers were told that their

willingness to have an open adoption was an important factor in their being selected, but that wasn't all.

> One of the things very directly said by Aurora, Janet's mother, was, "Well, when we were looking around, we wanted to pick a couple who could give the baby things that Janet couldn't." And the things that she talked about were stable relationship, a loving home, set patterns of family [interaction]. One of the things that they were very happy with is that we had a very extended family--we're very interactive with our nieces and nephews. . . We had a settled life. . . We had careers. We had networks of support.

Becoming Michelle's Mother

During the remaining period of Janet's pregnancy, the Millers met often with Janet and her parents and talked with Janet on the phone. Melissa was invited to be with Janet during her labor. Describing Michelle's birth, Melissa said, "It was a very warm, intimate interaction where we were part of everything . . . We were there. I was there at the labor, and that was a very open, almost enmeshed relationship."

As time for Michelle's release from the hospital approached, Melissa worried about what it would do to their relationship when she and Matt took Michelle home. Melissa tried to talk with Janet and her parents about that feeling.

> We were talking about saying good-bye. . . and I said something about how it's going to be very strange not seeing you all, not going out to dinner, not seeing you weekly, and not calling up. And their comments were, "Oh, well we'll still talk.". . . We had very much developed a friendship with the three of them. It had gone beyond acquaintance. It was the type of thing where there were definite feelings of loss over not seeing them anymore, and things that phone conversations couldn't possibly do.

Moments later the Millers presented the court order that gave them custody of the baby to the hospital administrator, only to be stunned when they

were told they could not take Michelle, that only the birth mother could take the baby from the hospital. The Millers were relieved when Janet and her parents resolutely supported the Millers' right to take the baby and swore that Janet would check out of the hospital against doctors orders if necessary so that Michelle could go home with the Millers. The confrontation was finally resolved but the entire incident was doubly painful for Melissa because it reminded her all too much of the baby she and Matt were never able to take home from the hospital. Thinking about how to describe that time, Melissa added:

> Doing an open adoption is just saying, "Okay. I'm willing to take this risk." And in some ways I'm a risk taker, and I realize that much more now than I ever did before. . . So as much as people will talk about open adoption being a wonderful experience and stuff like that, I agree. I think that there were some wonderful things and that I will have positive memories the rest of my life around that whole process. I will also have the nightmares, the realistic nightmares of how horrible that hospital interaction was, as well as the unrealistic nightmares of fearing that Michelle would be taken from me.

Reflections on Becoming a Mother By Turning to Adoption and Turning to Open Adoption

To better understand the experiences each of these women had becoming one of the child's two mothers in an open adoption, I reflected on the two turning points that give each experience its lived sense. These two turning points are the decision to become an adoptive mother and making the decision to have an open adoption. What is it like to be a woman who makes the decision to become an adoptive mother? What is it like making the decision to become an adoptive mother in an open adoption? Were these decisions simply one more out

of a series of choices and decisions? Women who become mothers through adoption "never drift into parenthood" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 51).

> Adoption involves choice on a scale most of us don't generally experience. You can't fall accidentally into adoption, as you can into pregnancy. You exercise choice down to the wire. Choice forces you to think about what you want and to take responsibility for the consequences of your decision. And the choice to go forward with an adoption means a lifelong commitment, which simply isn't true of other choices that most of us make. (Bartholet, 1993, p. xix)

What do these women's decisions and choices reveal about the experience of becoming a mother through adoption and an adoptive mother in an open adoption? In what fundamental way can these experiences of women who are adoptive mothers in an open adoption be understood? I will explore the meanings of their experiences through the phenomenological theme of turning, specifically turning to adoption and turning to open adoption. I will also reflect on the existential lived space experiences of these women as they turned toward adoption and toward open adoption through the focus of existential themes. Existential themes are commonalities in the way that humans experience the world, existential experiences so universal that they are a part of any phenomenon under investigation (van Manen, 1990). I will depend on the existential themes of lived time and lived space to guide my reflections about these turns.

What Is It Like to Be a Woman Who Turns Toward Adoption?

How can these women's experiences as they endured infertility illuminate their turns toward adoption? Heidegger (1959/1982) discusses what it is like to undergo any experience in a way that sheds light on these experiences:

> To undergo an experience with something--be it a thing, a person, or a god--means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of "undergoing" an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens. (1959/1982, p. 57)

How did these women turn from what they were enduring, infertility, to what they are currently enjoying, being adoptive mothers? Heidegger (1977) explores the concept of turning and offers an insight into its meaning. A turning involves "a turning about, a changing of direction" (p. 37). Their turns toward adoption involve a turn away from their efforts to conceive a child. For women who did not originally intend to adopt, the turn toward adoption occurs only when they turn away from the quest for a biological child. Becoming a mother was not originally something to be undergone. But when infertility befalls, what was begun as a joyful quest was transformed to a quest described by endurance and pain. Adoption, which had not been originally intended, becomes a way to escape the enduring and suffering. Adoption is turning to a different quest, the search for a child and the quest for motherhood.

Understanding the Lived Time Experiences of a Woman Who Turns Toward Adoption

The existential experience of lived time illuminates further the meaning of turning toward adoption. Lived time is the subjective experience of time. Lived time involves the simultaneous experience of the present, the past, and the future. Heidegger (1959/1972) orients us toward the concept of lived time this way:

> Of time it may be said: time times. . . Time times--which means, time makes ripe, makes rise up and grow. Timely is what has come up in the

> rising. What is it that time times? That which is simultaneous, which is, that which rises up together with its time. (p. 106)

How did the women in this study turn toward adoption? What causes this turning point in their lives? A woman who purposefully tries to become pregnant has decided that what had previously been in the future, motherhood, is now timely. The time has arrived for her to be a mother. She is ready, the time is ripe, and she trusts time to bring forth her child. But time does not always bring what is hoped for. When pregnancy is expected but does not occur and when pregnancy occurs but does not hold, infertility befalls. Time delivers only grief and tears.

What was begun as a joyful quest is transformed into the experience of unexpected infertility. What was envisioned as a short wait becomes an interminable one. She endures, looking for a way to attain the unattainable and to end the pain. Now the passing time is a cruel opponent, a heartless enemy. Paradoxically, there is the sense of time dragging and of time rushing precipitously into the future, a future that is not of her making.

Concluding: Beginning the Turn Toward Adoption

The theme of concluding entails the experiences of ending and terminating. The theme of concluding also involves the experiences of making reasoned judgments, decisions, and resolutions. What can the theme of concluding reveal about the meaning of woman's experiences as she turns toward adoption? When you did not originally intend to adopt, the turn toward adoption can begin only when you conclude the quest for a biological child.

What is it like to begin turning toward adoption? The turn toward adoption begins when you stop believing that if you just try hard enough you can make a pregnancy happen. The turn toward adoption begins when you give up hope that next month is the month you'll announce you are having a child. The turn toward adoption begins when you conclude that you will never succeed in giving birth. Turning toward adoption begins when you come to the end of your rope or the end of the road and you decide that infertility treatment must be halted. Turning toward adoption begins when you bury your dream child, the child who's a chip off the old block. The turn toward adoption begins when you resolve to put all that behind you.

> Today I closed the door of the nursery
> I have kept for you in my heart.
>
> I can no longer stand in its doorway.
> I have waited for you there so long.
> I cannot forever live on the periphery
> of the dream world we share, and you
> cannot enter my world.
>
> I have fought to bring you across the
> threshold of conception and birth.
> I have fought time, doctors, devils, and
> God Almighty.
> I am weary and there is no victory.
>
> I can never hold you. I can never really
> let you go. But I must go on.
> The unborn are forever trapped within the
> living but it is unseemly for the
> living to be trapped forever by the
> unborn. (E. Van Clef, in Silber & Dorner, 1990, p. 25)

Beginning: Concluding the Turn Toward Adoption

What is it like to turn toward adoption? Turning toward adoption is revealed through the themes of concluding and beginning. What do the

concluding and beginning experiences help us to understand about what it is like to be a woman who has turned toward adoption?

When she shuts the door on her own fertility, what becomes timely for a woman who wants to be a mother is the search for another child, a child to adopt. When she begins trying to find a child to adopt, a woman concludes her turn toward adoption. Thus a woman's experience of turning toward adoption concludes as she begins to dream of adopting a child in the future, just as her experience of turning toward adoption began as she stopped dreaming of giving birth to a child in the future. In doing so, she now joins those women who had originally intended to adopt, and they conclude their turn toward adoption by beginning their quest for a child to adopt. In this way the meaning of turning toward adoption is also revealed through the theme of beginning.

What is it like to conclude the turn toward adoption? Your turn toward adoption is concluding when you decide that your goal is parenting, not pregnancy. The turn toward adoption is concluding when you open a new chapter in your life. You are concluding your turn toward adoption when you begin to believe that you can make an adoption happen, either because you found a little miracle right in front of you or because you are willing to work hard to make a miracle happen. Turning toward adoption is concluding when you begin to hope that next month you'll be able to announce you have a child. Turning toward adoption has concluded when you embrace adoption, the ancient tradition that will allow you to embrace a child as your own.

What Is It Like to Be a Woman Who Turns Toward Open Adoption?

Turning toward open adoption begins with the turn toward adoption. Yet not every woman who turns toward adoption turns toward open adoption. Because most adoptions are not open, there is an additional resolution involved when the search for the child ends with an open adoption. How can we understand what it was like to move from the quest for a child to adopt to turn toward open adoption? The experience of turning toward open adoption is described well by Laing's (1970) reflection on the gate.

> Before one goes through the gate
> one may not be aware there is a gate
> One may think there is a gate to go through
> and look a long time for it
> without finding it
> One may find it and
> it may not open
> If it opens one may be through it
> As one goes through it
> one sees that the gate one went through
> was the self that went through it. (p. 85)

Laing's (1970) analogy of passing through a gate captures the diverse experiences of the women in this study as they turned toward open adoption. Some of the women in this study found themselves moving into open adoption without having originally intended an open adoption for themselves. Others of the women intended to have an open adoption from the beginning, but because open adoption is not a path that can be travelled alone, arriving at an open adoption took a long time. Yet at first I could not reconcile Laing's reflection with Heidegger's turning, which was described earlier as a change in direction or a turning about. Is the experience of becoming a mother in an open adoption truly captured by the phenomenon of turning?

Returning to Heidegger's (1977) discussion of turning after reading Laing's reflection on the gate, I found an additional dimension of turning I had not previously considered, the "destining" concept in the turning. Heidegger explains that an essential meaning of turning is that it allows us to move toward our true nature. Heidegger's turning as destining, his translator notes, underscores the spirit of "aptness, fitness, and self-adapting" (p. 37). Thus, the meaning of turning which is captured by Heidegger's sense of turning as adapting and destining is a turning that connects with Laing's reflection to illuminate these women's turns toward open adoption. "The gate one went through was the self that went through it" (Laing, 1970, p. 85). And the turn toward adoption takes place through the gate within themselves, the gate that opens to permit them to move "to the directing already made apparent--for which another destining, yet veiled, is waiting" (Heidegger, 1977, p. 37).

Turning, Hultgren tells us, involves not only "rotation and deviation from a course" but also "capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (Hultgren, 1991, p. 51). The turn toward open adoption must begin with the recognition that you are free to choose between open and closed adoption. Turning toward open adoption is understanding that adoption does not have to be closed, that it can be otherwise if you choose. What does this mean for a woman who has turned toward adoption, a world full of rules, traditions, and assumptions about what should be? Kaelin (1988) is particularly illuminating about this meaning of turning toward open adoption when he says, "Who I am depends on my possibility to choose and to become what I am" (p. 58). The turn toward open adoption is completed with the appreciation that open adoption will

allow you to become what you already are. In other words, the turn toward open adoption is completed when you understand that open adoption is a way to be your true self.

> If living in the world of the other, by the other's rules, is an essential structure of individual existence, then to be oneself. . . we must project a world of particular significance to ourselves. Indeed, we must insist upon our right to be creative. Being a true self, being one's self truly, is. . . a modification of the world in which we merely find ourselves every day. (Kaelin, 1988, p. 97)

What is being your true self? It is being your authentic self. Authenticity is the way of life that results from a deep questioning who you are and what you should do. "It is this struggle with one's whole being (historically, socially, and ontologically) where an authentic existence is revealed" (Stark, 1987, p. 42). "Authentic actions resonate with the rest of a person's life. They make sense. . . Authentic actions are natural" (Andersen, 1993, p. 134). A turn toward open adoption involves the recognition that open adoption offers you a more authentic way to be in the world of adoption, a way to be genuinely yourself.

Knowing and Wanting to Know: Beginning the Turn Toward Open Adoption

The experience of beginning to turn toward an open adoption is the experience of knowing and wanting to know. Just as the themes of concluding and beginning highlight the meaning of these woman's experiences turning toward adoption, the themes of knowing and wanting to know illuminate the meaning of beginning to turn toward open adoption.

Turning toward open adoption begins with knowing that there are many ways to make a family. You begin to turn toward open adoption by knowing that adoption is the way you can make your family. Beginning to turn toward

open adoption means knowing that options exist in adoption. Turning toward open begins by being willing to hear about these options. Turning toward open adoption begins by being willing to be open minded enough to seriously consider adoption options that are unfamiliar and nontraditional. Turning toward open adoption begins by being willing to consider that the way everything is being done in adoption is not necessarily the way everything should be done.

Turning toward open adoption begins by knowing that if you were in a birth mother's shoes you couldn't stand not knowing where the child was and how the child was doing. Beginning to turn toward open adoption means wanting to meet your child's birth mother face-to-face. Beginning to turn toward open adoption is wanting to know firsthand that she has carefully considered what she is doing.

You begin to turn toward open adoption by wanting to know as much as possible about your child's roots and heritage, because you know that genetic and historical connections are an important part of a child's identity. Turning toward open adoption begins by knowing who you look like and by not being able to imagine your child not wanting to know the same thing. You begin to turn toward open adoption by wanting to know medical information and by wanting to have a way to know more if not knowing becomes a problem.

Knowing What is Authentic: Concluding the Turn Toward Open Adoption

You are concluding your turn toward open adoption when you recognize that open adoption offers you an opportunity to live in a way that is consistent with your values, a way that is genuine and authentic. Concluding your turn toward open adoption is the experience of being convinced that open adoption is

right for you and the way you want to live your life, whether the knowing comes gradually, immediately, or as a complete reversal of your original impression. Concluding your turn toward open adoption means deciding you want to live life in a honest, straightforward, forthright way. You are concluding your turn toward open adoption when you choose to be as free as possible from restraint and inhibition. You are concluding your turn toward open adoption when you know that you want to be sensitive and compassionate about the needs of birth mothers and adoptees. Concluding your turn toward open adoption happens when you are willing to trust and believe that trust will be returned.

You are concluding your turn toward open adoption when you are willing to cooperate with a birth mother. Concluding your turn toward adoption means feeling free enough from fear to let that birth mother know what your name is, where you live, and what you do. Your turn toward open adoption is concluding when you are willing to make yourself vulnerable by opening yourself up and revealing not only who you are but also what your hopes and dreams are. You have concluded your turn toward open adoption when you make a commitment to open your life to include your child's birth mother.

Understanding the Lived Space Experiences of a Woman Who Turns Toward Open Adoption

What is the lived space experience of a woman who turns toward open adoption? Heidegger explains lived space by saying, "Of space it may be said: space spaces. . . Space: it throws open locality and places, vacates them and at the same time gives them free for all things" (Heidegger, 1959/1972, p. 106).

What does Heidegger mean when he focuses on space, vacant space, and space free for being?

A woman who intentionally tries to become a mother creates a space for a child in her life. It is a space filled by dreams and hopes, a space made free for a child. If, after creating that space, you find you cannot have a child, that space in your life changes. What was a space extended by your hopes and dreams of having a child transforms, becoming a hole of despair, a hole in your very being. You need the help of another woman, a mother, to fill that hole in your being.

In your despair, you search for another mother, but which mother can help you? Only a mother who does not have space in her life for the child, at least not now. As you search you come face-to-face with this mother. Together you talk, something that would not have happened a few years ago, and you get to know each other by sharing the present, describing your pasts. What separates you most is the timeliness of motherhood and the space in your lives for a child. You tell her about your untimely childlessness and what it feels like to be ready to be a mother and not have a child to mother. She tells you about her untimely pregnancy and what it feels like to have a child and not be ready to mother the child. You explain the hole in your life, the space where you wait to hold a child you cannot have. She explains how she cannot offer her child what she knows the child will need, the space to grow and be. And you offer to make space for her in her life, refusing to force a hole of despair on another, remembering only too well your own despair.

Questions Raised About Being an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption

What is it like to be an adoptive mother, to live in an open adoption with the child's birth mother? Once the child is adopted, what are the important experiences an adoptive mother has with the child's birth mother? These questions and others will be addressed in the next chapter, Chapter V, where I share the meanings I found in my reflections on an adoptive mother's experiences being with the child's birth mother in an open adoption.

CHAPTER V. BEING AN ADOPTIVE MOTHER IN AN OPEN ADOPTION: BOUNDARY EXPERIENCES WITH OTHERS

What is the essence of the lived experience of an adoptive mother in an open adoption? What route for reflection will reveal what it means to be an adoptive mother who has this experience? One way of arriving at the essential nature of this phenomenon is to determine the important relationships that define the social and private world of adoptive mothers in open adoptions (Beekman, 1983). Because we are not alone in the world, being present in the world places us in relationships with others. This is why Robb's (1988) work suggests that I consider the ways in which an adoptive mother experiences the important people in her life as "others."

If "the self" in the social world exists only in relation to "the other," then the self can also be understood by exploring the phenomenological importance of the other. According to Cooper (1983), any relationship requires the presence of both a self and an other. Laing (1969) agrees:

> We cannot give an undistorted account of 'a person' without giving an account of his (sic) relation with others. Even an account of one person cannot afford to forget that each person is always acting upon others and acted upon by others. The others are there also. No one acts or experiences in a vacuum. The person whom we describe, and over whom we theorize, is not the only agent in his 'world.' How he perceives and acts towards the others, how they perceive and act towards him, how he perceives them as perceiving him, how they perceive him as perceiving them, are all aspects of 'the situation'. They are all pertinent to understanding one person's participation in it. (pp. 81-82)

Thus, for both Cooper and Laing the value of exploring the self and the other is that it is a means of discovering the self. This leads me to ask this question, What are the essential relationship experiences of a woman who is an adoptive

mother in an open adoption with other women? Who are the important others who will help us to understand the self of the adoptive mother in an open adoption?

Where do I begin? With the first way in which a woman experiences others as the other. She is a woman, others are men. This is so obvious that it is accepted as a given: mothers are women. Obvious or not, the difference is an important one. For it is against other women that an adoptive mother in an open adoption measures her boundaries and her sameness or differentness. But the important others in the life of an adoptive mother are not found here. Because, according to Laing (1969), while every relationship involves an other, not all relationships are equally useful in helping us to understand the self. "Every relationship implies a definition of self by other and other by self. This. . . can be central or peripheral, have greater or less dynamic significance at different periods of one's life" (Laing, 1969, p. 86). How do we know which relationships should be examined and which should be ignored? "The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences" (Denzin, 1989, p. 10). I must reflect further.

When a woman who is an adoptive mother in an open adoption begins to compare herself to the other women in her world, a pivotal boundary that shows what she has in common with some and what separates her from others is the presence or absence of motherhood. She is a mother, others are or are not mothers. Therefore, important to understanding this phenomenon is the presence of a child, which permits us to say this woman is a mother, that woman is not a

mother. "A woman cannot be a mother without a child. She needs a child to give her the identity of a mother" (Laing, 1969, p. 82). Are all women with children mothers? Are women without children ever mothers? Are all mothers the same? Schultz's (1987) work suggests that I reflect on the presence or absence of commonality an adoptive mother in an open adoption has with other mothers.

