THE SEALED ADOPTION RECORD CONTROVERSY: PERSPECTIVES OF ADOPTEES, ADOPTIVE PARENTS AND BIRTH MOTHERS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

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To My Parents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people have assisted me throughout this endeavor and deserve recognition. First and foremost, I acknowledge the intellectual support and personal understanding of my advisor, Laurel Richardson. I thank her for her wise counsel, patient criticism and constant kindness. She is a worthy model as a scholar, a friend, a person. My other dissertation committee members, Al Clarke and Elizabeth Menaghan, each offered stimulating comments and criticisms that greatly assisted me in the formulation and refinement of the ideas guiding this study.

At all times the help and solidarity of many friends were vital to me. Judith Cook and Mary Margaret Fonow gave thorough and insightful readings to drafts of the dissertation that helped me to clarify ideas. More than that, they have been an endless source of encouragement. I thank them for their hospitality, diversion and warm companionship. A special thanks is extented to Penelope Maza, Diane Broadhurst and Elaine Schwartz for their contributions, both intellectual and logistical. I am especially indebted to Nancy Cowan, Laura Bonneville and

Marjorie Davidson. Their loyal friendship and belief in my abilities helped me to overcome the many obstacles I faced over the years.

A special thanks goes to "my favorite typist," Marsha Hawkins, who typed . . . and typed . . . and typed this lengthy manuscript.

Finally, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my family. I thank my husband, Elliot, for his love and support. I am especially grateful to my parents, Norman and Reva Ganson, who taught me the value of knowledge and education. Their warmth and buoyancy have long been a source of strength for me. Their aid and encouragement have been the most important of all.

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Sociology

Studies in Sociology of the Family, Gender Sociology, and Sociological Theory.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is the process through which a child's relationship with her/his biological parents is terminated and she/he is assimilated into a new family. In most adoptions the original birth certificate is sealed; the new one contains information only about the adoptive parents. There is a growing controversy in this country concerning the right of an adoptee to have access to the original birth records. Biological parents are also advocating the right to access the records. This study focuses on the opinions and attitudes of the adoption triangle participants--the adoptee, the adoptive parent and the birth parent--regarding this controversy. This chapter includes a discussion of the problem, the purpose of the research, and the rationale for the study. The final sections contain a general overview of the study, and describe the organization of the chapters.

PROBLEM STATEMENT: ADOPTION AS A SOCIAL ISSUE

There is no ongoing data collection system for national adoption statistics. The most recent information available from the federal government is based on data collected from 1944 through 1975. These data indicate that adoption reached its peak in 1970, with an estimated 175,000 adoptions. In 1975, the total number of adoptions was estimated at 129,000 (Maza, 1984). It is believed that the number of adoptions in subsequent years has remained fairly constant (Maza, 1985, personal communication). Most adoptions that occur are relative adoptions; it is estimated that 63 percent of all adoptions are relative adoptions. Relative adoptions typically include adoption by stepfathers and adoption of a child into the family of another relative subsequent to the death of one or both parents. Although relative adoptions are more prevalent than nonrelative adoptions, most attention has focused on children adopted by unrelated individuals. These children are the ones who usually become involved with social service agencies and for whom adoption requires severence from and lack of knowledge about the biological family.

Current adoption policy, specifically the inaccessibility of adoption records, is being challenged in all arenas. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of adoptees and birth parents who are searching for information about their biological kin. The current search

movement is viewed by some as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s (Feigelman and Silverman, 1984; Dukette, 1984). In the 1970s, efforts to extend civil rights to address children's liberties, resulted in legal protections increasingly similar to those available to adults (Burt, 1976). As society has begun to accept the concept of children's rights, recognition of the rights of the adopted person also has grown. Further, the actions of various ethnic groups to achieve collective identities has spawned interest in knowing genealogical background. These factors have resulted in an environment more conducive to searching for one's biological kin than previously existed.

Legislative interest in the topic is evidenced by the large number of bills dealing with adoption records. From 1981 through 1983, state legislatures in 45 states and the District of Columbia Council introduced such bills (Harrington, 1984). The bills include proposals to open adoption records, to maintain state registries for adult adoptees and birth parents interested in reunions, and to develop an intermediary system as a mechanism to obtain medical and genetic information. The federal government has also become involved in the issue by including provisions for open records and birth parent contact in the Model Adoption Act legislation, developed in 1980. More recently, a bill was introduced in the 98th Congress that

provides for a national voluntary reunion registry (S. 2396, Adoption Identification Act of 1984).

The media has maintained an ongoing interest in the area since the mid '70s. Journalists frequently report on successful or unsuccessful searches, the reunions and the position of the adoptive parent. The communications technology has even played a role in adoption searches; reunions have occurred as a result of individuals appearing on TV talk shows or being interviewed in newspaper feature stories. Advice columnists, certainly a barometer of public interest, have contributed their thoughts on the controversy. The effect of this attention has been to make the adoption process more visible; the shroud of secrecy enveloping adoption is being lifted. The visibility of the adoption experience--the positions of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents--has resulted in increased public awareness and attention to the issue.

Increased public awareness of the issues surrounding adoption records also has been facilitated by the growth of activist organizations concerned with the rights of adoption participants. Adoptee groups, such as Adoptees Liberty Movement Association (ALMA) and Orphan Voyage, have played a major role in bringing the search issue to public attention and stimulating genealogical interest among adoptees. Birth parents also have become organized; in the mid 1970s Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) was formed as

a support system for individuals who had surrendered children, and as a political movement to influence adoption policy and practices. All these groups, along with other local and national organizations, have voiced their concerns in public and governmental forums.

Social service agencies have begun to respond to the changes in the adoption process. These agencies often assume the role of broker, or intermediary, in the process. The changes that have occurred make great demands on agencies to deal constructively with the movement to acknowledge geneaology. There is evidence that the social work profession has attempted to accommodate these demands. The social work literature includes articles on developing new guidelines, and proposals for alternative adoption practices such as "open adoption" (Dukette, 1984; Pannor and Baran, 1984).

The literature on adoption has been slow to recognize this shift in public concern. Most of the numerous books and articles on adoption are aimed at the layreader, focusing on "How-to" adopt and parenting skills. The bulk of the professional literature is in the fields of social work, clinical psychology and psychiatry. This literature is characterized primarily by articles on adoption practice, psychological problems in adopted children, and the psychodynamics of the parent-child interaction (Sorosky et al., 1979). There are few research studies that focus on

the adoption process as experienced by the key participants--the adoptees, the adoptive parents and the birth parents. The secrecy surrounding the adoption experience and the lack of access to records has tended to discourage sociological research. Traditional societal attitudes and values have reinforced the privacy of the process. Further, sociologists and other research professionals tend to view the adoptive family as no different than other families.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research is to examine the issue of sealed adoption records from the perspectives of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents. The controversy over whether adoption records should remain sealed, as they are in most states, is at the core of the traditional concept of adoption as a process that severs the ties between the adoptee and the birth family. Thus, the attitudes and opinions of adoption participants regarding record accessibility provide a basis for understanding the critical dimensions of the adoption experience. An essential component of a full analysis of adoption--and a distinguishing characteristic of this study--is the inclusion of the three major participant groups. With few exceptions, existing studies limit their focus to either adoptees or adoptive families. The birth parent, the "hidden"

parent, is generally ignored altogether in adoption studies. In contrast, this research effort focuses on the shared and conflicting definitions of the adoption experience reported by the individuals from all three groups. Some of the issues raised in the analysis are inconsistent with our current beliefs about what adoption means to the individuals involved. These new insights extend our understanding of adoption and suggest possibilities for policy and practice changes to accommodate participant concerns.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Several factors point to the need for this type of study. First, there is a dearth of sociological analysis on the structure and process of adoption. Yet, the social forces surrounding current and changing adoption relationships indicate the need for adoption to be placed in a social science perspective. As a social institution, adoption warrants scientific investigation.

Second, the existing literature on adoption generally does not capture the way the institution is shaped by the juxtaposition of the separate perspectives of the three key groups. This study attempts to fill this void by analyzing the similarities and differences in group responses to a single issue.

Third, the topic promotes needed cross-fertilization between the disciplines of sociology and social work. The

sociological approach used in this study is combined with attention to recent developments in social services delivery and social work practice. In turn, the findings can be applied to social work practices.