Beekman (1983) points out the value of exploring the experience of self through the experience of boundaries with others. The boundary in a relationship is the point at which there is no longer commonality with another. To Cooper (1983), a boundary is the point at which the self moves from conjunction to disjunction with the other, that which "holds apart while holding together" (p. 203). Cooper clarifies the meaning of a boundary's point of conjunction and disjunction with these analogies:

> Like the edge of the page that both divides and joins,. . . the rim of a glass, which while separating inside from outside at the same time brings them together, or the edge of a coin, which separates as well as joins. 1983, p. 203)

What are the important boundaries, the important points of juncture and disjuncture of an adoptive mother in an open adoption? It will become apparent as my reflections progress that there is not just one dimension to the meaning associated with becoming an adoptive mother in an open adoption. According to van Manen, this is to be expected, for "the meaning or essence of a phenomenon is never simple or one-dimensional. Meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered" (1990, p. 78). Through reflections on the self as an adoptive mother in an open adoption we can come to better understand the lived experiences of the women in this study.

Brophy, in her phenomenological study of stepmothers, says that "stepmothers are revealed by the other woman. It is through the absent presence of the children's mother that the stepmother is made" (1984, p. 74). Similarly, in adoption, it is through the presence of another woman's child that an adoptive mother is made. Because being an adoptive mother requires the child of another mother, the most obvious other to explore as the other is the birth mother. Perhaps less obvious but also important are the boundary experiences of an adoptive mother in an open adoption with two others: adoptive mothers in closed adoptions and mothers (women who became mothers biologically rather than through adoption). The essence of being an adoptive mother in an open adoption beckons to us through the pivotal differences with three other mothers: birth mothers, mothers, and adoptive mothers in closed adoptions. In this chapter I will explore the boundary experiences an adoptive mother in an open adoption has with each of these three others, beginning first with birth mothers.

Being an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption: Boundary Experiences With the Child's Birth Mother

In our first conversations, the adoptive mothers in this study talked about their relationships with their children's birth mothers by recalling their experiences as adoptive mothers. No conversation ever focused exclusively on the child or on the birth mothers. While my original intention was to study the relationship adoptive mothers have with birth mothers in open adoptions, after I began the conversations with the women in this study I noticed that as often the women focused their attention on recalling and describing their experiences with

birth mothers, their focus always ended up shifting slightly to include the child. As they talked about becoming mothers to the children, they also talked about their children's birth mothers. When they talked about their experiences with their children's birth mothers, they also talked about the children.

In phenomenological research it can happen that the original phenomenological question does not point like a beacon toward the meanings that emerge from the conversations and reflections. "Within a phenomenological investigation a topic is not pre-selected, but rather it presents itself to the researcher and not just once but countless times so that the topic constantly changes and transforms" (Dean, 1982, p. 101). While this shift in focus may seem surprising to someone who has not been intimately involved in the research, such shifts are not only acceptable but imperative when the researcher becomes aware of the disjunction between the research question and the meaning of the lived experience under investigation. By allowing ideas to incubate, and through maintaining a respect for the mind's capacity for reorganization and reconstruction, the researcher finds that richer research questions evolve" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 29).

Analogies for an Adoptive Mother's Relationship With the Birth Mother in an Open Adoption

Is it true that the relationships of adoptive mothers and birth mothers in open adoptions are always through their mutual focus on the child? I asked the women in this study to use a metaphor to describe their relationship with the child's birth mother, hoping that their metaphors would help to illuminate the

way they understand their relationships with their children's birth mothers. Why turn to metaphors? "Language can take us beyond the content of the metaphor toward the original region where language speaks through silence. This path of the metaphor is the speaking of thinking, of poetizing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 49).

Babs Gardener: The In-Law Relationship is About as Close to It as You Can Get

Babs described her relationship with the birth mother in open adoption as being more like an in-law relationships than a friendship. When she explained what she meant by an in-law relationship, Babs said:

> It's a portion of your family that you don't see very much; it's a portion of your family that you have to deal with, and you may not like them, and you may not like their style, but that's very true in many families.
>
> The in-law relationship is about as close to it as you can get. There are a lot of in-laws you wouldn't want to spend an afternoon conversing with, but you do because they belong to your family. I mean, when one refers to this as an in-law relationship, that's it. You get what you got. And the person that's in your family that comes with the rest of them is the one that you love, and the rest you figure out how to deal with. . . and that just takes working out. I mean, that's just in-law business.

Explaining why she uses the in-law analogy rather than one describing a friendship, Babs said she doesn't have a real friendship with Carol and she doesn't think most birth mothers and adoptive mothers in open adoptions become true friends. "It can happen that it's a friendship. I don't mean that it can't. But generally it's not."

> What I need from her is what I get from her, permission to raise her child. That's the relationship that I have with her. I don't need her for anything else, and so we're not friends in that way. We never will be friends, I don't think. There's not much that she's able to give at this point. There is not much that I want to give her at this point either because I can't fix anything; I've worked real hard at not trying to fix anything, so what I do for myself and for her is to listen. . . she doesn't want advice, she just wants me to listen. . . I am just polite, friendly. That's what it is, it's polite

and friendly rather than being myself. And it's tiring. It's charm, charm, chat, chat, not genuine connectedness. Although the connectedness is that I care about her, and she knows it. She doesn't question that, she's very comfortable with that.

Marie Bishop: It's a Lot Like Having Another Set of In-Laws

Describing her relationships with her younger son's birth parents, Marie said, "they're both very likable, very easy going, and actually a pleasure to be around. I wish they would honestly call more often, or stop by, because they truly are just two nice young kids." Marie added, "It's very effortless to be with them. They use their good manners, and they're very polite, and they're very easy to be around." When Marie described the relationship she has with Hank's birth grandmother, she said, "It seems to be getting a little bit easier as we go along because I think she's becoming more relaxed, that she's not afraid anymore that one day I'm just going to say, "No more." When it came time to give an analogy that would explain both of the relationships, Marie said:

> It's a lot like having another set of in-laws, people that you're very, very polite to, try to be very careful about what you say, what you don't say, and they do the same thing. . . I can't say we share a lot of pleasant memories with birth mothers or anything because we truly don't. . . The only thing we share is Hank and Frank and there's not a lot of bond other than that one point. . . That's all we share in common. That's the only thing that ties us together. There's not a whole lot of other interaction. Whenever we have a conversation, that's the only thing we talk about, that's the only thing that we're really interested in talking about because it's the only thing we share mutually.

Leah Wilson: She Was Like a Daughter in a Lot of Ways

Leah reports that Cindy wrote after she returned home to say that it was worse losing Leah as a surrogate mom than it was to give up Jonah. Cindy ended that letter by saying, "You've been like a mom to me." Leah agreed that it

was true. "She was like a daughter in lots of ways. . . And there are a lot of ways that I am still a supportive kind of cheerleader for her when she does something."

Leah, looking back, described her relationship with Cindy as being like "peaks and valleys" rather than always being smooth. Yet Leah feels that the peaks and valleys she has experienced are just a part of life, not necessarily a part of an open adoption relationship. Leah gets tired of trying to defend being in a relationship with her son's birth mother through open adoption. In Leah's experience, other people's questions about their relationship are often framed in the negative. "They will say, 'Well, wasn't this. . . ?' or, 'Wasn't that. . . ?' or, 'Didn't you have this. . . ?' or, 'Didn't you have that. . . ?'" Leah gets equally frustrated trying to find a way to honestly portray being in an open adoption with the child's birth mother without exaggerating either the pluses or the minuses.

> I mean, everything that you work through you work through bit by bit, and it's not terrible. It might be scary at times, and it might be nerve-wracking at times, but we all do this every day of our lives in one way or another, and we have crises all our lives, and we have things that we have to deal with that are really difficult. It's not, on a scale of one to ten with ten being the highest crisis, it's not like that. But there's no way of telling people that it's all right.

Jillian Chambers: They Are Our Family Now and We Love Them

Asked to describe the relationship she has with her sons' birth mothers, Jillian answered by saying, "We consider it a family relationship. We don't keep the relationships going out of duty; we do it because they are our family now and we love them." When I asked her what type of family member the relationships reminded her of, Jillian said, "I always describe it as being like an aunt, or a godmother, or special relative. . . but I do think of it being like an in-

law relationship." Jillian makes it clear that she feels good about her relationships with her children's birth mothers. She genuinely likes Ruth and Donna.

> I really like both of my [children's] birth mothers. They're both neat girls . . . They're sort of friends, but significantly younger. Both of my son's birth mothers are teenagers, so I don't really relate to them to as an adult. Initially, I was much more treating them like a special guest, but now I'm much more treating them like my little sister, because they're young. I'm an oldest child and I have a tendency to mother everyone, so I particularly mother them. . . I'm more of a mother figure than a friend. I'm sure they think of me as a friend and I'll probably be more a friend when they're older.

Melissa Miller: It Makes Me Think of the Older Neighbor Next Door

When Melissa considered analogies for her relationship, she tried several out before settling on one.

> It's sort of like people you see in class every week, and then all of a sudden the class is over, and they're gone. You know that in the long-term that you're not going to be spending your life with these people, but it seems strange when it happens.

Reconsidering, Melissa decided that description wasn't quite right. She struggled to place the relationship accurately, and briefly considered a maternal relationship, only to reject that in favor of an older neighbor analogy.

> My relationship with Janet was very much maternal. I felt myself to be her, not maybe her mother, but similar to how I feel to some of my. . . role model type of relationships. It makes me think of the older neighbor next door who takes an interest in you, and you get to come over, and you tell them some of your things, and they talk to you, and they give you attention, and they give you time, and they give you affection, and maybe even love. But. . . she disappears in some ways or at least in closeness. You might go back and visit this person, but you don't have the same relationship again when you grow up.

Reflecting on the Analogies for the Relationships

What do these metaphors point to about the relationships adoptive mothers have with their children's birth mothers? Melissa describes her

relationship as one like a close but temporary alliance of a young woman with an older neighbor. In some ways Leah's analogy of a mother-daughter relationship is closer to Melissa's than it is to the other analogies. Why? Both Leah and Melissa emphasize only a one-to-one relationship, a closeness between the birth mother and the adoptive mother, a relationship shaped between two people rather than between two people who have a relative in common. Both Leah and Melissa developed relatively intense relationships with their children's birth mothers before the child was born and their analogies point to that fact. Rappaport (1992) reports that this personal connection often occurs when the birth mother and the adoptive mother are able to be together for at least some portion of the pregnancy and the birth.

In contrast, those adoptive mothers who described their relationships by the in-law analogies emphasized a relationship between the adoptive mother and the birth mother that is formed through their shared connection to the child. Why does the in-law analogy appear so often when birth mothers describe their relationships with the child's birth mother? All of the women who use the analogy believe that adopting the child made the child's birth family a part of her extended family. What part of the family are they like? Not a biological member of the family. The in-law analogy is a rich description because the birth mother is not a biological member of the family and she was not originally a part of the family even though she is expected to be a part of the adoptive mother's family from now on. The reason for the relationship and the focus of the relationship is the person who connects them to the new family, the child. This analogy seems particularly apt in describing the relationship an adoptive mother has with the

birth mother when she has regard for the birth mother but does not actually think of her as a friend, which is true of the relationships Marie and Babs have with their children's birth mothers.

The insights I gained about the relationships between adoptive mothers and birth mothers lead me to ask how adoptive mothers come to establish the boundaries between themselves and their children's birth mothers? Does having the birth mother in her life, either in an intense one-on-one relationship or in a relationship that focuses on the child produce, as some critics of open adoption believe and others fear, a barrier to an adoptive mother's ability to take on the role of mother to the child? I will explore the boundaries between the adoptive mother and the birth mother in an open adoption on three issues that all adoptive mothers confront: naming the child, feeling entitled to the child, and terms for the child's birth mother.

Which Mother Names the Child? How an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption Experiences Boundaries With the Child's Birth Mother

When I began the conversations with several of the women in this study I asked them about their children's names. Why? I wanted to focus on some aspect of their experience that would be easy to recall. I also wanted to establish the expectation that they were the experts about their own experiences, because this type of research "makes experts of informants" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 11). What I never anticipated was how animated their responses would be to what at the time had seemed to be a simple question.

Their experiences in naming their children was a topic that each of the women in this study was more than willing to discuss and reflect upon.

When I examined our discussions involving the naming of the children, I first focused on why the children have the names they have. I found that the reasons that many of the names were selected are typical of many American children. All of the children have the family name of the adoptive father. All of the children have given names that were "chosen" because they were considered "good" names (Stewart, 1979). Some children were named what they were because the name was always the mother's favorite name for a child. Several women selected Biblical names for their children. Some of the names connect the children to their adoptive families because they pay homage to family members or friends of the family, or honor the national and religious lineage of the adoptive family (Wallace, 1992; Wells, 1946). Using a family name as a given name was seen by some of the adoptive mothers as a way they could link the child to the adoptive family, explicitly claiming this child to be a member of this family, while for one of the adoptive mothers the child's name was a way to maintain the link between the child and the child's biological family.

The naming issue that ultimately drew my attention is not why the children's names were selected, but by whom. Who names a child? The child's mother and/or father names the child. Naming a child is one of the specific rights or privileges that society gives parents and that parents give themselves. What names appear on the birth certificates of the children in this study? Why were those names chosen? Who chose the names--the birth mother, the adoptive mother, or both? Because the birth mother continues to be a real person in the

lives of the child and the adoptive mother who is in an open adoption, asking who names the child in an open adoption can be one way of exploring the boundaries between adoptive mothers and birth mothers in open adoptions. Understanding who selects children's names in open adoptions is one way of exploring the meaning of being an adoptive mother in an open adoption.

In asking who names the child in an open adoption it is important to remember that state adoption laws give both mothers the right to independently name the child. The names selected by the birth mother, if any, are recorded on the original birth certificate. If the adoptive mother knows the names given to the child by the birth mother, she has the option of maintaining those names or of giving the child new names. When the adoption is finalized and the adopting mother becomes the child's legal mother, the state abrogates the birth mother's rights and responsibilities to the child, including her right to name the child. The state issues an amended birth certificate which shows the new legal name of the child, that recorded by the adoptive mother.

In discussing naming issues in adoption, it is important to remember also that open adoptions stand in contrast to the assumption of anonymity between the two mothers and the severance of contact between the birth mother and the child that underpins current adoption practice. In typical closed adoptions, the birth mother chooses a name for the child, as does the adoptive mother, and these names may never be known to each other. Because an adoptive mother in an open adoption is in contact with the child's birth mother and the contact is generally established before the baby is born, the options for naming the child are

expanded. These expanded options offer the birth mother and the adoptive mother the opportunity to cooperate in some way on the child's name.

How did their contact with the child's birth mother affect the naming experiences of the adoptive mothers in this study? While at times the naming of the child was experienced in very positive ways by the adoptive mothers, at other times the naming experience introduced tension in the relationship between the adoptive mother and the child's birth mother as they worked to establish boundaries at the beginning of the adoption. The women in this study varied considerably in their feelings about where the boundaries should be and who should name the child in an open adoption. Their beliefs and expectations about the role the birth mother will have in the child's life determined whether or not they experienced tensions over naming the child.

> Melissa (speaking about her daughter's birth mother and birth grandparents): They asked all the time, "What names have you picked out?" But it never occurred to me to even think that they'd want to have anything to do with picking the names out.
>
> Babs: I asked both birth mothers if they had picked out names for the baby. No, they had not.
>
> Leah (speaking about her son's birth mother): She wanted to be a part of that, so we would sit on the couch night after night with these baby name books.
>
> Marie: I said to Tara, "You have to name him. You have to put something on the hospital papers because I can't take him out of the hospital until you do. I can't pick this one. You have to pick it." And she had a hard time picking one.
>
> Jillian (speaking to her adoption counselor): "I'm telling you this, and then I'm going to call and tell Donna. This is going to be our child, and the name choice should be our name choice. And I completely disagree with you about this shared name thing."

These comments set the stage for exploring how the women in this study experienced being the adoptive mother of a child in an open adoption. All of the women in this study wanted to choose the names their children would live by. Each of the adoptive mothers in this study had to confront what the chance to name the child meant to her, what it meant about being the child's mother, and what it meant to live in an open adoption with the child's birth mother.

Melissa, who never considered that her daughter's birth mother might want to be involved in naming the child, experienced no tension whatsoever over which of the child's two mothers would name the child. Her daughter's birth mother, Janet, never indicated an interest in choosing a name for the child, expressing interest only in knowing the names Melissa had picked out. This encouraged Melissa to perceive the naming experience as one that empowered her to be the baby's mother.

Unlike Melissa, the other women in this study did experience varying degrees of tension over the naming of the child as they established the boundaries between themselves and their children's birth mothers. I will discuss the experiences of each to further shed light on what the experiences involved in naming the child reveal about being an adoptive mother in an open adoption.

Collaborative Naming: The Adoptive Mother and the Birth Mother Work Together to Name the Child

Collaborative naming is the term I use to describe the interactions that occur when both of the child's mothers work together to name the child. Babs is one of the adoptive mothers who attempted to name her children collaboratively. Why? Babs believes that both the child's adoptive mother and birth mother have

a right to name the child and strongly believes that the child should not be renamed.

> Babs: Coming into our adoption, I knew adoptees already, I knew birth mothers. I knew names meant a tremendous amount to both and I knew what it does to the adoptee to have one name at birth and then have someone change it.

Having thought about this a great deal, Babs planned to incorporate the names selected by the child's birth mother into the child's permanent name. To her disappointment, neither birth mother had selected names for the child. Feeling strongly about the issue, Babs asked both girls' birth mothers for permission to use their name as a third given name for both girls.

> I said, "Do you mind if we give her Patricia as her third name?" No, she didn't mind. She liked that. So we gave Jenny a third formal name and that's Patricia [after] her birth mother because she needs to have something of her own from her biological family. And then we asked Carol [the same thing] and Carol did not want the baby named for her. So we asked her if it was okay if we used her mother's name. Christina's third name is her biological grandmother's name.

Leah, like Babs, believes that both mothers have a right to name the child. When Cindy wanted to be involved in the process of choosing the names for the baby, Leah was willing to try collaborative naming. Leah ended up experiencing tensions related to her attempts to collaborate with the child's birth mother on the name. For Leah, however, the tensions she experienced were of a completely different sort than those experienced by Babs when the birth mother didn't have a name for the child. Tensions developed between Leah and Cindy because they could not find a name they both liked.

> Leah: We never really had any big, big differences, except what to name him. That was the biggest one. She wanted to be a part of that. . . Cindy really wanted to have a say-so in the naming of the baby, and we would sit on the couch night after night with these baby name books and toss

around names, and sometimes it was funny. We'd laugh at certain names. It's funny because we could not come to any kind of agreement on a girl's name at all, none. Oh! Oh! Some of the names that she had, it just raised the hackles on me. . . Oh no, please! I can't name my child that!. . . That's where I think my uncomfortableness came, knowing that as the people that were going to raise this little guy we really had to be comfortable with the name, too. We couldn't give in entirely to what she wanted. It was a part of becoming a family. That's the way I pictured it, that if we're going to be a unit of some sort, he has to feel as if he belongs within that unit. And regardless of whether there's an adoptive mom or not, he still has to be secure and safe in that name.

Sequential Naming: The Birth Mother Names and the Adoptive Mother Renames the Child

Sequential naming is the term I use to describe the process of naming a child in an adoption where the birth mother chooses the names for the original birth certificate and the adoptive mother chooses the names for the amended birth certificate. Leah ended up suggesting to Cindy that they use sequential naming rather than collaborative naming for two reasons. First, time was running out and no resolution on names was in sight. Second, Leah felt strongly that the child's name should be one that she would be comfortable living with and she no longer believed that Cindy and she would ever agree. Ironically and totally unintentionally, they ended up selecting the same middle name for a boy. When she shared the names she had selected with Cindy, Leah recalled Cindy's response this way:

> She said, "Oh, my gosh, that's the name that I was going to give him!". . . So when we named him Jonah Bruce she was at least partially satisfied. . . Jonah is the one that we chose, and Bruce is the one she put on the birth certificate as his middle name. So he has the same middle name, and she likes the name, so that's good, and we're happy with that.

Marie also named her children sequentially. However, unlike Cindy, she did not first try to name her children collaboratively because she believes that

both the birth mother and the adoptive mother should feel free to name the child whatever they want. When Marie renamed her youngest son there were no tensions because she knows first-hand that her son's birth mother, Tara, had not planned to name the baby. Tara had planned to leave the hospital without naming the child only to be informed that hospital policy required her to do so before the baby could be released from the hospital. Marie, who was with Tara when she learned she had to name the baby, encouraged Tara to choose whatever name she wanted. Marie said to Tara, "I can't pick this one. You have to pick it."

Marie's tension-free experience with her youngest son's sequential naming stands in contrast to her experiences renaming of her oldest son, who came to her when he was two months old. He is the only child in this study who did not enter the adoptive home as a newborn. While Marie obviously first knew him by the name given to him by his birth mother, Bradley, she renamed the baby with names she preferred when she took custody of him, an act that created a great deal of tension for his birth mother and birth grandmother.

> Marie: Hank was always my favorite boy name and I always knew that if I had a son his name would be Hank. Amy resisted using Hank because she had named him Bradley and of course she had him for two months and that was hard. They had a hard, hard time. I didn't get upset about it because I knew it would be a problem that resolved itself.

What did Marie mean when she said that the problem would resolve itself? She explained that she knew that sooner or later her son would settle the issue himself by only responding when called by the name he knows himself by, Hank.

> Marie: I explained to Julie, Hank's biological grandmother, "He knows himself as Hank. If you call him Bradley, he won't answer. He won't know who you are talking to." Plus, we knew an adult adoptee who had found her birth mother when she was in her early thirties. Her biological mother insisted on calling her by her original given name and it really

aggravated her. So I did caution Hank's biological family. I said, "I can't guarantee that's going to happen, but it could. So be forewarned." I also said, "Keep it in mind and if Hank says no, don't call me that, he means no, don't call him that. So please respect his wishes if he says that."

Exclusive Naming: Either the Birth Mother or the Adoptive Mother Chooses the Child's Names

When only one of the child's two mothers, either the birth mother or the adoptive mother, chooses the only names given to the child, I use the term exclusive naming. None of the children whose mothers are in this study have names that were selected exclusively by their birth mothers. Any time a child was named by the birth mother, the child was renamed by the adoptive mothers. However, five of the children were named exclusively by their adoptive mothers because the birth mother did not name the child.

It is interesting to note that Marie said she couldn't pick out the name for the baby's original birth certificate because Jillian did just that. Jillian's experiences naming her two sons are unique because the given names selected by Jillian and her husband appear on both their original birth certificate and on their amended birth certificates. Jillian believes that collaboratively naming the child encourages a birth mother to believe that she will be co-parenting the child.

> Jillian: Mac and I sort of felt like the name was the ownership, and we wanted to do the name. We didn't want to share the name. I guess that's sort of like naming the child made them part of our family rather than part of their family. Sharing a name would have made--not that I don't acknowledge that they're relatives--but sharing a name would have made them a shared ownership rather than our ownership. . . And one of the things I was very fearful about when I was initially thinking about open adoption, was I want to be the one making all the decisions. I want to be the parent! I do not want to share. I do not want to co-parent. That's what I was looking [out] for: Is this co-parenting? So I think that the fear of sharing a name gives the additional fear of, well, then that's just a step toward co-parenting.

Jillian felt it was important to make it clear to both birth mothers that open adoption is not co-parenting. Early in her discussions that led to the adoption of both of her son's birth mothers Jillian explained what she saw the role of the birth mother to be in this way:

> Jillian: I was very clear with them from the very get-go that they would not be the mothers of these children. That has not been a problem at all, and I don't even know that would have been a problem if I hadn't made it clear, but I wanted them to be clear that their relationship was the one that would significantly change to the child. Discussing other relatives, grandparents and aunts, I'd say, "Their relationship does not have to have any significant changes. Their relationship can be exactly what it is. They can be the grandmother. They can be the aunt. But your relationship will significantly change, and you will not be the mother. You will be like an aunt, or a godmother, or special relative."

Because Jillian believes that in an open adoption there should be only one name used for the child and does not believe in collaborative naming, Jillian asked her children's birth mothers to let her name the baby. Recalling how she explained it to her sons' birth mothers, Jillian said:

> I said, "This is your decision. You don't have to do what I want. You can, if you want to, name him. That's okay. But we are planning to stay in touch. I don't want you calling him one thing and me calling something else. It would be different if it was a closed adoption and forever in your memory you've got your little, whatever." I said, "But since we're planning to continue on as relatives and family, there should be no discord over what the child's name is."

Reflecting on the Importance of Naming a Child to an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption

Why was it so important for each of these adoptive mothers to be able to name her child? How can I make sense of the diverse naming experiences of these women in open adoptions? As varied as their experiences with naming the child are, naming the child was an important step for the adoptive mothers in

this study. For all of the women in this study, naming the child was a real part of the image they had of how they would be a mother to this child. Naming the child was a first step toward making the child her own, establishing a boundary between herself and the birth mother.

While adoptive mothers are always told that they have the legal right to name the child, naming is not just the exercise of one of the legal rights of being a mother, adoptive or otherwise. How can we make sense of the fact that over half of the birth mothers did not name their children? While Jillian is the only adoptive mother who asked the children's birth mothers to let her choose the child's original name, it is striking that half of the children in this study were not named by their birth mothers. Because I did not talk with the birth mothers involved in the adoptions in this study, I can only speculate on their reasons for not naming their children. A birth mother who is in a traditional closed adoption can never know the name her child lives by, so unless she names the child she has no name for the child, the child who lives in her thoughts and dreams. In contrast, a birth mother in an open adoption will know the name the child lives by. Some birth mothers in open adoptions may not name the child because they feel that choosing names for the child will make it harder to relinquish the child. Perhaps knowing what name the child will live by discourages some birth mothers from naming the child because they don't want to name the child only to have that name replaced with another. Perhaps still other birth mothers in open adoptions have come to think of the adoptive mother as the mother of the child and offer her a gift in the form of the opportunity to name the child alone.

If the meaning of naming a child is not found in the legal right to do so, then where can the meaning be found? According to Hoffman-Riem (1986) an important task for adoptive mothers is "constructing normality" or "emotional normalization," which involves diminishing any "difference between their own type of family and 'normal' families" (p. 176). Melina (1986) believes that "naming a child might be a way of claiming a child--of signifying that the child belongs to us" (p. 11). Naming the child makes her the child's mother and makes the child her own.

For the women in this study, choosing the name for the child is one of the first ways they could do what other mothers do, the first rite and right of mothers that they could experience on their own. Despite the opportunities many of the women in this study had to be actively involved in the pregnancies and deliveries of the children they adopted, their knowledge of the child was always that of an outsider. As much as the women in this study valued any opportunities they had to be involved in their birth mother's pregnancy and delivery, they were also always fully aware that as adoptive mothers they were participating through the forbearance of the child's birth mother and that their experiences were second-hand. Naming the child was the first rite and right of being a mother that each of these women could experience on her own.

> Leah: I think that business of becoming family is real important and names have a lot to do with that,. . . identification as mother, too, I think. Because you're really stepping into a role of mom. Regardless of what kind of mother you are, adoptive or otherwise, I think that has a lot to do with it.

Naming the child is one way the adoptive mother begins to know herself to be the child's social and psychological mother, of defining the boundary

between herself and the birth mother. Naming the child is the way each of the women in this study publicly announced that she had found her child and that she is now the child's mother. "Naming becomes a way of affirming and accepting the child as our own, just as men's giving their name to a child does that to the child" (van Manen, 1990, p. 91). By naming the child, the adoptive mother "claims" the child to be her own (Reitz & Watson, 1992). "To assign the naming word is, after all, what constitutes finding" (Heidegger, 1959/1982, p. 20).

> Babs: Naming is ownership. God named the creatures and showed the ownership. I think naming is a to-do, and I think that it would be no matter what, a conflict between a birth mother and an adoptive mother. And it is a conflict. . . Because even though I think I don't possess them, the temptation is there, you know, that they are mine by nurture; they <u>are</u> mine. They would be different children had it not been for me; that this child would not be this child in another place. And so in that way I can take credit for that, or take responsibility, or whatever.

Searching for a way to give light to the weight and worth of the issue of naming in defining the boundaries between adoptive mothers and birth mothers in open adoption, I came across a statement by Byatt (1990), where he parallels the act of naming to the act of writing poetry. Byatt writes that the first humans were poets making poetry when they gave names to things because words that name things are "the language of poetry" (Byatt, 1990, p. 513). Byatt's description of naming as a form of poetry opened up a new way for me to explore the significance of naming the child to an adoptive mother in an open adoption.

What is the importance of a child's name to the child's mother? A mother's dreaming about her child, thinking about her child, talking about her child, and talking to her child are all facilitated by the child having a name. Because the child is, the child must be named. "It is only the word at our

disposal which endows the thing with Being" (Heidegger, 1959/1982, p. 141). But which name? Why not any name or names selected by another? "What are words, that they have such power? What are things, that they need words in order to be?" (Heidegger, 1959/1982, p. 141).

When the women in this study discussed their children's names, they made it clear that names they had chosen were not just randomly selected. The right child's name evokes the essence of what the mother sees for the child. "Names are words that portray to the present what already is to representational thinking" (Heidegger, 1959/1983, p. 144). In this way choosing the child's name is creating a poem about the child's being and becoming, a poem that reflects to the mother what she knows the child to be in her mind and her heart.

What makes one name for a child right and another wrong? The right name is one that represents the vision the mother has for the child and the child's future. The right child's name is a poem of prophecy. The right child's name is a poem of the mother's making. "They are words by which what already is and is believed to be is made so concrete and full of being that it henceforth shines and blooms and thus reigns as the beautiful everywhere in the land" (Heidegger, 1959/1983, p. 144). When a mother chooses a child's name, the name becomes her poem of revelation, the mother's best expression of her vision of what the child will be in her world, in this life. "The poet is sure of his (sic) word" (Heidegger, 1959/1983, p. 145).

Which Mother is Entitled to the Child? How an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption Experiences Boundaries With the Child's Birth Mother

I wanted to understand how being in an open adoption affected these women's sense of entitlement as mothers, for any adoptive mother must develop a sense of entitlement, whether she is in an open adoption or a closed adoption. An adoptive mother's feeling of entitlement involves her feelings that the adopted child "belongs," both to her and in her family (Melina, 1986). In this way entitlement becomes a boundary between the birth mother and the adoptive mother in an open adoption.

I was tempted to dismiss the role of open adoption in the experiences of these adoptive mothers, and to say that because they became entitled through caring, their entitlement experiences mean the same as all adoptive mothers. But because the emotional and legal right to be the child's mother in an adoption can be supported or undermined by the actions of the child's birth mother, can being in contact with the child's birth mother ever be irrelevant to the experience of being entitled to be a child's mother in an adoption? Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, Woods, and Schmidt (1985) and others who are critical of open adoption are concerned that being in contact with the child's birth mother will undermine the entitlement process of the adoptive mother.

When the child's birth mother is present in an adoption, where is the boundary between her and the adoptive mother? How the adoptive mother comes to understand that she is entitled to do the mothering of the child reveals one of these boundaries. I will focus on the revocation period and the point of

feeling full entitlement to explore the entitlement experiences of an adoptive mother in an open adoption.

The Adoptive Mother's Experiences With the Revocation Period

Reitz and Watson (1992) make the point that being entitled involves two components: legal entitlement and emotional entitlement. Emotional entitlement is a complex process in which an adoptive mother comes to feel that she is the child's mother. Only the court can award legal entitlement to the adoptive mother. When her adoption petition is granted, according her full legal parental rights, she becomes legally entitled to be the child's mother.

In an independent adoption, which all of the women in this study have, the point at which you are granted temporary custody of the child until the point at which the child's birth mother terminates her legal rights to the child is called the revocation period. Legally, this is a period during which the birth mother has the opportunity to change her mind, so it is a time where the adoptive mother is aware that she is vulnerable to losing the child. While none of the adoptive mothers in this study experienced any direct conflict with their children's birth mothers during this period, that does not mean it was a stress free period for everyone. Jillian and Babs did not report any true concerns about a revocation once the child was in their home. The other women in the study did. Sometimes the child's birth mother played an active role in this uncertainty; sometimes she played an inadvertent role; sometimes she did not have any role.

Marie's two experiences with the revocation period point out how the child's birth mother can either act to encourage the adoptive mother's sense of security or insecurity during the revocation period. When Marie took custody of

her oldest son, her attorney warned her that there was a good chance that Amy would decide to back out of the adoption because she had been caring for the baby for several months. Amy's actions during the almost month long revocation period made Marie very uncertain that she would go through the adoption. Why? Amy called Marie almost every day to ask how the baby was and cried throughout each call. Marie responded to her fears of losing the baby by being unable to eat. "I lost 15 pounds in one month," Marie recalled. No matter how much she tried to put it out of her mind, she couldn't.

> Marie: I just wanted to be able to go someplace to escape and not think about it. But I couldn't escape from it because everybody was hovering over me and asking "How many more days?" And then it started, "Well, what time on that last day?" Well, there's a little bit of a leeway on those things. We thought that if we waited until midnight on that last day we would be free and clear so everybody said, "Okay. Midnight." That last night, we were all sitting there waiting. At 11:30 p.m. the phone rang and John's mom said, "Don't answer it." I said, "Well, if they've already notified the court, there's nothing we can do. It's not notifying us, it's notifying their lawyer or specifically the court." I said, "You know, it doesn't make any difference." Answer the phone!" And it was John's brother-in-law calling to find out what had happened. He said, "We couldn't wait anymore.
> Deb: Oh, no!
> Marie: And I have never, ever heard John's mother yell at one person so bad. "Idiot! Don't do this next time!" And I'm sitting thinking, well, how many times are we going to do this? But as it turned out, happily because Frank's adoption was so low-key, we forgot that John's brother-in-law did in fact call again, and he said, "Wasn't today the day?" We said, "Well, we're not sure. It may have been yesterday. Let's count." You know? Hank's birth parents were just so sure that they didn't want him that we forgot that we were waiting for the revocation period to be over. We hold up Hank and Frank's adoptions as diametrically opposed, because the first one was such a cliff-hanger and just so emotionally gut wrenching and the second was just as easy as pie. I mean, there was never a doubt. Even the social workers would say, "Well, we can cut this short because we don't have anything to talk about, everything is settled." And because there was never a doubt, we went to the hospital and we just picked up Frank and brought him home.

Leah had very different experiences being in contact with her son's birth mother during the revocation period. While Leah did find that being in contact with Cindy introduced some tensions during that time, it was not because she had significant reasons to fear that Cindy would change her mind about the adoption. Cindy's role in Leah's fears were more inadvertent than active.

> Deb: What if Cindy had changed her mind, if she had decided, "I'm going to keep this baby." Did you ever think about that?
> Leah: Oh, yeah. A lot of times. I was scared that she would change her mind. In fact, I sometimes couldn't even sleep at night, when she was living with us, worrying that she would feel a closeness and a bonding and want to change her mind. I keep on telling myself over and over again, "Well, she has the right to change her mind. It's her baby." You know, playing that tape in my head day after day, but it didn't help much.

> Deb: What about after the birth, the revocation period?
> Leah: I felt a lot of anxiety, not real high, but at times. It would be fine for a time then some kind of communication would happen that would make me nervous and it would resurface. It would be something that would say to the effect that, gee, I wish things could have been different, but I'm glad that you're there for him. That one part of the sentence--I wish things could have been different--is what I would focus on and think, hmm, does this mean she's going to change her mind?

Sometimes an adoptive mother's sense of insecurity during the revocation period is totally independent of the actions on the part of the birth mother. The way that Janet, Michelle's birth mother, acted during the revocation period should have reassured Melissa. After the Millers took Michelle home, Melissa called Janet and her parents every couple of days, not only to let them know how the baby was but also to see how everyone, especially Janet, was doing. "And [their answer] would be, 'We're getting on with our lives. We're really happy.'" But Melissa found she could not stop worrying.

> Melissa: It was clear to me by the time we walked into this house from bringing Michelle home that I felt like her mom. . . I remember thinking,

"It's really impossible to not do this, but you're just buying trouble if this is a revocation because you've bonded."
Deb: Was a potential revocation was an issue for you and Matt?
Melissa: Do you mean was it a reality, or did I worry about it?
Deb: Both.
Melissa: On their part it never was a reality. And even talking to them afterwards, they had absolutely no idea when the 90 days were up. For me, it was a daily issue, and I worried about it at some level through the whole time, and I knew which day was 90 days. We ended up celebrating, mostly because I forced Matt into doing it. He hadn't worried about it at all and thought that I was crazy. But for me it was a very big issue. And I think that was based on the fact that we had the fall-through at the hospital. In retrospect, it added to the basic mistaken belief I had that I would never be a mother. Even though it was not logical, and consciously I realized that, I just, in my heart of hearts, could not stop worrying. I literally every morning would count off on the calendar how many days were left.

The Adoptive Mother's Experiences With Feeling Full Entitlement

Adoptive mothers do not automatically feel fully entitled at the moment they take custody of the child nor necessarily when the courts officially terminate the birth mother's rights. Each of the adoptive mothers in this study compared her own sense of entitlement to the child against her sense of the birth mother's entitlement to the child. In their discussions about entitlement, all of the adoptive mothers made it clear that they feel they were entitled to be raising their children. But as Smith and Miroff (1981) point out, entitlement "is not a question of whether or not one feels entitled, but to what degree the sense of entitlement has been developed" (pp. 19-20).

Because I was interested in understanding more about the boundaries between adoptive mothers and birth mothers in open adoptions, I wanted to explore their entitlement experiences. I wanted to understand when the feeling of entitlement was present. As the women reflected back on their sense of entitlement, each was asked to focus on identifying the point at which they felt

their entitlement was greater than the birth mother's. In Smith and Sherwen's (1988) study of adoptive mothers, some adoptive mothers experienced the sense of entitlement "gradually," while others experienced it "immediately" (p. 132). I use the terms "absolute juncture" and "reciprocal progression" to describe the immediate and graduate entitlement experiences described by the adoptive mothers in this study.

Absolute junctures of entitlement. The entitlement experiences that I describe by the term absolute junctures of entitlement are those where the adoptive mother describes herself as becoming fully entitled to the child at a single point in time. Legal entitlement is always an absolute juncture of entitlement because it follows a procedural path and a specific timetable. But an adoptive mother has to forge her own path to emotional entitlement. What are those paths? For some of the women in this study, their emotional entitlement as the child's mother was also the experience of an absolute juncture.

Marie Bishop described the point where she felt fully entitled as the point at which she took custody. Why at that point? Because she believed that was a clear indication that her sons' birth mothers were not committed to still being the child's mother. By explanation, she said, "We had fall-throughs who decided to keep the baby. I can't say that we were truly upset because it was their baby unless we took custody." Talking about her entitlement to her sons, Marie said that she felt emotionally entitled to Hank "the minute I saw him." With her youngest son, she felt entitled to be his mother "even before Frank was born." Marie attributed her early and absolute sense of entitlement to both sons to her knowing a great deal about why the adoptions where occurring. Because she as

able to talk with both women in person, she had a strong conviction about the rightness of the boys being with her rather than with their birth mothers. "They were always ours by virtue of the fact that their birth parents didn't want them." Explaining, Marie said:

> I'm really trying to struggle for a word for it because I really don't believe in that ownership of kids. Nobody owns anybody else. But I always felt like they needed us more. . . It was like it was our responsibility. Once we knew that they really needed us so badly, it was our responsibility to get them and take care of them, our moral responsibility. I don't mean to say it in a disparaging way, but Frank's birth mother especially just told us over and over again, "I really don't want the baby. I don't want the baby.". . . And Amy, Hank's birth mother. . . she thought she wanted him, but when she had him she didn't take care of him. . . She couldn't take care of herself, to be honest with you. She had made a mess of her life and is in worse straights now than when she had Hank. Even Hank's grandmother, Amy's own mother says she's glad that we have him. They're always first priority, and see, with both sets of birth parents, they were absolutely last priority. We had to take care of them because there was nobody else. So they were always ours by virtue of the fact that their birth parents didn't want them. We got them by default.

Jillian Chambers also feels there was a specific point, a point of absolute juncture, when she became fully entitled to be her sons's mother. Like Marie, being in an open adoption facilitated this sense of entitlement, but in a much different way. Jillian's sense of full entitlement occurred during the adoption ceremonies held for each of Jillian's sons when each of their birth mothers transferred the child to her. During these adoption ceremonies, a minister led Jillian, her husband, the boys' birth mothers, and in Charlie's case, the birth father, through vows to God and each other about their intentions for the child and for the adoption. For Jillian this was the juncture when she, rather than the birth mother, was entitled to be the boys' mother.

> Jillian: I tried not to step in and take the baby until they were ready to hand him to me. And for both of our adoptions we had adoption

ceremonies, and I did not take custody of that baby until we had an adoption ceremony because I felt like when they made the statement to God then they were ready. Then that was when I took the child. Up until that point, that was still their baby.

Reciprocal progressions of entitlement. The other three women in this study described their entitlement experiences very differently than the way that Marie and Jillian did. Leah, Melissa, and Babs each recalled feeling slowly more entitled while simultaneously feeling that the child's birth mother was becoming less entitled. These reciprocal transfers of entitlement progressed until each felt her entitled was greater than her child's birth mother. Interesting, for two of the women, the sense of greater entitlement occurred at the same point.

Melissa: I needed to come to a point where I honestly, pretty much to the depths of my soul, felt like Michelle's mother, and that there was for me a transition point of, okay, she had Michelle for 9 months in her body; I've had her for 9 months outside of my body, and now we're even. And being very, very aware that was, for me, an issue; that I felt, okay, now we've done equal. Now is the time I feel is my full identity as Michelle's mom. I mean, I think that Matt and nobody else I know understands my feeling that way. They're sort of like "You've obviously been her mother since the day you brought her home from the hospital, if not before." But it was more of a sort of a feeling of claiming rights.

Babs: It was exactly 9 months because I had [her] one day longer than Patricia had her, and then she was mine. . . As soon as I had Jenny more than Patricia had her, then I was really solid in that she was mine in the sense of, not in the sense of possession-ness, but mine in the sense that she could be with us.

Leah Wilson identified the point at which her sense of being fully entitled to be Jonah's mother occurred after her son was eight weeks old and was recovering from emergency surgery.

Leah: I think that in Jonah's case, once we had gone through his surgery with him and all those difficulties and everything, I felt like we had been there for him. And that was important to me, that he did so well. And I think sometimes I said to myself, "One of the reasons he is doing so well is because we love him so much." And it would be hard for me at that point

> to say she had a right to take him back, and that was only 8 weeks into his life--his out-of-womb life I mean. So I think even as soon as that I started to feel that way. If he had not been so ill and had all those troubles with throwing up and everything, I don't know. It's funny when you're taking care of a child who has difficulties and you invest all that--that makes it sound cold. It isn't really cold. You do it because you want to. It isn't because you feel you have to, it's because you love that child so much, and you want to see him get better. But yet at the same time, after all of that goes into it, you think, jeepers, we were the ones that were here for him. It sounds selfish, and maybe it is, but that's the way you feel. At least that's the way I felt. . . And after that, I just felt like I had some claim on his survival.

What is the experience of an adoptive mother in an open adoption who lives through the revocation period and comes to feel fully entitled to her child? How can we understand the experiences of these adoptive mothers when some experienced insecurity during the revocation period and others experienced security? How can we make sense of an adoptive mother's experience with feeling full entitlement in an open adoption when for some it occurred abruptly and for others it occurred gradually? What about the varied entitlement experiences of each woman in this study can be understood in a way that gives us a picture of entitlement that is a coherent whole?

The Existential Foundations of Entitlement

If you are a woman who seeks to adopt a child, you can become a child's mother only through the direct or indirect actions of another mother, a mother who has decided she cannot keep her child. When you make the decision to have an open adoption, her actions become less indirect, more woman to woman. As an adoptive mother of a child in an open adoption you are often in contact with the child's birth mother long enough to be able to observe her changing body. You may even have the chance to see the child be born. Regardless, you

are fully aware of the pregnancy and birth experiences your child's birth mother has had. The child's birth mother has lived body and lived time experiences with the child during the pregnancy and the delivery, while she was "with child." In this way her experiences with this child mirror the universal existential experiences of mothers, a way of knowing the child that is closed to you.

When a mother gives her child to you in an open adoption, she serves as the midwife for your birth as the child's adoptive mother. Through her actions she transforms herself from the child's mother into the child's birth mother. By taking her child as your own in an independent adoption, you enter into a period of legal limbo. You have taken her child as your own, but you live with the knowledge that she has the legal right to reclaim the child as her own, her right to the child established by her exclusive genetic, gestational, and birth relationship to the child, experiences that can never be duplicated or terminated.

When you take custody of the child, you begin your existential experiences of lived body, lived time, and lived space with the child. The birth mother's lived space experience with her child becomes one of distance. If it is true, as Connolly (1987) says, that the birth mother's feeling for her child "is the feeling of irrevocable connectedness superimposed on the reality of undeniable separateness" (p. 165), then paradoxically the same can be said for the adoptive mother's existential experiences. For her it is because she gave birth but does not have her child, while you have your child but did not give birth. The essential difference between yourself as the child's adoptive mother and her as the child's birth mother is that you didn't have the child you have, while she doesn't have the child she had.

You and the child begin your life together as a family. Families live together in time and space. And the child consumes your time, growing and developing because of your commitment to time to be with the child. And the child is a part of your everyday physical space, changing that space. "The house is the location of our shared lived space, the home. In the home and in its immediate environment the child is offered the opportunity to explore the world from a safe haven" (van Manen, 1990, p. 106). Now where you live becomes more than a house, for homes house families. "Home is where we can be what we are" (van Manen, 1990, p. 102). What are adoptive mothers being? What are they? Mothers. Mothers mothering the children that share the same lived space, that same lived time, "a history which we call family time and which has its own horizons" (van Manen, 1990, p. 105).

And now you have what the birth mother can never have, the shared lived time and lived space experience with the child that the child will remember. Now, when the child remembers back to being a child, you are the mother who is in the child's memory, not the child's birth mother. So while the birth mother continues to remember her relationship, the specifics of these experiences live only in her memory. She comes to know the child is yours in a way the child cannot be hers, as a member of your family, because they live apart.

But the distance between the birth mother and the child is not one of total absence when the adoption is an open adoption. She gave birth to a child she doesn't have but continues to know while you continue to know the woman who gave birth to the child you have. Because you know each other, her actions can help you to feel secure in your entitlement to be the mother of the child or her

actions can threaten your entitlement. But unless she revokes her decision to have you become the mother of the child, at some point in time you come to feel that you, not she, is the one who is entitled to have this child. How? By your caring for the child. By caring for the child you establish your sense of entitlement to the child and create an important boundary between yourself and the child's birth mother.

Caring: The Phenomenological Foundation of Entitlement

Through the word caring we can understanding the entitlement experiences of these adoptive mothers in open adoption. Each adoptive mother in this study developed her sense of entitlement to her child through caring for the child. Care is a Middle English word derived from the Old English word caru, meaning serious attention. Phenomenological care, according to Heidegger, is not the blind endurance of whatever life brings. Rather, we are "fulfilled by care" (Heidegger, 1926/1962, p. 243). Kaelin (1988) adds, "caring is something we do, not something we must suffer" (p. 117).

Heidegger identifies care and caring as an essential connection to the three structures that shape to human existential being-in-the-world: worldhood, being-in, and being-oneself. The second of these, being-in, provides the best understanding of the role of care in the entitlement experiences of the women in this study. Being-in is the existential way a person relates toward everyday concerns. "The existential structure. . . of the ways in which we can express our concern is care. And so, the final answer to the question of how a human being exists in its world is 'by caring'" (Kaelin, 1988, p. 60). Heidegger uses the

German term "Besorgen, to concern oneself with" to describe these experiences of human concern (1926/1962, p. 83).

A mother's caring for a child has several possible dimensions. Caring for a child can be having affection for the child. Caring for a child may involve paying attention to and meeting the social, physical, and safety needs of that child. Caring for a child may be expressed through an authentic interest in the child. Caring for a child can also be the thoughtful protectiveness, attentiveness, and regard for the child that promotes the child's well-being and success. "Real care is not ambiguous or indifferent" (Flynn, 1979, p. 31). Note especially that a mother's caring for a child does not necessarily require a birth relationship.

Heidegger's chapter on care in Being and Time provides the following ancient fable. The fable of Care suggests a way of further understanding the entitlement experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption. An adoptive mother in open adoptions comes to understand that she is entitled to the child through her experiences caring for the child.

> Once when "Care" was crossing a river, she saw some clay; she thoughtfully took up a piece and began to shape it. While she was meditating on what she had made, Jupiter came by. "Care" asked him to give it spirit, and this he gladly granted. But when she wanted her name to be bestowed upon it, he forbade this, and demanded that it be given his name instead. While "Care" and Jupiter were disputing, Earth arose and desired that her own name be conferred on the creature, since she had furnished it with part of her body. They asked Saturn to be their arbiter, and he made the following decision, which seemed a just one: "Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit at its death; and since you, Earth, have give its body, you shall receive its body. But since "Care" first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives. And because there is now a dispute among you as to its name, let it be called "homo," for it is made out of humus.
> (Heidegger, 1926/1962, p. 242)

An adoptive mother, like Care in the fable, is not the source of the body of the child, but she does shape the child through her caring. And in that shaping through caring she makes that child her own. She marks her entitlement through caring against that of the child's birth mother. She feels fully entitled to the child when she is confident that her caring, in all its forms, is unassailable.

Which Mother Initiates Contact? How an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption Experiences Boundaries With the Child's Birth Mother

Who initiates the contact in an open adoption? How much contact is there? People outside open adoption often assume that the birth mother is either intrusive in trying to parent the child or intrusive in how often she is in contact with the child. When I brought this up with the women in the study, all of them agreed that this is not what they experienced at all. Babs' response to this type of concern was typical, "Well, it doesn't look like they're beating down the door, right?" I will reveal the patterns of contact each of the women in this study has with their children's birth mothers.

Birth Mother Initiated Contact

Leah Wilson wishes she could see Cindy more often, but because of the geographic distance between where they each live, the Wilson's have been able to visit Cindy only once, when Jonah was about one year old. Cindy's work hours and living arrangements make long distance phone calls problematic; as a consequence, they rely on letters and pictures to stay in contact. "She's always enjoyed writing letters, so it just seemed natural for her to do that." Their

standing agreement is that they will communicate by letter and Cindy will be the one who initiates each exchange of letters.

> We agreed before Jonah was born, that it would be Cindy who would take the lead, because she is the one with the ongoing, developing life. We decided that only she could know how much contact she would need or want. We've always let her take the lead.

Asked how that is working out, Leah focused not on the arrangement but on the amount of contact that has resulted. "At least in the beginning I thought that we would have more contact," she replied, "but as time has gone on, that contact has dropped off, and that we're feeling less satisfied about that.

> Deb: What does that feel like?
> Leah: It's that old abandonment kind of thing. It's like, here I am with your child, and we had this relationship, and now I don't have you in my life anymore kind of thing. . . Sometimes it is hard. It's hard for me to restrain myself and say, "Well, you know, why aren't you writing?" But it's okay, I just have to accept. . . that as life goes on, the interest is less acute on the part of the birth mother, and it just happens that life takes over and intervenes. And I can see that "dropping out" happening because when Jonah was born it was letters twice a month or sometimes even more. And then once a month. And now it's 3 months will go by. . . so I know that that's happening. I can see it, but I always kind of hoped that since we've been open to hearing from her, it wouldn't happen, that she would keep on communicating. . . But there is some sense of confidence in me that even though Cindy may drift away for a while, that there is a good chance that she may be in his life later on, at his request maybe, you know. And I have enough faith in Cindy to believe that she will be open to that.

Adoptive Mother Initiated Two-Way Contact

Jillian Chambers tries to see both of her son's birth mothers at least once a year. Last year she had both of her son's birth mothers come to visit at the same time so they could meet each other. Jillian makes sure that both Ruth and Donna get monthly letters with pictures of the boys. Twice a year she sends them a copy of the family videotape. While she didn't have a formal discussion to

determine who would initiate the contact, Jillian believes that there is a clear understanding that her sons' birth mothers expect her to do it.

> I initiate most of the contact. . . Neither one of them are writers. If they want to talk to me, they'll usually call, but they rarely write. They kid me about "being on my mailing list," because when I sit down every month and I do the bills, I have pictures that I stash in with the bills, and I'll throw some pictures in an envelope and write a quick note, so practically every month they get some little thing from me. . . I think that they feel that if I contact them, it's okay, but that if they contact me I might think that they're being a pest. So its always felt like it's my responsibility to stay in touch with them. . . I'm pretty satisfied with how that works out.

Marie Bishop continues to stay in contact with her children's birth families. There are occasional visits with Hank's birth grandmother and Frank's birth mother and birth father. Their contact occurs usually through letters and pictures.

> Marie: Usually contact is initiated by me. I usually write the letters, or send the pictures, or make a call. But they're always glad to get the pictures, and they usually call in response or send a little note or that sort of thing, but I'm usually the one who actually initiates the contact.

When her sons' birth families write to her Marie hurries to write them back so that they won't think that she doesn't want to stay in contact with them. Marie can't imagine not being in contact with her children's birth families. "Even if both children decided that they did not want to maintain contact, I think we truly would just because these are people we know now," said Marie. Why?

> Just to keep in touch with them, to see how they're doing, so that I can tell a continuing story to Hank and Frank. I don't want to have a story that ends at a certain spot. . . This isn't a story with an end, this is a continuing story.

Babs Gardener and Carol have maintained contact in the 4 years since Christina's birth. Discussing the way they keep in contact, Babs says they mostly exchange phone calls, but letters, pictures, and cards are also used to stay in

touch and to recognize special holidays. The Gardeners meet with Carol and her son at least once a year, sometimes in each other's homes, sometimes in restaurants or a place where all the children can play. Babs commented on the fact that she, not Carol, generally initiates the contact. "Although Carol would feel free to call, I think she still feels that she would be an intrusion," she explained.

Adoptive Mother Maintained One-Way Contact

During the four years since the adoption was finalized, Amy has only occasionally been in direct contact with Marie Bishop. This is a dramatic change, because a month after the baby was transferred to Marie, Amy maintained almost daily phone contact with her. When Amy terminated her parental rights she stopped contacting the Bishops. At first Marie continued to contact Amy, but eventually Amy told her that she would rather they maintain the contact through her mother, Julie.

> Marie: And that surprised me, to be honest, because if under any circumstances I had to give Hank up, I can't imagine not wanting to know every little detail. So I try to imagine how much it must hurt for her and that makes me feel sorry for her.

Melissa Miller also has only one-way contact with her daughter's birth mother, Janet. But unlike Marie's situation, Janet never directly communicated that she didn't want to communicate with Melissa. It is her actions that communicated this. When Melissa first she took Michelle home, she called Janet regularly. By the time Michelle was 3 months old, Melissa was concerned about the one-way nature of their relationship. Neither Janet nor her parents ever initiated calls.

> They wanted us to make all the contacts. . . and that wasn't okay with me. So then we kept saying, "No. No. We want this to be a two-way street" . . . We would say, "Please, we'd like to hear from you,". . . And they never called, never once did they call.

Thinking about how Janet never contacted her, Melissa began question whether Janet truly welcomed the calls or was being pushed into the contact by her parents. "Janet was hardly ever there, and when she was there, she'd get on the phone for a 2-minute conversation, and she'd say, 'Well, why don't you talk to my dad now.'" Melissa tried to talk with Janet about it. "I would say, 'These are the things I need to know because I want to know how to complete this or continue with this.'" Melissa hoped that Janet would let her know how she was feeling specifically about the calls and generally about the adoption.

> She would go, "Oh, I'm fine with anything you want to do." And, "Oh yeah, I'd like to hear from you. I'd like to talk to you." But it seemed incongruent with her interactions. And there were a couple of times when I suggested that, well maybe you'd like to stay out if, but you would like us to interact with your parents. And I was never sure I was sensing eagerness for that, but then it would get scotched. There was a lot of that, their family system dynamics that made it very difficult for me to be quite as direct as I usually am and feel like I was getting the directness back.

Because Janet lived too far away for casual visits and the phone calls that Melissa was initiating were increasingly unsatisfactory, Melissa began to write letters to Janet rather than call.

> I honestly got to the point where I felt that Janet needed the time to come to grips with her loss without having to deal with me. It became very clear to me that there were some things going on for her, that her agenda was different from their agenda, and their agenda might end up being more hurtful to Janet.

But even by switching to letters Melissa did not hear back from Janet. "The first 6 months. . . every other week, at least, we would send the letters and pictures, and

we'd say, 'Write us and let us know how things are going.' And we never got any letters back."

The one time Janet did write, shortly after Michelle turned one, she enclosed a note for Michelle to read when she was older. The note for Michelle explained why Janet had made the decision for adoption. In her cover letter to the Millers, Janet stated, "I feel that this is the last real contact that I will have with Michelle and it has been so hard for me to relinquish that." Because the Millers had never intended that Janet should feel she had to relinquish contact with Michelle, they found it hard to understand Janet's comment. Knowing that Janet was receiving their update letter at roughly the same time, they decided to the best thing to do was to give her time to work though whatever feelings she had.

> Melissa: By the time I got to know and like them, I don't think I thought that our relationship was going to be as limited as it is. . . I expected there to be more contact. . . At the bottom line, I expected there to be an exchange of letters, probably every 6 months to a year or something like that.
> Deb: Why do you think it is less?
> Melissa: There's a part of me that wonders if this really was a non-event for her in some way, or if her coping with this thing made her denial so complete and her repression so complete that, at least on a functioning level, she really didn't care to stay in contact.
> Deb: How do you deal with that?
> Melissa: I will do everything in my power to make sure that Michelle doesn't feel rejected, but I'm afraid if there is no contact, if there is no interest ever shown again, that she will feel that way. . . I think the reason we have so hard a time struggling with this it's not just rejection of you. It kicks in the motherly protection instincts for our kids. It's like no, you can reject me, but you don't dare do that to this little angel.

Just before our conversations ended, Melissa wrote again to Janet and enclosed recent pictures of Michelle.

> I told her: "Please let us know if you don't want any more contact at all. If you don't call us or write to us and tell us not to, we will continue to send you information, and we are very open to your calling us or writing us to say hi and tell us how you're doing.". . . I sent pictures, additional, extra copies of some of the pictures to be given to the birth grandparents so that even if Janet doesn't want to contact us, they might. I was afraid if I said, "Call us to let us know what you want to do," or "Call us if you want us to keep in contact," that she might really still continue to want the contact--at some level--and not contact us.

Given their history, Melissa is very unsure whether Janet or her parents would respond. "I've never been really sure how much they've wanted. . . [They] may feel that everything is resolved." Melissa still hopes that Janet will contact them.

> Obviously this is hindsight, but hindsight is that they didn't want to be too intrusive for us; we didn't want to be too intrusive for them. . . I think that probably we're settling for much less contact than either of us would really want right now.

Suspended Contact

As she discussed the difference in the contact she has with Carol and the suspended contact she has with Patricia, Babs made the point that because she no longer has contact with Patricia, she doesn't consider Jenny's adoption to be open any more.

> Patricia. . . I don't see her. . . and that's not open to me. . . I have an open adoption with my second daughter. I have openness, as much as I am permitted to be with my first, but I mean, it would be open if it were permitted to be.

During the first 2 years of Jenny's life, Babs Gardener exchanged regular letters and phone calls with Patricia. Once Patricia visited Babs' home. The Gardeners regularly sent Patricia photographs of Jenny and sent her special cards on holidays. Patricia even sent Jenny a special present, a quilt that she had made.

Quite unexpectedly and without explanation, Patricia broke off her contact. "We have not heard from her since Jenny was two when she called us to say she

was getting married and was pregnant again. That was it." For a long time Babs continued to write, but never heard back. Babs finds herself struggling to make sense of why Patricia would drop contact.

> I got to know her. . . I knew that she was very sure this is exactly what she wanted to do. It's only years later when we are not in contact with her that I don't know what she's thinking and feeling. That's the hardest part for me is that I don't know if she's sorry, I don't know anything. I mean, there she is just out there in nowhere, not answering letters, and who knows what she's thinking? And so in the way that I can't handle something I don't know, I'm really good at making it up. But I have a sense of her. I think it just hurts too much. . . I mean, she's an extremely deep, caring person and I think she made this choice because she felt she had no other choice.

While Babs would love to know how Patricia is and why she won't contact them any more, Babs has made the decision to respect the choice implicit in Patricia's actions and suspend the contact for now, even if she isn't pleased with the result.

> Deb: What happens when the birth mother pulls away from the open adoption? How do you make sense of them stopping the contact?
> Babs: I wonder if her reluctance to come back in touch with us is because that hurts so much. I don't know. I know she liked us. I have no question about that. We connected real well. . . But the only birth mothers I've ever known are the ones who were sorry. . . So even though we wanted to keep the door open, it may just be too much, that the pain was overwhelming, and it was just easier not to deal with it.
> Deb: How do you explain it to the child?
> Babs: There is no easy way to deal with this. I want to be real careful. I mean, that would hurt. You can imagine. And that's what I think is the hurt part for me is that if your birth mother is alive and then everybody has made every opportunity to make her known to you, and she still doesn't want to be there, God, what do you do with that? It is a hurtful thing. And you want to spare your children hurt, but sometimes you just can't, you just can't. You just have to face it and say, "This is what is and it is a hurtful thing."
> Deb: Then how do you reconcile that with what you believe to be true about open adoption?
> Babs: It is a very difficult thing. I mean, it is the thing that's the hardest thing: not to know. But that is her choice and I have to give her that. We have made enough moves in her direction that if she now wanted to, she

> knows she would be welcome to do that [reestablish contact]. That is her choice and one has to--as a human being to human being, and an adult woman to adult woman--give her that choice. . . I just feel weird about it, and sad. . . I'm left in limbo and angry about it because I can fill in the pieces for Jenny only so far, and then I don't have any more pieces to fill in.

Reflecting on Contact Patterns Between an Adoptive Mother and a Birth Mother in an Open Adoption

When I reflected on the experiences of these adoptive mothers in open adoption being in contact with their children's birth mothers, I was particularly drawn to the fact that none of them feel that they have more contact than they want and that several would like to have more contact than they have. This flies in the face of conventional stereotypes about what contact adoptive mothers want from birth mothers. It also helps to explain why adoptive mothers feel confident that open adoption is not co-parenting.

> Deb: Do people ever say to you, "Well, won't they be confused by having two mothers?"
> Jillian: Yes, people do. But how can you have a mother-child relationship with somebody that you see once or twice a year? So, I don't feel like that's a problem at all. . . Originally I thought their birth mothers would be a lot more like godmothers or aunts, but their real godmothers and aunts are closer to the children than their birth mothers are.

Note that their experiences are the opposite of what those who oppose open adoption fear, as reported by Baran and Pannor (1990):

> Two mothers competing for the child's love, attention, and loyalty is the fearful specter raised by those opposed to open adoptions. Permitting the birthmother to know the adoptive family and participate in the placement, according to the opponents, inevitably must lead to interference, intrusive behavior, and rivalry. . . If the two parents have different values and child rearing approaches, confusion and chaos will result, according to the advocates of continuing the closed system. (p. 328)

What happens when there is diminished contact between the adoptive mother and the birth mother? None of the situations where contact has diminished has been because the adoptive mother wanted less contact. How does the adoptive mother experience this? Repeatedly, some of the women's greatest disappointments in expectations for open adoption have been when contacts have tapered off or been broken. When the child's birth mother slows her contact patterns or breaks her contact completely, the words abandonment and rejection are used by the adoptive mother.

> Emptiness and futility can arise when a person has put himself (sic) into his acts, even when these acts seem to have some point to him, if he is accorded no recognition by the other, and if he feels he is not able to make any difference to anyone. (Laing, 1969, pp. 83-83)

The adoptive mother feels abandoned if her relationship with the child's birth mother is one she considered to be a close connection or a friendship. "The refusal to dwell together is indifference. Indifference is the failure to recognize the other human being in a genuine encounter or personal relation. Indifference is a failure or crisis of the "we" (van Manen, 1990, p. 108). But regardless of the form of the relationship between the adoptive mother and the child's birth mother before the change in contact, the adoptive mother expresses concern that the child will experience the change in contact as a rejection or an abandonment.

What Do You Call Her? How an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption Experiences Boundaries With the Child's Birth Mother

All adoptive mothers have to decide what names or terms they will use when they discuss the woman who gave birth to the child. These names and terms point to the boundary between the adoptive mother and the birth mother.

Because the child's birth mother is an integral part of their life, adoptive mothers in open adoptions are more likely to find themselves in conversations where they will be referring to the child's birth mother. Reitz and Watson (1992) suggest that it can be a problem for adoptive families to decide what names to use in conversations while referring to the people from the child's family of procreation:

> What to call the birth parent presents a problem to many families. Some use the term "your birth parent"; others use the term "your other mommy" or "your other daddy'; and some use the birth parent's first name,--which is only appropriate if other adult visitors in that home are addressed by their first names by the children. Other children (with family help) invent a pet nickname, much as they do to distinguish grandparents. (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p. 264)

What do the adoptive mothers in this study call their children's birth mothers? I was curious what the women in this study call their children's birth mothers. What names and terms do they use? When asked, all of the women in this study indicated that they generally refer to their children's birth mothers by first name, either in conversations around home or with others. Because they are in open adoptions and in contact with their children's birth mothers, using their first names comes very naturally. Babs was typical in saying, "We've always referred to them by names--Patricia and Carol. Similarly, Leah said, "We just call her Cindy."

When these adoptive mothers are in conversation with someone who will not understand who the birth mother is by name, each of the adoptive mothers must rely on a term to explain and clarify who that person is. In the adoption community there are several terms that are currently being used to describe the child's original mother. What do the women in this study use? What do the

terms they use say about their understanding of being an adoptive mother in an open adoption? Each adoptive mother in this study has a preference.

> Leah: In describing her to other people, we always say--nine times out of ten--bio-mom or biological mother.
>
> Melissa: I guess I feel most comfortable with the term birth mother.
>
> Babs: I use birth mother and biological mother.
>
> Jillian: Birth mother is my favorite term. I like birth mother because it's easy to say and sounds like godmother--birth mother, godmother.
>
> Marie: We just generally settled on, you know, birth parents, birth mother, birth father. But other than just having to say it so many times, biological parents, would be my favorite to be honest with you. That's who they are, they're his biological parents. We're the parents who have him.

None of the women in this study have problems with the term birth mother or biological mother. Why? Because the term clearly indicates that portion of the mother experience that they do not claim.

I was also curious about why they had decided to use the terms they use. Did they decide on their own? Were they advised to use those terms? Did they ask their children's birth mothers what they prefer? What I found was that most of the women learned to use the terms they do by reading articles on the topic or from talking with others in the adoption community.

> Melissa: I guess because I. . . came up through RESOLVE [an organization that provides infertility education and support] I know the politically correct way to refer to adoption.
>
> Leah: Everyone just seems to use birth mother or biological mother.
>
> Marie: I think it has evolved into that over the last couple of years. I've noticed that more and more people in the adoption field, like social workers, talk about birth parents. So I think it's just sort of what's come down from them.

Jillian: We worked with an adoption counselor who sent us volumes of information. . . I remember she had a whole article on hurtful terms and different things that bothered adoptees, terms that bothered adoptive parents, terms that bothered birth parents, and what were good terms. And I agreed with them, so I memorized them.

Babs: The birth mothers I know call themselves birth mothers, except for Carol Schaefer, the author, who calls herself the "other mother."

As we talked about terms, these adoptive mothers began to talk about terms that others use to describe their children's birth mothers, particularly terms that are different from the ones that have chosen and that they dislike. Any time an adoptive mother is in conversation with someone who refers to the child's birth mother in a way that somehow belies the adoptive mother's experience, tensions arise. What are these tensions and what do they reveal about the boundaries between an adoptive mother and a birth mother in an open adoption?

Terms That Misunderstand What She Does: I Have a Problem With That Term

One type of tension over terms for the birth mothers of these women's children occurs when someone uses a term that does not fit with what the adoptive mother knows about the birth mother's relationship with the child. What types of terms do this? Not all of the women in this study have problems with the same term because each has her own understanding of the term and what it implies about nature of the relationship the birth mother has with the child. For example, Babs likes the term "other mother" but several of the other adoptive mothers do not. Jillian's response was typical:

Jillian: I do not like "other mother." I think that implies that there are two people parenting. . . I have a problem with that term because she's not the other mother.
Deb: Because that suggests she is co-parenting?
Jillian: Right. Exactly. That is a co-parenting term.

Even when several of the women in this study have problems with the same term when it is used to describe their children's birth mothers, they are likely to have different reasons for being bothered by the term. Note that Babs, Leah, and Jillian all have different issues with the term "real mother."

> Babs: When Oprah Winfrey has a reunion, she starts calling that biological mother the "real mother." Then real becomes the description of the biological mother. It's no longer your biological mother, but you've been reunited with your real mother and how do you feel about that? Well, semantics aside, that's a powerful word, real. What does that mean, real? And for kids who have two mothers, what a burden on them that they have to choose between their real mother and their other real mother.

> Leah: I think sometimes in my mind I want Jonah to know the difference. I want him to know that, yes, I am his real mom, I'm his everyday mom that's here for him, but that Cindy is, well, without her he couldn't have come into existence. I want to take credit for the things that I do with Jonah as a mother, and the other thing is that I want Cindy to have it, too, so it's just kind of a struggle to know what to say and not say to everyone.

> Jillian: I'm very, very specific, and I correct people when they say, "Well, what about his mother?" "You know, what about his real mother?" I say, "Do you mean his birth mother? I'm the real mother!" I always say I'm the real mother, she's the birth mother. And I will make sure that everybody around me knows the correct terminology. We use birth mother and I do say adoptive mother if I'm trying to be specific. But most of the time I'm the mother, so birth mother goes with them.

Terms That Insult or Hurt: It's a Like a Slap in the Face

At times the term used to describe the child's birth mother is a term that insults or hurts the adoptive mother. Again, the response to specific terms is not uniform. For example, Leah has no problems with the term "natural mother" and uses it throughout her conversations while all of the other women in the study find the term objectionable. Babs describes her reason for being bothered by the term natural mother this way:

> Babs: I've worked real hard at getting rid of "natural mother." I think words are powerful. Natural, what does that make me, unnatural?

Deb: Are you?
Babs: No, because I think that biology, biological mothering, is very different from everyday mothering, and so I worked really hard at my choice of words. And so, natural, no. I think that natural has too much weight the way we use the word, the way our culture uses the word.
Deb: What weight does that carry for us? Is it being the opposite of natural?
Babs: Uhm-hum. Uhm-hum.
Deb: So what's behind that?
Babs: Well, it's once again a sort of slap in the face. Biological, the opposite of that is not something queer or really weird; something unnatural is not natural. I mean, not natural I could deal with. I'm the not natural mother, but unnatural has all of this other baggage, you see.

But the terms for birth mothers that insult or hurt these adoptive mothers most are terms that attribute something to the birth mother that the adoptive mother feels should be attributed to her. In each of these cases, the term for the birth mother is experienced by the adoptive mother as being something that is being taken away from her. For example, for Melissa the term natural mother is inappropriate for her daughter's birth mother not only because she believes Janet's actions are inconsistent with the term, but also because it is a term she associates with herself.

Melissa: To me, the term natural mother, I don't think of it as biologically based. I think of it as having natural instincts.
Deb: Oh! A natural mother. She is just a natural mother.
Melissa: And people have referred to me with that. I mean, I remember way back when I first used to talk about how I wanted to have kids, people would say, "Well, you're obviously a natural mother because you're so into kids, and you're so good with kids". . . When I knew Janet, well, she was not maternal, she had no experience with infants or children, and that at that stage she had no desire to have that interaction. . . I will never understand not having those maternal feelings because I had them at two. I mean, it's such an integral part of my character, and it's what I had to come to grips with when we had considered being child-free; that was too much a part of my own identity to give up.

Reflecting on the Meaning of Terms Used for Birth Mothers for an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption

It is interesting to note that the tensions these women feel about the terms used for birth mothers are not the result of their interactions with birth mothers. Rather they are the result of conversations with others who are not members of the adoption circle. Brophy (1984) tells us that for stepmothers the child is the one who most frequently reminds her that there is another mother in her life. The stepchild is also the one must likely to challenge the stepmother's authenticity as a mother. For the adoptive mother, the challenge comes most frequently from those others who are not in adoption. Acquaintances, friends, and even family members are the ones who are most likely to challenge her authenticity as a mother through their choice of terms. As she reflected on what meaning this has, Jillian was able to explain why the women in this study have experienced so many people being insensitive to the terms they use to describe birth mothers and adoptive mothers.

> Jillian: There are a lot of misconceptions about adoptions, and at this point in time I don't take it to heart as much. . . I think there are a lot of people in the world, and I was probably the same way 6 years ago, who find it real difficult to understand how you can really love a child that you did not give birth to, that is not genetically related to you. That some how your love must somehow be not quite as much and that you don't really take responsibility for the child that you've raised as much as, say, somebody who actually gave birth to that child and the child is genetically related.

Melissa focused on her sense that the meanings of the terms used to describe birth mothers are no longer appropriate, not only because of what we now know about birth mothers who search for the child they relinquished, but

because of the different experiences of birth mothers who are in contact with the child through an open adoption.

> Melissa: I was reading that piece last night again.
> Deb: Oh, the one about the "other mother?"
> Melissa. Yes. And I was thinking about it because my reaction was very negative to that last time because I really thought, "No, birth mother feels really right for me, and I don't understand why they're not happy with that.". . . [And] I was in a conversation this morning, with somebody I hadn't seen in a long time, and I was referring to Janet's mom and dad, I called them the birth grandparents. I have found people's reactions being very strange to even having the birth mother having parents and that seemed almost to be uncomfortable to the person I was talking to because it gave them an identity. There isn't a stork who dropped the baby off and kept going. These are people who are somebody, who have a life and have a presence and an identity. . . And I thought, "Okay, what really needs to be made is a new word, something like 'matrice,' and then you can instill in that word a new meaning which can be, warmer than birth mother but not have the negative connotations to the adoptive mother like natural mother, real mother, and things like mother and mama.

Babs, who is fully aware that there are terms for birth mothers that used to bother her and some that still do, pointed out that she believes that adoptive mothers who have been in open adoptions for a while should ask themselves whether or not they are being overly sensitive about the terms that others use to describe a child's birth mother.

> Babs: Christina got a picture of her birth mother and brother in the mail, and she said, in her own way, "Dis my brother. Dis my mother." Then she looked at me, and she said, "You my mamma." And that's right. Motherhood is motherhood, but mammaness or momminess is something different. . . I think we do have to be very careful not to be so sensitive. I mean, I think that those of us who have been around for a while and have our feelings under control and so on can let go of some of the sensitivity. I think it's our job. It's our job as teachers and as modelers to do that for people. You can get to a point where you are now secure, your family is secure, you are not worried any longer. Who <u>cares</u> what the word is?

Is the boundary issue that adoptive mothers in open adoption have over terms for the child's birth mother simply one that can be solved by careful choice

of terms and efforts to try not to be overly sensitive? Leah's insight suggests not. Leah discussed why adoptive mothers are likely to have some term, often mom, or mommy, or mamma, that they don't want share with our children's birth mother.

> Deb: For all of us there is some term that we think is ours and ours exclusively. All of us, it seems to me, have in our minds at least one term that we don't used to describe birth mothers because we want it held back for ourselves. And it varies, for some it would be the term of mommy, or for somebody else it might be mom or mama. For example, I could be comfortable with calling Linda the natural mom, but I would never call her the mommy, or I would never say she's "Anna's mama." I could float through natural mom and never bat an eyelash, but if somebody said, "Oh, how's Linda, her mama?" I'd kind of go "ooohhh!"
> Leah: Sure. I mean, you have your pet names for Anna, I'm sure, and I have mine for Jonah, and I wouldn't use those on anybody else. And I want mama to be mine, or whatever he calls me at the time, because he shifts on what he calls me. Now it's been mama for a while. He melts me every time he says it because I have the warm feelings associated with that. I don't want anybody else to be called that. It's the code of intimacy that comes from it. They talk about one of the ways you can tell that there is an intimate relationship between people is by the terms of endearment that they use for one another. There are terms of endearment that indicate that closeness.

Being an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption:

Boundary Experiences With Adoptive Mothers in Closed Adoptions

The contact experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption with their children's birth mothers are different from what many outside open adoption assume. This leads me to ask what is the essential difference between being an adoptive mother in an open adoption and being an adoptive mother in a closed adoption. Fundamental to understanding the relationship structures in the experiences of this self and other is recognizing the relationship each has with the child's birth mother.

Regardless the type of adoption, the child's birth mother is present in the life of an adoptive mother. "Whatever the circumstances, adoptive parents and birth parents remain a presences in each other's lives as their mutual child grows" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 66). What varies is the degree to which her presence is physical and interactive. "The birthmother remains. . . the always present ghost in closed adoption" (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 328). Therefore, the reason why an adoptive mother in an open adoption includes a birth mother in her life is the pivotal difference between herself and other adoptive mothers who are not in open adoptions. In order to explore this boundary, I asked the women in this study what they see as the differences between themselves and adoptive mothers in closed adoptions. They ended up reflecting on three areas: what they see as benefits for their children, what they see as benefits for their children's birth mothers, and what they see as benefits for themselves rather than specifically describing what they see as the boundary between themselves and adoptive mothers in closed adoptions. Marie captured well why she couldn't begin to describe what it is like living in a closed adoption in the following statement.

> Most other adoptive parents we've talked to want their anonymity guarded so carefully from birth parents. We can't understand why, and I don't think they can understand our rationale. It's like putting two aliens together from different planets. . . We can't understand what they're trying to say, and they can't understand what we're trying to say. The only thing we can say is how it has enriched the adoption process for us, which it truly has.

What Adoptive Mothers See as the Benefits For Their Children In an Open Adoption

Many of the women began by talking about the benefits they see in open adoption for the children. "Don't people think about the well-being of the child?" asked Leah. "As a parent, aren't you responsible for the whole child not just the parts that you want to acknowledge? I think closed adoption is an emotional closure on what's real." Melissa said, "I guess I can't underline enough how for us the reason to do an open adoption was for Michelle's benefit." Babs agreed, "It's not you that you're doing it for, it's for your kids, if nothing else so that they don't have to do the tremendous amount of work that's necessary to find biological parents, just to spare them that."

One benefit is that there are fewer secrets in the child's life. Marie suggested that "everybody is afraid of the unknown." Babs agreed, "It's fear that somebody's going to come and get you. That's what I think of as closed adoption--fear, overlaid with worry. And anything might set off the anxiety and there's a lot of unspoken but nagging kind of issues."

> Jillian: I really like there not being any secrets. I think secrets are destructive. . . I really strongly feel that secrets fester like an abscess. . . I think secrets eat away at a kid. They've got to know, and it starts to build, and build, and build. I know it would drive me nuts if I had been an adopted child. I would have obsessed myself sick over it, I think I really would have.

Another benefit for the children is that they sometimes get to know their birth mother as a real person. Leah believes this helps with the problem of fantasy birth mothers. "I think kids build up this picture of people that they've never met, their birth parents and they think they are either very good or very

bad, Leah said. "Ultimately, I would like my son to know that his mother loved him and loves him still."

I really love having a concrete person to talk about," Jillian emphasized. "Identity development, that's a very important reason for open adoption," added Melissa. "We still live in a world where genes matter." "I almost think of closed adoption as child abuse," said Jillian. "That poor child! Oh, how could you do that to your child? How insensitive it is of people to try to deny a heritage. I want my children to be grounded, I want my children to have roots, I want them to have access to information."

> Babs: I want her to feel connected to the world and not have to have a child to be connected to the world, not have to get pregnant to feel biologically connected. I hear over and over and over again about the non-belonging biologically to anybody, that your child is the first person you're ever biologically connected to. . . If you only have a ghost, then you have no chance to mesh that with reality. . . Just to see, I think that that's what kids would just want, just to see what their birth parents are like," Babs explained.

What Adoptive Mothers See as the Benefits for Their Children's Birth Mothers in an Open Adoption

"Cindy could see where Jonah was going to be growing up and what kind of people we were. . . So I felt like that was a real positive. And I feel like with a closed adoption you just don't get that at all," said Leah. A real concern for all the women in this study was the way closed adoption affects birth mothers. "I think that the one binding force of openness is that you really become aware of the plight of birth mothers," said Babs. "Carol, Christina's birth mother said, "I'm so glad I can just pick up the phone and call you and find out how she is doing. I don't have to wonder and worry," she explained.

> Marie: One of the reasons we truly decided on the open adoption was to be charitable because if the situation had been reversed, boy, would I have hated to have somebody tell me, "No, you've got to just give up the baby. You'll get over it." Everybody said that to me when I had a miscarriage, "You'll get over it." But you really don't forget. You don't even forget babies you never even saw, who were never born, let alone kids who you saw and know are out there. And I've seen it from the other side. I've seen a birth parent who has wondered. Because Hank's birth grandmother gave up a baby for adoption when she was 18 and every time I talk to her, you know, she says, "Oh, this is such a relief to know I could call and check on Hank." And she said, "You know, it's so hard not knowing whether she's dead or alive." And that's a cruel thing to do to somebody.

Open adoption was also seen as a way of helping the birth mother to find some satisfaction in what would otherwise have been an overwhelmingly painful process. "How difficult it must be to give your baby away and never know how appreciated it was, never know what a wonderful thing that was in somebody else's life," said Jillian. Melissa agreed, "Even though I kept saying, 'This is a time of sadness for you,' they kept saying, 'No. Because we feel like we can share in your joy.'"

What Adoptive Mothers See as the Benefits For Themselves in an Open Adoption

Not only do these adoptive mothers believe that open adoption can reduce the fears a child might have, they believe it reduces their own worries and fears. "So many of the fears that I had about adoption were completely alleviated when I was able to have some choice in choosing the birth parents," said Jillian. Leah agreed, "I think it's a very fearful kind of situation in a closed adoption where you always are in that limbo of what's going to happen in the future." Melissa stated that being in an open adoption means that "I don't have to worry if Michelle is playing out on the front lawn that they were going to come snatch

her." "You don't have to worry that you'll run into each other somewhere or that she'll knock on your door some day," added Marie. "That gives you a peace of mind."

"I really don't know how people manage without lots of detailed information about the genetic background of their children because I love knowing every little thing," stressed Jillian. Marie emphasized the information available in an open adoption can be current, which has been especially helpful with Hank's on-going medical treatment for a chronic illness. Several women talked about their preference for knowing who their children look like. "It would drive me crazy because I would sit here everyday, wondering who they look like," explained Marie. "I like knowing where their looks and traits come from."

And finally, being in an open adoption offers the adoptive mother a greater sense of entitlement to the child. A number of the women indicated that they had wanted to hear first hand why the birth mother was making the decision to have the child adopted. Having this knowledge helped them to feel confident about taking the baby. It also means a great deal that they were selected by the birth mother to raise the child. "Adopting parents have been selected, not by an agency or lawyer or doctor, but by the birthparents themselves, often from among many other qualified and hopeful couples. Can there be a greater compliment than being chosen to parent someone's child?" (Rappaport, 1992, p. 94). It clearly supports the entitlement process of adoptive parents when the birth mother chooses them to raise the child (Reitz & Watson, 1992). In addition, the birth mother in an open adoption can continue to entitle and encourage the adoptive mother, an experience that Jillian and Babs both

emphasized. Nothing can more supportive of what you're doing as a parent than the message from a birth parent letting you know that they are pleased that you are the person raising their child. "Who better to give you accolades than the birth mother?" Babs asked. Jillian agreed, "It validates me more as the mother." In addition, when the birth mother is mothering another child, being in contact with her is reassuring to the adoptive mother because she can see how different the relationship the birth mother has with the child she has at home in comparison to her relationship with the child who has been adopted.

How Adoptive Mothers Summarize Being in an Open Adoption

I asked each of the women in this study to contrast her commitment to open adoption when she entered adoption with her commitment to it now that she has lived in an open adoption. Each of the women stated that she is more committed now. Again, their words make the understanding of that commitment richer.

> Melissa: If I was going to do another private adoption, I would voluntarily choose an open adoption. I don't want to do it any other way. I wouldn't choose a closed adoption. I would seriously think about not doing an adoption if it was offered but it had to be closed.
> Jillian: I feel so strongly that open adoption is the healthiest thing that it's real hard for me not to understand why the majority of people still understand that.

> Leah: When people say, "Well, gee, how did you do that?" I say, "In retrospect, it was easy compared to when I think about closed adoption and I wouldn't have done it any other way.'"

> Babs: I just wouldn't do it any other way. As hard as it is sometimes, I just wouldn't do it any other way.

> Marie: It just feels good. In my heart I truly believe this is right.

As strong as their commitments are to open adoption, I was curious whether or not they thought that adoption laws should be changed to mandate openness. All of the women in this study emphasize the importance of choice.

> Melissa: For me, personally, I don't think I'm capable of doing a non-open adoption. But I think it's not for everybody.
>
> Jillian: I don't think that open adoption should be mandated. I think it should be a personal choice. But I really feel like the more people educate themselves about the different options out there, more and more people are going to choose this.
>
> Leah: Well, maybe it's not for everybody. But it really has been helpful for us.
>
> Babs: I'm not sure, totally sure, that everybody needs to be doing it [open adoption] although I do think absolute open records--I mean, people knowing who each other are--are essential. Ongoing contact for some families, I don't know. I mean, it is right for me, but I don't know that it is, in fact, right for everybody. I'm very up front about saying that I really do believe in openness, but I'm not going to force it down somebody's throat if they don't want to do it.
>
> Marie: I don't think either one is a panacea for adopted kids. I don't think either an open adoption or a closed adoption is an end-all answer for either adoptive parents or birth parents. It's whatever the adoptive parents are comfortable with that's going to be the right answer for the kid. If the parents are forced to live with something that they are uncomfortable with, they're going to convey that to the kid subconsciously. Everybody just has to do what they think they can deal with emotionally because some people, this just terrifies them and to me the unknown terrifies me.

Reflecting on the Boundary Between Adoptive Mothers in Open Adoption and Adoptive Mothers in Closed Adoption

The essence of the boundary between an adoptive mother in an open adoption and an adoptive mother in a closed adoption is knowing. Adoptive mothers in open adoptions value knowing. They turn away from open adoption

because it does not offer them the knowing they need. "I think it's like closing the doors on everything--the child knowing, the adoptive and the biological parents knowing," summarized Leah.

Adoptive mothers in open adoptions can't imagine being in a closed adoption where the birth mother is a nameless, unidentified being in their lives, an illusive phantom who's true spirit is concealed. They openly acknowledge and include the child's birth mother in their world as an adoptive mother. These adoptive mothers want to know their child's birth mother because they believe that knowing benefits the birth mother and because it also benefits them and their children. She is a named, real person about whom the adoptive mother has detailed knowledge through an on-going relationship. But it is more than that. Rappaport (1992) believes that open adoption is "primarily about relationships" (p. 5). I must disagree. Open adoption is about knowing. The relationships in open adoption are the route that makes knowing possible. Knowing and keeping avenues that make further knowing possible are integral to the lives of these adoptive mothers and what they value in all aspects of their lives. They are in open adoptions because it offers them a way to live that is consistent with the way they know themselves to be and with the way they live their lives.

Being an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption: Boundary Experiences With Mothers

What remains to be explored in understanding what it is like to be an adoptive mother in an open adoption is the boundary she has with mothers. When a woman adopts a child, she thinks of herself as the child's mother and in

public situations she identifies herself as the child's mother. Yet sometimes she is called an adoptive mother, while other women are simply mothers. What is the pivotal boundary between a mother and an adoptive mother? How is being an adoptive mother not being a mother? Because she does not have a birth relationship with the child, society responds by withholding from her the simple, unmodified title of mother. She becomes the child's adoptive mother.

Which Mother Has an "Own-Child" Relationship? How an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption Experiences Boundaries With Mothers

One of the important themes that illuminates the point of junction and disjunction between an adoptive mother and a mother is the "own-child" relationship. As I listened to the recordings of our conversations and read through the transcribed texts, I became interested in how the women in this study use the term "own child" in their conversations and how they reported that others used the term.

Imagine, for example, that two people observe a woman who is supervising four children at a playground. One observer points to a specific child and says, "That one is her own child." The reflexive statement, her own child, indicates the woman's direct relationship to the child. The word own, as an adjective, is derived from the Old English agan, which means to posses, to belong to, to have a direct relationship to. Although the phrase own child does not overtly mention a mother-child relationship, the natural assumption is that it does, for between a woman and a child there is no other way of possessing, no greater way of belonging to, no more direct relationship than that between a

mother and her child. This is the discernable, coherent understanding of the term in the following statements made by the adoptive mothers in this study:

> Jillian (talking to her sister): "Well, honey, you'll have your own child one of these days."
>
> Babs: "Jenny, when she was five, said to me, 'When I have children, my womb is not going to be broken. I'm gonna be able to have my own children.'"
>
> Melissa: "I very much wanted to have my own child."
>
> Leah: "A lot of people who adopt are older because they've gone through the mill of trying to have their own children."

In these statements the women in this study grant a mother who gives birth to a child and rears her child an immediate and unchallenged own-child relationship. They recognize that biology combined with nurturing entitles a woman to the own-child relationship. Giving birth to a child begins a woman's own-child relationship and her mothering preserves it. These are the women that society calls "mothers."

What is the essence of an own-child relationship? Is it simply the connection of biology? If a woman's unconditional own-child relationship with a child is based on biology and mothering, what does it mean if the mother doing the mothering is not the child's biological mother? Can an adoptive mother have an own-child relationship with the child she didn't have? Consider this conversation:

> Leah's mother-in-law, speaking to a third person: "Oh, you should see Leah and Zachary with the baby. You'd think that was their own baby,"
> Leah (interrupting): "But he is our own baby. He's our child, he is our own child to raise."
> Leah's mother-in-law: "Well, yes, I guess."

What does this conversation reveal? The restrictive interpretation of the own-child term by Leah's mother-in-law is consistent with the belief held by most members of the non-adoptive world "that there is something inherently different about a woman's bond with a child who was born to her and her bond with a child who is not biologically related" (Genevie & Margolies, 1989, p. 277). It is typical of the non-adoptive world's "less than unconditional acceptance to parenthood via adoption" (Smith & Miroff, 1981, p. 25). Discussing what that feels like, Leah said, "A person who has had their own biological child, they don't have to deal with that. Your child is your child."

The message adoptive mothers receive is clear. In a world where biological connectedness counts, adoptive mothers constantly hear that any love they feel for the child, any connection they have to the child is inferior. Society conveys the message that an adoptive mother is not truly entitled to consider the child her own. "Blood strangers who rear and nurture children are unreal, unnatural substitutes for the real thing" (Bartholet, 1993, p. 167). What is the basis of this prejudice? "The belief that the love of a biological mother for her child was more intense than, and therefore better than, the love of the adoptive mother for her child" (Miall, 1987, p. 37). Babs explains the countless messages mothers give adoptive mothers this way:

> If you are so unworthy that your womb cannot produce somebody, then probably your love is not worthy enough to really love somebody well enough so that they will see you as their true parent, so blood will always win. They have the legitimate claim to that child because they have the claim of birth, they have the claim of biology, which then invalidates any claim of love we have.

Despite these messages from others, the women in this study whole-heartedly believe that adoption does create a woman's own-child relationship with the child. Each of them knows she has an authentic own-child relationship with the children she adopted. Understanding how adoptive mothers experience these authentic own-child relationships provides insight into what it is like to live in a world where adoptions are not the norm and most mothers are not adoptive mothers.

The Existential Foundations of the "Own-Child" Relationship

The way a mother possesses her child, the way the child belongs to the mother, and the direct relationship between the child and the mother can be understood through the consideration of the existential qualities of this relationship. A child's mother dwells with the child in existential ways--lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived place. Van Manen (1990) calls these fundamental existential themes. These existential themes are commonalities in the way that humans experience the world, existential experiences so universal that they are a part of any phenomenon under investigation. These commonalities provide a basis for better understanding human life experiences, commonly known as the lifeworld. Three of these--lived body, lived space, and lived time--are particularly helpful in the phenomenological reflection on the own-child relationships of mothers and adoptive mothers.

The Lived Body Experience

Lived body is the way we experience being in the world through our own body and through the bodies of others. According to van Manen (1990), lived body, which he also calls corporeality, is the experience of being "bodily in the

world" (p. 103). How does a mother come to know the child is her own child through the existential experiences of lived body? A woman knows her child through the experience of lived body in a way uniquely her own, and closed to all others, including the child's father. In biological families, "the wife is the only one physically pregnant, both the husband and the wife are socially pregnant" (LaRossa, 1986, p. 48). This means that the mother's experience of being bodily with the child is different. Van Manen (1990) discusses the important of this difference:

> A child is "given" to the mother in a different way than a child is "given" to the father. . . A man has initially a less intimate or symbolic relation to a child. Whereas a man has to acknowledge a child as his, a woman already has the child before she can accept or reject the newcomer. (p. 91)

When a woman conceives, bears, and delivers a child she comes to know that child through bodily experiences that no other can. Her pregnancy and delivery gives her an exclusive right of declaring to the world that this child is her own, a way a saying "I do not <u>have</u> my child; I <u>am</u> in some way my child" (Levinas, 1947/1987, p. 91). There is no more direct way of establishing one's relationship with another human than by bringing forth that child into the world through one's own body.

A mother's knowing of her child through the lived body experience of pregnancy and delivery is an experience of the child as one's own-child that an adoptive mother knows she can never claim. "Adoption separates the biologic from the nurturing part of parenting. . . Adoptive parenting by definition involves the parenting of children who are not 'us' but 'other'" (Bartholet, 1993, pp. 46-47). For the adoptive mother, the essential understanding of how she and

a mother are different is that she, as an adoptive mother, did not "have" the child she has, while a mother "had" the child she has.

But an adoptive mother does have a lived body relationship with her child. By saying yes to this child, an adoptive mother embraces the child as her own. "In the physical holding and parental embrace we know our child in a profoundly symbiotic way" (van Manen, 1990, p. 105). The adoptive mother's knowing of her child through the experiences of lived body, though different from that of a mother who gives birth to a child, is very similar to that of fathers:

> The theme of "commitment" is experientially there when the man takes the child in his arms, and in the gesture of accepting and holding the child, the man finds himself face to face with "responsibility," with something utterly new. This encounter is often a profoundly moving experience—now he is the father of the child. But to <u>be</u> a father, he has to continue <u>acting</u> as father as well. (van Manen, 1990, p. 96)

This is one of the unique characteristics of an adoptive family, that the adoptive mother and the adoptive father both begin their connection to the child at the same time and in the same ways.

<u>The Lived Space Experience</u>

How does a mother's experience of lived space contribute to her sense of a unique own-child relationship? Lived space is "felt space" (van Manen, 1990, p. 109). Felt space or lived space is the sense proximity to another, whether another person is experienced as being near or far. The lived space experience of a mother is one of nearness to her child. A mother experiences a unique relationship with her child as she first comes to know the child within her own body. A mother pregnant with a child experiences the child as living bodily within her body, the most intimate feeling of lived space with another.

A woman who conceives, bears, and delivers a child has a special connection to that child, "the real space-time event of a unique birth experience" (Stiffler, 1992, p. 19). After a child is born, the intimacy of space between the child and the child's mother--adoptive or otherwise--continues, though never to the degree that it was with the child's mother before birth. This shared intimate space is the foundation for strengthening any mother's connection with the child. Both a mother and an adoptive mother show their commitment to a totally dependent infant by touching, caring for, and embracing the child. Caring for the child reveals her caring about the child.

The Lived Time Experience

What is the meaning of lived time for a mother and a child? Existential time, or lived time, involves the simultaneous experience of time in three dimensions: the past, the present, and the future. "Time times simultaneously: the has-been, presence, and the present that is waiting for our encounter and is normally called the future" (Heidegger, 1959/1982, p. 106).

Lived time flows backward, into the past. The mother who gives birth to a child gives the child the gift of life. This gift of life includes the gift of an existential past, a past that moves in the unbroken chain through the mother toward the beginning of time. In this way the child's time extends beyond that part of the child's past which is of the child's own making. The child's past extends beyond what the child is and has been, to what was, even before the child was. In this way, a mother is what an adoptive mother can never be: the genetic link that connects the child to the past that flows endlessly back in time.

Time also extends forward while extending backward. A woman who gives birth to a child extends her own future through time into the future of the child. The woman, through her child, extends her chain of time, the chain that stretches toward the future. Yet it is not the mother, one self, that continues. For the mother's self's time ends with death. It is the child, another self, who continues. It is in this way that the mother continues to be even after her death. It through the being of this other, her child, that a mother can confront her eventual end of time and achieve "victory over death" (Levinas, 1947/1987, pp. 90-91).

What is the lived time experience of a woman who makes a commitment to adopt the child of another woman in an open adoption? What is her experience of lived time? Lived time is one of the ways that an adoptive mother comes to know with assurance that she has an authentic own-child relationship with her child. Leah explained how lived time and family underpin her understanding that her son is her own child when she said, "When you have a child from birth, he's yours. He's part of your family. Who else's is he? I mean, nobody else is raising him."

In the adoptive mother's day-to-day actions of being present with the child she experiences the child through lived time in ways remarkably similar to that of a mother. "The parent and the child both share a history which we call family time and which has its own horizons" (van Manen, 1990, p. 105). By taking that child to be her own, she merges her present with the child's present and makes the promise to be present with the child in the present. Her shared present with the child does not erase the past, neither the past when she had no child nor the

past of the child which does not include her, but it does change the past. "The past changes itself, because we live toward a future which we already see taking shape, or the shape of which we suspect as a yet secret mystery of experiences that lie in store for us" (van Manen, 1990, p. 104). By her acts of mothering the child in the present, she makes it possible for the child to rise up and grow from the present into the future.

An important aspect of lived time in the acts of mothering is experiencing "the child's desire to become someone himself or herself, to live for something and to create personal meaning in life" (van Manen, 1990, p. 105). The adoptive mother makes the commitment to be with the child, to belong with the child, to create a family with this child and for this child.

> From ancient days to the present, humans have known a multiplicity of choices for dealing with the newly born, and they have known that the presence of these choices does not simply mean the newcomer must be kept alive. There is not just the old alternative of the throw-away child, but rather another essential possibility; one which implies the resolve to bring into being for the sake of this child and with the help of this child, all that is essential to being human. (Langeveld, 1983, p. 5).

An adoptive mother's commitment is to be present with this child in the present and by the acts of mothering, to make it possible for the child to move from the present into the future. It is the sense of the future through the child that brings adoptive mothers to the experience of immortality, where "the continuous link will be the psychological relationship that will carry on the family history" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 59). For being a mother, adoptive or otherwise, is living with the child in the present while keeping a focus on the future.

Understanding an Adoptive Mother's Claim of an Authentic "Own-Child" Relationship With Her Child

Imagine, again, that woman who is supervising the four children at the playground, the observer who points to a specific child and says, "That one is her own child." Isn't it possible for that the child who is her own child to be a child who is adopted? Leah wanted me to understand that Jonah is her own child. "He's our child to raise, and he's our child to be a part of."

An adoptive mother comes to know that while the own-child relationship is always nurturing, it doesn't have to be biological. "I discovered that the thing I know as parental love grows out of the experience of nurturing, and that adoptive parenting is in fundamental ways identical to biologic parenting" (Bartholet, 1993, p. xvii). Bartholet, like Leah, is a woman who has experienced both biological mothering and adoptive mothering. Their experiences with both affirm the meaning of the own-child relationship the other adoptive mothers in this study give to their experiences.

> Leah: I have the lovely situation of being able to compare, and it's really neat because I love my three natural children and I absolutely adore Jonah, and I know that the love bond is just as strong with all of them. It's like Jonah is Jonah and I know he's adopted, but we just love the heck out of him, and he is our child just like any other child in any other family in the respect that he's ours to raise, ours to let go when the time comes. But, you know, it's not owning. No. Ours in the sense of belonging with us.

Leah, like the other women in this study, gives a child's adoptive mother the right to use the own-child term by stressing the importance of the connections to the child made possible through the everyday acts of mothering. To them, mothers mother. After all, Webster defines adoption as taking by free choice the child of other parents to be one's own child. An adoptive mother takes up the

child of another mother and in doing so takes up the lived time experience with the child, which is accompanied by the experiences of lived body and lived space. These experiences enable an adoptive mother to claim the own-child relationship, to whole-heatedly embrace the child as her own, and to disregard the protests of others that the only authentic own-child relationships are biological ones.

I
Did not plant you,
True.
But when
The season is done -
When the alternate
Prayers for sun
And for rain
Are counted -
When the pain
Of Weeding
And the pride
Of Watching
Are through -

Then
I will hold you
High.
A shining sheaf
Above the thousand
Seeds grown wild.

Not my planting.
But by heaven
My harvest -
My own child. (C. Pearson, in Johnston, 1982, p. 76)

CHAPTER VI. REFLECTING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

I undertook this research with several goals in mind. Primary among these goals was my desire to be better able to understand the experiences of adoptive mothers who live with birth mothers in open adoptions. I wanted to be able to reveal these experiences in such a way so that my readers might be able to say, "Oh, so that's what it is like to be an adoptive mother in an open adoption." Or, as Squire puts it, "So this is what it's about" (1993, p. xii). The success of this phenomenological study can be evaluated by the depth of understanding my readers have about the lived experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption.

Human science research furthers individual and societal well-being by focusing on understanding the meaningful aspects and actions of human experience (Danner, 1986; Reason, 1988). I wanted to understand more fully my own experiences in open adoption. I also wanted to be able to contribute to the understanding of what it means to be in not only this type of relationship but in a sense, in any relationship, by stimulating "new possibilities for choosing" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 12). I will reflect on my experiences with this research, provide suggestions for improving the future adoption experiences of others, and show how this research can be beneficial to family life education.

Looking Back On My Own Experiences

This research has expanded my understanding, reshaped my thinking, and changed some of my present-day actions. Just as the simple words of the phone

call between Linda and myself (presented in the opening of Chapter I) represent far more than a first reading would reveal, the word "mother" also represents layers of meaning which hint and surround the essence of the phenomenon of open adoption mothering. These meanings, however opaque in the beginning, became clearer through the illumination of reflective dialogue. In this section I will look back on how I have changed as a result of doing this research.

Looking Back: Coming to Be an Adoptive Mother in an Open Adoption

According to van Manen (1990), all phenomenological researchers have an orientation they bring to the phenomenon that is being investigated, the orientation being "a particular interest, station or vantage point in life" (p. 40). My interest in open adoption is a result of my own experiences as an adoptive mother in an open adoption. My husband and I were in the third year of medical intervention for infertility and concurrently taking a course on adoption alternatives when we were contacted by a relative who asked if we would be interested in adopting the baby of a young woman who had previously worked for him. Having already determined that parenting, not biological parenthood, was our aim, it took us about three heartbeats to decide that we very much wanted to pursue this opportunity. We talked with Linda on the phone and made arrangements to meet with her and her boyfriend. Hearing their story, our hearts went out to them. All and all, we were charmed. When they agreed to proceed with plans for us to adopt their baby in an independent adoption we felt very fortunate, not just because we had found a baby to adopt, but also because we had found them.

While our adoption did not start out as an open adoption, it did end up that way. Because the only person we had ever known to have an open adoption was a speaker at our adoption course and because there were no books on open adoption at that time, our decision to open the adoption was a lonely one. The decision came only after we weighed our fears of the unknown against what we increasingly wanted this adoption to be. It was a deeply personal decision, a reflection of our consideration of the following: what it would be like to give up a child and not know what was happening to the child; our concern for what it would be like to be a child and to not know anyone you were biologically related to; our increasing irritation with the burdens of secrecy; our growing discomfort with the fact that they were trusting us enough to give us their baby while we hadn't even given them our last names; and certainly not least, our deepening admiration and affection for them. Making the decision to open the adoption was a transforming experience. "We are reborn even as we participate in each act of being fully human, as we give ourselves to our humanness, our being" (Connolly, 1987, p. 163).

Anna is now more than 7 years old, as is our relationship with Linda and John. True to each other throughout that difficult period, they married several years after Anna was born. They have two daughters of their own, so Anna has full siblings. Looking back, our relationship has been simple yet complex, ordinary yet extraordinary, what Rappaport (1992) calls "normal and special at the same time" (p. 12).

Looking Back: Coming to See My Own Blinders About Open Adoption

Looking back, I realize that coming into the research I had an expectation about open adoption relationships that was so taken for granted that I was not even aware of it. Linda and John, by their very nature and our similar backgrounds, have been easily incorporated into our lives. I can't imagine Anna's birth parents not being in our lives. They are there and I can't imagine them being out of it. My blinders were that this is the way things are in open adoption and that this is the way things should be.

> Each of us has many, many maps in our head, which can be divided into two main categories: maps of the way things are, realities, and maps of the way things should be, or values. We interpret everything we experience through these mental maps. We seldom question their accuracy, we're usually even unaware that we have them. We simply assume that the way we see things is the way they really are or the way they should be. (Covey, 1989, p. 24)

Not really being in contact with other women in open adoptions, I truly imagined that most relationships between the adoptive mother and the birth mother would mirror mine. Given this expectation, it is not difficult to imagine how great my surprise was when this did not hold to be true. As I began to meet with the women in this study and we talked, questioned, and considered their lived experiences, each woman responded honestly. As they recounted their experiences, they repeatedly pushed against my expectation that we would be more alike than dissimilar, giving voice to their own experiences and breaking through my one dimensional view of open adoption.

The transition was painful. "Self-growth is tender" (Covey, 1989, p. 62). What I have come to understand was worth learning. Open adoption is highly individual, as individual as the persons involved in it. Because open adoption is

an unstructured understanding between two or more people, the way each open adoption plays out is a function of the interacting personalities, needs, and realities of those who are in that particular open adoption. Initially disappointed that others' experiences did not duplicate my own experiences, understanding this was ultimately freeing. For if the form open adoption takes is highly individual, then open adoption is flexible enough to be workable for many, if not most, adoptions.

According to Carson (1986), "to understand means that what is understood has a claim on us, we appropriate the meaning to our own thoughts and actions in some way" (p. 82). I have long been struggling about how I should portray open adoption. I believe that everybody in our open adoption has benefitted. Open adoption is consistent with my philosophical, ethical, and moral standards of what an adoption should be, so obviously it feels right for me. But I had gotten to the point where I didn't know how to tell people my story and to be an advocate for open adoption without coming across as if I were preaching or implying that my choices are better than the choices made by others who do not choose open adoption. As a result of doing this research and coming to understand the rich variation possible in open adoption, I feel refocused as an advocate for open adoption. No longer do I have to worry that I have to present my way of doing open adoption as a map for others. When I am invited to give a talk about our open adoption, I now know that I can tell our story and let others know that it is just that, our story, one of the countless individual ways that adoptive parents make sense of being parents to children who have other parents. And while I can say with confidence that open adoption has offered me

a way to be in adoption that is authentic, each person has to choose the form of adoption that is authentic for themselves.

Looking Back: Coming To See Both Sides of the Open Adoption Experience

As we began to delve deeper into the reality of our experiences in open adoption, I came to see that not only were our experiences uniquely our own, but that each story had two sides. One side involved the easily shared satisfactions and joys that have come to each woman as a result of being in an open adoption. On the other side are the difficult decisions, the tensions, the compromises, and the disappointments that have also come as a result of being in an open adoption.

For a time, this became frightening to me. I became concerned that people might only attend to whatever I might reveal about the hard part of open adoption. My experience has been that so many people have their mind set against open adoption that they are only too willing to ask for the negative. There was a part of me that said, "Wait a minute! How can I ever present what's tough to deal with in open adoption without somebody just coming in and grabbing that, and only that, for their own purposes?" I turned back to the writings of others who have tried to portray accurately some aspect of adoption to see how they resolved the same concerns. I was finally able to resolve my fears by turning to what brought me to open adoption in the first place, valuing what is honestly revealed over that which is concealed, helped greatly by Arms' (1989) reflections on her similar feelings about writing openly about the experiences of birth mothers:

> It is essential that adoption be portrayed honestly, not as an idealized picture of life without pain or anxiety for everyone. Only if birth parents

> and adoptive parents are made aware of the potential risks and dangers and hard times can they be prepared for them. People must be educated to know how difficult even optimal relinquishments and adoptions can be, and appropriate skilled support must be offered to everyone. (p. 414)

Looking Back: Coming to See How Contact Changes in Open Adoption

As I began to talk with the women in this study, I became personally distressed over their stories where the child's birth mother terminated contact. One of the things that I have always found difficult to make sense of in my own adoption experience is the fact that as time passed there seemed to be decreasing contact between us and Anna's birth parents and the sense that we initiate most of the contact. This, coupled with the experiences of several of the women in this study, led me to reexamine my own situation. While all of these experiences involved abrupt breaks in contact, I nonetheless became concerned that this decreasing contact represented a warning of some type. While I had originally made sense of this in terms of the increasing demands we all are confronted with in our personal and professional lives, I eventually began to question whether there was something more that I was missing. I recently spoke with Linda to share my fear that they might prefer to break off contact. I was reassured by our conversation and pleased to hear that they are still committed to being in touch. I can't imagine not having them in our lives. I can't imagine them not being there for Anna.

Focusing on the meaning of the analogies that the women used for their open adoptions, I was also able to understand that one of the reasons I have felt sadness because of the decreasing contact with Anna's birth parents is because I have come to think of Linda as not only a member of our family, but also as a

friend. My analogy for our adoption reveals this. I use the analogy of a zipper. I represent the teeth of the zipper on one side, Linda the teeth of the zipper on the other side. Anna is the pull, the center of our relationship that brings us together in an enmeshed relationship. Together we cooperate to do what we set out to do. I have also come to recognize that while it is natural for me to miss that time in our relationship when we were fully present with each other before and during Anna's birth, it is unrealistic to believe that our day-to-day relationship could duplicate the feelings of connectedness that were present then.

Rereading articles recently written on the topic of open adoption and the repeated conversations I shared with these women has helped me to gain a broader perspective. It is natural that there is more contact in the beginning of the adoption as the adults continue to explore knowing each other and as the birth parents come to know the child they are not living with. I have come to understand that contact, more often than not, tapers off as the adoption continues. Reitz and Watson (1992) describe this situation in this way:

> At the point of placement, it can be expected that all the parties involved will continue to grow and change. This means that the arrangement for an open adoption may at some time no longer meet the needs of any one of the parties involved. In the context of the pattern of meaningful relationships that we all form, this should not be surprising. Many of our most intimate relationships have meaning because of shared experiences that have significant emotional meaning to those involved. And many a sincere promise to keep in close touch is broken by physical separation, the lack of continuing common experiences, or shifts in life direction or focus. Sometimes plans to keep close contact are consciously re-evaluated and changed, but more frequently the changes occur by default. (p. 267)

So while I am disappointed that we do not have more contact with Anna's birth parents, especially contact initiated by them, I have come to appreciate the fact

that the contact I have is much greater than that which occurs in many open adoptions and the relationships we have shared are particularly special.

Looking Back: Coming to See How My Feelings About the Term "Real Mother" Have Changed

Our concept of mother is a composite of norms, values and beliefs including the relative merits and contributions of biology and social and/or psychological acts. Yet it seems that there are two competing world views of what it means to say "real mother." Historically, the biological connection has been seen as paramount. This is reflected in the views of those who consider the biological parent to the "real" parent. Perhaps this is the result of the fact that "adoption is biologically alien to the unadopted" (Lifton, 1975, p. 81). In contrast, the concept of motherhood as biology is alien to adoptive parents and others who have come to believe that "the social rather than biological tie with the baby is paramount" (LaRossa, 1986, p. 10). For these individuals, the "real" mother is best represented by the mother who raises the child.

I am relatively unfazed by the term real mother. I realized that I had forgotten how I originally felt about the term when, quite by chance, I uncovered the following piece, written by me six years ago.

> Do adoptive mothers see themselves as real when society does not? I think so. How physically stunned I felt, as if I had been struck by a painful blow to the chest, when a friend casually contrasted what it means to be a real mother and an adoptive mother. My very being longed to cry out and avow that I am a real mother, one whose entitlement was granted by the legal process of adoption and by the social act of being chosen by another woman to raise her child.

What has changed? For me now, the truth of the matter is that neither I nor Linda can be considered Anna's "real mother." The more I read about the experiences of birth mothers, the more I came to realize that birth mothers are also denied full entitlement to the term (Connolly, 1987; Duskey, 1979; Schaefer, 1991).

> In a society that defines women as mothers, mothers-to-be, or childless, the woman who has given birth and then relinquished her child for adoption is an enigma. Having signed away her legal claim to the child, she is often perceived as the most unnatural of women, a rejecting mother. (Millen & Roll, 1985, p. 411)

How sad this makes me feel for Linda and for other birth mothers, just as it once made me sad for myself and for other adoptive mothers. How constraining our view, how limited our understanding. When will we ever learn that "there is more than one way to be a good mother?" (Arms, 1989, p. 15). So when Trafford (1990) asks, "What can guide us in answering 'Solomon's ancient question: Who is the baby's real mother?'" (p. 6), my answer would be a paradoxical, "Both of us, yet neither us."

Like the women in this study, I am now secure enough in my mothering relationship with Anna that the words used to describe adoptive mothers or birth mothers no longer hold the potential for hurt that they once did. How did this change? Through the experiences of time, combined with my focused, thoughtful consideration of the issue. In retrospect, I am glad I had that resolved before the first time that Anna, only four years old at the time, hurled her anger at me like a weapon by saying, "You're not my <u>real</u> mom." The potential wounding never happened. Surprised by my own calmness, I confidently responded, "No, but I'm the mom you've got."

Real mother. I'd never said that. I never taught her to say that. She didn't have to be taught. She just knew. "Adopted children know the truth. No matter what phrase we use to refer to the birth mother, invariably they refer to the birth mother as their 'real mother'" (Listain-Carlin, 1986, p. 4). Months later, in a reflective moment, Anna asked, "You aren't my real mom, are you?" Once again, I felt assured when I said, "Well, most people would say I can't be your real mom because I didn't give birth to you." Still another time when she said, "I wish you were my real mom." I could honestly answer, "Yeah, me too. It would be a lot easier then, wouldn't it?"

Open adoption doesn't take away the fact that we both wish that I had given birth to her. Nor does it take away the fact that she was relinquished and her sisters were not. But as much as I would like to make it my job to take away all the possible pain Anna might feel because of being adopted, I can't. I am encouraged in this view by research on adoptee experiences (Brodzinsky, 1987; Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990; Brodzinsky, Schecter, & Henig, 1992; Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984) and by the family systems perspective (Reitz & Watson, 1992; Rosenberg, 1992), but more importantly, by the experiences of other adoptive mothers: "The truth may bring some sadness and pain, but there are far worse ramifications of dishonesty" (Melina, 1989, p. 5). Just as my task was to work through my grief over Dan's and my infertility before Anna ever came to be our child through adoption, the task confronting Anna will be to make her own sense of this adoption story. I cannot do that for her. What I can do is be honest and supportive and show her that I care.

"Care" finds its roots in the Gothic "kara" which means lament. The most basic meaning of care is to grieve, to experience sorrow, to cry out with. This is striking in that we tend to think of caring as an attitude of the strong toward the weak. Yet it is more properly understood as an invitation to enter into the pain of another and simply be present. (Flynn, 1979, p. 31)

Looking Back: Coming to See That Anna is Linda's Child and My Own Child

I initially wanted to understand how to make sense of Anna having two mothers. Exploring the concept of the own-child has given me a way to express this relationship. Because Linda gave birth to Anna, Anna is her child. And because I am the mother Anna lives with, Anna is my own child. For a while I wondered if this was being insensitive to the way Linda sees her relationship with Anna, but there are two specific things, one implicit and one explicit, that have convinced me that this is true.

The implicit understanding I have that Anna is my own child and that this relationship is exclusive is based on my observations. I have been able to observe Linda's interactions with Anna, both before and after Linda gave birth to two more daughters. I know that Linda's relationship with Anna, the way she is with Anna, is very different from the way that she is with Anna's sisters and has been at each age. I also observed something in their home that came as a great surprise to me but does support my intuitive sense that Linda's relationship with Anna is not an own-child relationship. The first time we visited Linda and John in their new home almost 2 years ago, I was stunned to realize that there are no pictures of Anna on display in their home. Pictures of their other two daughters were prominently displayed throughout many of the rooms in their house. That

was one of the first times I realized that they see Anna as our child. Leah, discussing my situation, interpreted it this way:

> When she has her own family, that distance occurs because of the bonding she has with children that are present. . . I bet she and he would probably have a hard time admitting it to themselves how they feel about it. If you asked them, they probably wouldn't be able to answer you and they might feel even defensive wondering why you wanted to know, but at a very deep level they realize that the child is their child. But then, on the other hand, there comes that sense of finality that this is the way it is. This is my family now, and that child is not my family now. She's my child, but she's not my family.

The second way I have come to be confident that Anna is my own child but not Linda's own child is from an explicit statement that Linda made in a conversation we recently had. Linda, herself, is an adoptee from a closed, agency adoption. Linda was discussing her interest in searching for her birth mother. Apparently Linda felt compelled to explain why she would want to search and expressed particular concern about learning more about her medical history. "After all," she said, "I have two daughters." Surprised, because I always think of her as having three daughters, I was silent for a moment, as was she. Breaking the silence, she added, "And Anna."

Looking Back: Coming To See the Isolation Open Adoption Brings

As I talked with the women in this study, I began to realize how isolated we feel. Not only are we out of the mainstream by being mothers through adoption, but we are also out of the mainstream of adoption by being in open adoptions. Many of us commented on how nice it was to be able to talk about open adoption issues with someone who knew what it was like to be in an open adoption.

Similar to all people who find themselves in relatively unusual situations, adoptive mothers in open adoption feel better able to function effectively when they are able to call on others for support and understanding. Numerous writers, including Hartman (1988), Reitz and Watson 1992, and Rosenberg (1992), suggest that all adoptive parents will benefit from professional assistance as they negotiate transitions in the life cycle. Arms (1988), in contrast, suggests that "adoptive family members. . . need to be able to turn to people in their own community who can help" (p. 421).

Prodded by Carson (1986) to remember that phenomenological research is ultimately action research, I began to feel that I owed something to these women who had so willingly supported my own self growth and my research. Bolstered by my enjoyment of being in contact with others who were in open adoption, I decided that I would try to set in motion a support group for adoptive parents in open adoption. Working from the names and addresses that I had collected in preparation for this research, I sent a letter to everyone on the list inviting them to meet each other and discuss the possibility of meeting on a regular basis. The first meeting was in March of this year. The consensus at that meeting was that we would continue to meet. Two meetings have been for adults only. Two meetings have featured family activities. There are currently eleven couples actively involved in the support group and we are considering expanding our group and doing some form educational outreach with prospective adoptive parents.

But the facts of these meetings and our future goals are less important than the sense of community we have created for ourselves, a place where we can

come together and share our common experiences, be understood, and feel supported. As one of the fathers said at our first meeting, "This is the first time I've been able to talk about our adoption without having to go into explanations about why we are doing this." In addition, this group is a place where we can understand that just as each family lives their everyday lives in a way uniquely their own, each way of being in an open adoption is uniquely their own. While we can serve as examples and models to each other, there are countless ways to be an adoptive family in an open adoption. We come together to support each other, but each of us forges our own paths in open adoption.

Looking Back: Coming To See My Own Fears About Phenomenology

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of realizing that our experiences were uniquely our own was the way it affected my ability to give voice to the essential components of others' experiences. My anxiety peaked when I confronted the 46 preliminary themes that I originally found in the texts generated from our conversations. It became a real challenge to maintain the conviction that with time the preliminary themes would merge, and that the themes which would give coherence to the myriad experiences of the women in this study would emerge. "Experience even in the first person is not private or arbitrary but has definite generic characteristics" says Kohak (1978, p. 30), giving me hope. This hope was supported when I reread that "phenomenologists believe that in most cases there are very likely to be similarities in the reactions of different people to a circumstance. . . Not in all aspects but in many of them" (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1979, p. 4). Taking a break from my

research, I came across a statement in Byatt's Possession that described perfectly what I felt: "He could hear, or feel, or even almost see, the patterns made by a voice he didn't yet know, but which was his own" (1990, p. 515).

Returning to my texts and my preliminary themes, I listened for the webs of connection. "Listening involves patience, openness, and the desire to understand" (Covey, 1989, p. 37). At times I could almost discern them, only to have them elude me once again. Increasingly I came to know there was a pattern. It was a great breakthrough to realize that what bound it all together was the experience of knowing the self, a knowing that comes through knowing the other. Now the text took on a new meaning.

> There are readings--of the same text--that are dutiful, readings that map and dissect, readings that hear the rustling of unheard sounds, that count grey little pronouns for pleasure or instruction. . . There are personal readings, which snatch for personal meanings. . . There are--believe it--impersonal readings--when the mind's eye sees the lines move onwards and the minds' ear hears them sing and sings.
>
> Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark--readings when the knowledge that we shall know the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was always there, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have always known it was, though we have now for the first time recognized, become fully cognizant of, our knowledge. (Byatt, 1990, pp. 511-512)

I confronted another anxiety when I sent each of the women in this study a copy of Chapter IV and V, the chapters where I reveal the themes and the understandings they provide about the phenomena of adoptive mothering in open adoption. In hermeneutic phenomenology the participants in the study are given opportunities throughout the study to confirm or disagree with the

interpretations that are being developed. Now they had the opportunity to see my reflections and understanding in its final form.

I must admit that I found it difficult to send those chapters off, and even more difficult to wait for their responses. While I fully expected that they might find small factual errors that would need to be corrected, such as the specific age of their child's birth mother at the time of the adoption, these types of problems with the text are easily corrected. Rather, my anxiety was whether or not the themes and reflections I was offering for verification might in some way be unfaithful to their experiences, despite the efforts I had made at each step along the way to share the themes I was uncovering in our conversations.

What was the result? As I talked with each woman after she had a chance to read the text, I asked questions. Where there errors of fact? Did what I had written reflect her experiences being an adoptive mother in an open adoption? Where there portions of the text that are not true to her experiences? Yes, there were a few factual errors, errors that I have corrected. No, none of the women in the study expressed concerns that what I had written did not accurately reflect her experiences, so the chapters stand as they were.

What I have come to realize is that the great vulnerability I was feeling was because the text of those two chapters is not simply a recounting of their stories. Phenomenological research is intensely personal and the reflections found in those chapters are uniquely my own. By candidly recalling their experiences and revealing their thoughts and feelings about those experiences, they had made themselves vulnerable, laying out their lives for everyone to see.

Now it was my turn to make myself vulnerable to them, laying before them the understandings I had struggled so long to bring to light.

In addition, I have come to realize that I was hoping for something more than a validation that my text accurately represented each woman's experiences. I was hoping that they would share with me how my reflections on our mutual experiences may have allowed them to rethink or revisit aspects of their experiences being an adoptive mother in an open adoption. When did I come to this realization? Only when I was able to recognize the sense of relief I felt when the third woman I talked with, Leah, shared what it felt like to read those chapters. It was then that I realized my job is not yet finished, that I have been remiss in not sharing with each of the women in this study what they have allowed me to see about my own experiences, both as an adoptive mother in an open adoption and as a researcher. I will, but not here. Just as Leah's comments to me were meant for me, what I have to say is meant for them.

Looking Ahead to Future Research

Now that I have completed this research on the experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption, I am interested in continuing my research with other members of the adoption circle. I am particularly interested in exploring the experiences of birth mothers in open adoption. I also anticipate that I will turn to investigate the experiences of adoptees in open adoption.

Looking Ahead to the Family Life Education

I have previously revealed a portion of my orientation--being an adoptive mother in an open adoption--but have not discussed my orientation as an

educator. I teach at the college level in two related curricula: child development and family studies. One area of overlap between the two curricula, family life education, is of particular interest to me for application of what I have come to understand through doing this research. I believe with great conviction that family life education should focus on real issues and practical choices, all the while keeping an aim on the opportunity to increase our appreciation of what it means to be human (Langeveld, 1983). It is this sense of the humanness that underpins everyday life decisions that Laing (1970) reveals by saying:

> All being in each being
> Each being in all being
> All in each
> Each in all. (Laing, 1970, p. 82)

Opportunities for Family Life Education:

Exploring the Meaning of Involuntary Childlessness

As is evident in the experiences that the women in this research recounted, infertility is an unexpected stressor event, a challenge to the almost unquestioned expectation of progression to parenthood after the decision to become a parent. Infertility calls into question "the importance of parenthood as a salient identity" in an individual's life (Daly, 1988, p. 55). Some courses in family life education will benefit from investigations of the social and psychological impact of infertility, including the stigmatizing impact of being infertile in a pronatalist society (Matthews & Matthews, 1986; Rhodes, 1988).

As a topic, involuntary childlessness offers the opportunity for family life education to examine the pronatalistic values that underpin individual and societal expectations concerning whether a person should become a parent.

Almost any course that focuses on parenthood decisions can profit from explorations of involuntary childlessness to reveal the anticipations, hopes, and desires that are associated with the decision to have a child.

In our mastery-oriented culture, the pervasive expectation is that decisions about parenthood are primarily questions of "whether and when" (Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, Dean, Meyers, & Schmidt, 1980, p. 621). Adoption suggests that we consider that pregnancy does not have to lead to parenthood. "Parenthood is neither an inevitability, nor a universally desirable condition nor a prerequisite to a full life--but a vocation for which only some of us are suited, by aptitude or choice" (Peck & Senderowtiz, 1974, p. 7). "Women have learned to ask: 'Should I have a baby?' A more appropriate question instead might be: 'Do I want to be a mother?' The two are not synonymous" (Potera, 1988, p. 69). Nor is an affirmative response limited to the alternative of biological parenting.

Confronting infertility requires "differentiating between reproduction, sexual adequacy, and competency to parents as well as in mourning the loss of the opportunity to bear a biological child" (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 14). While some parenting and marriage and family curricula do address the importance of carefully considering whether or not to become a parent, these curricula typically emphasize the importance of choosing freely after careful consideration of childfree and the parenthood alternatives. The topic of involuntary childlessness offers a different way of exploring the meaning being a parent has in the identities of individuals.

Many authors of texts for courses in parenting or marriage and the family include sections that describe the medical reproductive interventions available

today. While it is understandable that these high technology alternatives provide interesting reading, the unquestioned assumption seems to be that these alternatives are both desirable and beneficial. Little information is presented about the physical, social, emotional, and financial costs associated with these treatments (Bartholet, 1993). In addition, "extreme technological intervention perpetuates a value system that devalues involuntary childlessness and conceptualizes parenthood as a process of childbearing and childrearing" (Miall, 1989, p. 50).

Greater consideration should be given to the difference between infertility and involuntary childlessness. To the extent that infertility is the exclusive focus, medical intervention becomes the most logical alternative, because the solution to infertility can only be something which achieves fertility. By comparison, numerous alternatives are available to help an individual solve the problem of involuntary childlessness, including foster parenting and adoptive parenting. "Having and feeling a capacity for parenting, as distinct from a capacity for reproduction, is a requirement for all adoptive and foster parents" (Krugman, 1967, p. 269).

Opportunities for Family Life

Education: Exploring the Meaning of Being a Family

Just as the topic of infertility offers a new way to look at the expectations of parenthood, the topic of adoption and open adoption offers a way to examine what it means to be a family. The assumption that families will include children and that the children will be biologically related to both parents devalues

alternative family forms (Daly, 1988; Hartman, 1988). To the extent that family life education materials emphasize biological families, those materials depreciate adoptive families and other nontraditional family structures. Breaking through the unquestioned assumption that nuclear families with biological children are superior can be beneficial to students of family life education as we encounter increasing numbers of non-traditional families. For example, increased numbers of remarriages and first time marriages of single mothers mean that increasing numbers of parent-child relationships are non-biological (Marcus, 1990).

Adoption is used throughout the world to create families and to establish kinship (Weckler, 1953). Thus, consideration of adoptive families permits us to reevaluate "the family unit and human kinship in general" (Miall, 1989, p. 50). Adoption allows us to recognize the everyday effort involved in creating and maintaining families. "Biology is only one aspect of a relationship. Families are hardly built on the accident of birth alone" (Schneider, 1989, p. 19).

Research on adoptive parent-child relationships can permit us to rethink the biological, social, and psychological contributions to family life. For example, discussions about the process of bonding and attachment can be expanded by considering that Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, and Waters (1985) found similar levels of mother-infant attachment when they compared middle-class adoptive and non-adoptive families. This and other research on bonding and attachment in adoption can illuminate our understanding of all bonding and attachment (Watson, 1988).

Opportunities for Family Life

Education: Exploring the Meaning of Parenting

Parenting, the way a parent cares for a child, varies according to the culture and society in which the parent and the child reside. Considering the similarities and differences between adoptive parenting and biological parenting opens avenues for not only understanding adoptive parenting better, but understanding all parenting better.

No one will deny that becoming a parent biologically is clearly different from becoming a parent by adoption (Bartholet, 1993). But because biological parenting is learned, we can be confident that adoptive parenting can also be learned (Bartholet, 1993; Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, Dean, Meyers, & Schmidt, 1980; Krugman, 1967; Miall, 1987). Being a parent means to "emphasize the activity, the daily engagement. . . the doing that gives substance and meaning to the being" (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982, p. 6). It means integrating what one does into one's being.

Not the least of the issues confronting adoptees and adoptive parents are the devaluing comments about adoption that they encounter. Research relationships in adoption allow us to examine parenting from a new perspective. For example, when Genevie and Margolies (1989) compared the mother-child relationships of biological mothers and adoptive mothers, they found them to be virtually the same. Ternary, Wilborn, and Day (1985) found that parents of adoptive families and biological families behave similarly and have similar levels of personal adjustment. Despite these and other evidences to the contrary, biological parenting, especially the love of biological parents, is alleged by

biological parents to be superior to adoptive parenting (Kitzenger, 1978; Rundberg, 1988; Schneider, 1989). Adoptive parenting makes us confront that just as "parents can have more than one child, children can have more than two parents" (Andersen, 1993, p. 160).

My personal review of parenting books reveals that a number of authors portray adoption from the perspective that the children in adoptive families present special challenges to parents. While there are unique issues a child must resolve about having been adopted, it is interesting to note that the authors are apparently unconcerned that the adoptive parents might also have special issues to resolve. LePere (1988) reported that adoptive families experience predicable stresses at various points in the lifecycle.

Looking Ahead to Adoption Practice

While this research focuses on the experiences of adoptive mothers in open adoption, being able to understand the experiences of one segment of the adoption circle may permit others to better grasp the adoption experience. "By heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped research can lead to better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight lead to improvements in practice. In this sense, human science is practical science" (Barritt, 1986, p. 20).

It is through taking the initiative to shape our lives that adoption can be an empowering experience. Before focusing on how taking initiative leads to empowerment, I will focus on several potential misunderstandings. The road to empowerment is not necessarily the easiest. Nor does it mean that the life you

shape will be necessarily free from pain (Arms, 1989). Empowerment does not take place at the expense of others, therefore taking initiative in this way precludes being "pushy, obnoxious, or aggressive" (Covey, 1989, p. 75). Empowering decisions allow you to live with integrity, as freely, as honestly, as justly as possible. This type of life upholds commitments and scrupulously avoids betraying others.

In some ways the term enabling appeals to me more than the term empowering because empowering has come to take on meanings which are not always consistent with the way that I mean the term to be understood. The perspective on empowering that I dislike is called "empowerment-as-authorization" by Marshall and Sears (1990, p. 17). A person in a position of authority tries to empower others by transmitting to those others the facts and skills necessary for negotiating a specific situation. I advocate another form of empowerment, "empowerment-as-enablement," described by Marshall and Sears in this way: "The form is idiosyncratic. . . power is created and realized. . . not received from or bestowed by others. . . Empowerment is a deeply personal process of meaning making within particular historical, cultural, and economic contexts" (1990, p. 17).

Enabling Prospective Birth Parents and Adoptive Parents

Watson (1988), Reitz and Watson (1992), and Rosenberg (1992) encourage everyone in adoption to recognize that the child maintains membership in both families. This brings the adoptive family system together with the family system of the birth mother and, depending on the situation, the family system of the

birth father. As is evident in this study, open adoption offers us a way to examine how the child maintains membership in both families and how adoptive families function when the child's birth parents are actively in their lives.

Modell (1986) stresses that in adoption there is no recognized kinship position for birth mothers. Most of the women in this study consider the child's birth mother to be a member of their extended family and make decisions regarding everyday issues on this basis. By considering their children's birth mothers to be most similar to an in-law relationship, they echo the experiences of others in adoption reported by Rappaport (1992): "Most adoptive parents report that adding birth parents to their family is like expanding their family through marriage" (p. 110). The closeness and intensity of these relationships is highly individualistic, which reflects the flexibility inherent in open adoption.

> It is not important that the relationship be close, strong, and constant, or the reverse, that the relationship be distant, detached and casual. What is important is that an open adoption permits, within its framework, whatever is necessary and meaningful for the individuals involved. (Baran & Pannor, 1990, p. 331)

In considering the potential relationships between adoptive mothers and birth mothers, boundaries are the focal point of many fears and concerns about open adoption, especially the boundary related to contact. None of the adoptive mothers in this study feel they have too much contact with their child's birth mother. In fact, most would prefer to have more contact. But the frequency of contact is not something they would prefer to have mandated by others or for the most part, even mediated by others. In this way they agree with Reitz and Watson (1992) who believe that "any agreements about ongoing contact must be extralegal, and compliance must depend on the good faith of those involved"

(p. 267). I have come to believe that success in open adoption is a reflection of the desire of the members who practice it to choose interdependence over independence. According to Covey (1989), the difference is important.

> Independence is the paradigm of I--I can do it; I am responsible; I am self-reliant; I can choose. Interdependence is the paradigm of we--we can do it; we can cooperate; we can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together. . . The current social paradigm enthrones independence. It. . . puts independence on a pedestal, as though communication, teamwork, and cooperation were lesser values. But much of our current emphasis on independence is a reaction to dependence--to having others control us, define us, use us, and manipulate us. . . True independence of character empowers us to act rather than be acted upon. It frees us from our dependence on circumstances and other people and is a worthy, liberating goal. But it is not the ultimate goal in effective living . . . Life is, by nature, highly interdependent. (Covey, 1989, pp. 49-51)

I, like each of the women in this research, believe that open adoption is more positive than negative and cannot imagine being in an adoption that is not open. We recognize that these are our biases and appreciate them as such.

> Everyone involved in adoption has biases. If we discounted their ideas, we would be left with nothing except opinions from people indifferent to the subject--that would hardly be progress. We need to appreciate our biases and consider them in our formulations, but it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate them. (Andersen, 1993, p. 126)

Also like the women in this study, I heartily endorse open adoption without believing that open adoption should be mandated. This is not surprising, because each of us has seen the benefit of working within a flexible arrangement. But at the same time, I believe open adoption would be appropriate for a much larger proportion of all adoption. For this reason, I must disagree with Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig (1992) p. 190) who suggest that open adoption is appropriate for a relatively limited audience:

> The pioneers of open adoptions are a very select group of parents: highly educated, liberal, open-minded, nondefensive, experimental individuals

> who are not tied to tradition mores and lifestyles. These adoptive parents, and the birth parents involved in open adoption, tend to be willing to deal with moral ambiguity and complexity. If open adoption proves a good solution for them, however, it does not necessarily follow that it would be good for everyone. (p. 190)

While I respect the research conducted by Brodzinsky, Schecter, and Henig, I believe that they are missing an important point when they come to this conclusion. By choosing the adoptive path toward parenthood, adoptive parents show that they are not constrained by traditional mores and lifestyles. In addition, the general population of adoptive parents has been shown to have many of the very characteristics Brodzinsky, Schecter, and Henig believe are important for open adoption. Adoptive families have been shown to have higher levels of education and greater incomes (Bachrach, 1983). Adoptive families also have been shown to be older and to have been married for longer than other types of marital families (Moorman & Hernandez, 1989). Research on differences in the timing of motherhood reveals women who become mothers later (in their 30s and 40s) have a more clearly established sense of themselves as separate from their child (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982; Walter, 1986). All in all, it seems to me that adoptive parents already seem to possess many of the very characteristics which would make them likely candidates for open adoption, people well equipped to evaluate the realities of the circumstances, personalities, styles, and changing needs of the individuals involved in the adoption as they move through life and grow through experience.

Epilogue

I began this dissertation by telling the story about my daughter and a Mother's Day card. My experiences that day caused me to question the meaning of Mother's Day and the essence of the relationship between myself and my daughter's birth mother. But I've come to appreciate that Mother's Day is not just my issue, it is an issue for many adoptive mothers.

> Mother's Day is not the only time I think of her, but it's the only time I can't avoid it. She was going to have a child but couldn't keep it. I wanted a child desperately but couldn't have one. She was the mother at birth; I was the mother right after. It sounded simple, but it wasn't. (Mitchard, 1990, p. 96)

Nor is the issue of Mother's Day just an adoption issue. I agree with Vogel (1988), when she says, "Mother's Day is more complicated than it used to be" (p. 8), because the issue of Mother's Day is not just an adoption issue. It is also an issue confronting the mothers who choose other solutions to their involuntary childlessness and the mothers in stepfamilies.

Through serendipity I will be able to close by sharing another story about my daughter and a Mother's Day card. This past summer Anna and I stopped at a card shop near our home. Usually the store displayed only those cards which would be appropriate for the next 60 days. That day, however, cards for various occasions throughout the year were available, because the store was going out of business and the owner was trying to sell off the entire inventory.

While I looked at cards in one section of the store, Anna looked at cards in another section nearby. Eventually she rejoined me, warning me not to look as she clutched a card to her chest so that I couldn't read the message. With a great show of secrecy Anna purchased her selection.

When Anna got home, she asked her dad to help her find a safe place to keep her card. When they settled on a place, she let Dan see the card she had selected. Surprised, Dan asked her if she knew what the card said. Looking at her dad as if he had asked a silly question, Anna responded, "It's for mom. It's a Mother's Day card." Just six years old, reading was an emerging skill for Anna, but mom and mother were words she could read. Gently, Dan pointed to the words printed on the front of the card and read, "For My Other Mother." "Oh no," said Anna, "I thought it was for mom but it's for Linda. You have to take me to the store to get another card." They returned to the store for another card. I know, because Dan told me, that the new card says: "For My Mother."

Anna's purchase of the card for Linda may have been accidental, but I like the fact that it gave me another chance to reflect on what Mother's Day means in an open adoption. That was the first time that Anna tried to buy a Mother's Day card on her own, unprompted by others. Anna, without ever knowing there was a question, answered the question I started out trying to understand. When Mother's Day rolls around next spring, she has two cards for her two mothers. I will get the Mother's Day card that reads: For My Mother. Linda will get the card that reads: For My Other Mother.

Anna has it exactly right. Linda is Anna's mother in a way that I can never be. There is a tie between Linda and Anna that adoption cannot sever and that our open adoption honors. It was very clear to me after Anna was born that she knew Linda's voice from across the room. She searched for Linda's voice with her eyes from across the room, looking for the voice she already knew. There were already connections between them. But it's also very clear when I

watch Linda with Anna and with her two other daughters that the relationship she has with Anna is very different from the relationship she has with them. I am Anna's mother in a way that Linda can never be. By telling the doctor to place Anna into my arms, not her own, Linda signified her intention to transfer the responsibility for Anna to me. By our acts we endorsed the contract written in our hearts, one that was later ratified by law. By entrusting Anna to me, I was able to begin my new life as Anna's mother. Through the magic of the time that Anna and I have spent together, we have come to be connected in our own way. Anna has come to be my own child and I have come to be Anna's mother.

Anna once said to me, "There is a string that goes from your heart to my heart and from my heart to your heart." I couldn't describe it better. Rich (1976) agrees with Anna: "The mother. . . is connected with this other being by the most mundane and the most invisible strands, in a way she can be connected with no one else" (Rich, 1976, p. 36). We are connected together through our experiences together, the ties of love that bind us fast and connect us securely through our hearts.

APPENDIX

RESEARCH PARTICIPATION CONSENT FORM

Research to be carried out by Deborah A. Krichbaum, doctoral candidate in the Home Economics Education Program, Department of Industrial, Technical, and Vocational Education, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

1. I have discussed the nature of this research with Deborah Krichbaum and understand that we will be discussing my experiences as an adoptive mother in an open adoption.

2. I understand that I will be conversing with Ms. Krichbaum as often as every week over a period of nine months.

3. I understand that our conversations will be tape recorded.

4. I understand that I will remain anonymous.

5. I understand that I will be allowed to see the final interpretation of our conversations with the purpose of reaching intersubjective agreement about the meanings of my experiences.

6. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research at any time.

7. I feel no pressure to participate in this research and freely consent to do so.

....
Participant's signature Date

....
Researcher's signature Date

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