Fourth, the sealed records issue is timely from a policy perspective. The issue is under consideration by many state legislatures, and many groups and individuals are lobbying for or against passage of laws related to adoption records. This investigation can provide data to assist policymakers and enable them to make more informed decisions on the issue.

A major strength in research, particularly policy research, is its potential utility to a significant population. The study is envisioned to have academic, practical and policy implications and be of value to professionals associated with these areas. However, it is my intent that the study also be of value to those individuals for whom the findings are particularly meaningful--the adoptees, adoptive parents and the birth parents.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

In 1980, the federal government's proposed Model Adoption legislation generated a considerable response from adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents involved in nonrelative adoptions. This study is based on a sample of these written responses. Of the 2,881 letters written,

391 letters were selected for inclusion in the study. A systematic random sample of letters from each of the groups yielded 114 letters from adoptees, 164 from adoptive parents and 113 from birth mothers. (The term "birth mothers" is used instead of "birth parent" because there is only one birth father in the sample. The term "birth parent" implies equal distribution of mothers and fathers.) Two types of analytic procedures were followed. First, the characteristics of the letters and respondents (e.g., format of letter, number of pages, and respondent age and sex) were analyzed to enable a presentation of sample characteristics. The second procedure involved a content analysis of the letters to identify predominant themes and concerns of the letter writers. The letter characteristics provide a context for understanding and explaining why specific concerns were or were not raised.

The use of qualitative methodology is considered preferable over quantitative techniques because of the nature of the topic being addressed. The letters provide a unique data base for obtaining information on the three groups regarding the same issue, adoption records. Although the sample is biased because it includes only individuals who are inclined to write to a governmental organization, the biases do not affect the quality of the findings. It is beneficial to be able to analyze the comments of individuals who are concerned enough about the issue to take the

time and effort to put their thoughts in writing. Further, alternative sampling approaches do not eliminate respondent bias. Because of the privacy and confidentiality associated with the institution of adoption, it is not possible to obtain a random sample of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents. Studies on adoption participants are all characterized by sample bias, acknowledged by the researchers. Participation in adoption studies is generally voluntary, and respondents are often selected because of their association with a particular agency or adoption advocacy group.

Similarly, the content analysis procedure used is preferable to other methodological procedures. Use of questionnaires assumes preconceived notions about what is important to adoption participants. The content analysis of letters already written permits the participants to identify meaningful concerns. In-person interviews present a different set of problems--logistical and conceptual. Further, there may be differences between individuals who are willing to be interviewed versus those who are willing to write their opinions. The anonymity associated with writing may result in a more diverse respondent group, and also may yield more honest opinions. A major problem in an in-person interview is the tendency for the interviewee to provide socially acceptable responses. This problem generally does not exist with unsolicited written responses.

Overall, the sample of letters written by adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents provide a meaningful data base for content analysis. This type of analysis yields the salient dimensions of the adoption experience as conveyed by the actors most involved in the situation.

Five predominant themes emerge from an analysis of the letters: justice, identity, well being, feelings about others, and family. Justice refers to issues relating to whose rights are involved, what rights are of concern and the basis for these rights. Identity refers to issues concerning the necessary components to achieve a sense of self and how identity is defined. Comments focusing on well being relate to the psychological and emotional condition of the individuals involved in the adoption experience. Feelings about others refers to statements revealing how each of the respondents feels about the other participants in the adoption triangle. The family theme focuses on respondents' references and descriptions of familial relationships and the meaning of these relationships.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CHAPTERS

The report is organized into ten chapters. Chapter I, the introduction, provides an overview of the study. Chapter II presents a review of the relevant literature. Chapter III provides a description of the study methodology. Study findings are presented in Chapters IV through

VIII. Each chapter focuses on a specific theme as follows: Chapter IV--Justice; Chapter V--Identity; Chapter VI--Well Being; Chapter VII--Feelings About Others; and Chapter VIII--Family. Chapter IX presents a summary and discussion of study findings and Chapter X describes the implications of study findings.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

OVERVIEW

The subject of adoption is a popular topic; hundreds of books and articles have been written on the subject. However, there have been few research studies on the adoption process, especially studies that examine the process from the vantage point of the key participants, the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the birth parents. There is an absence of the sociological approach--examining the institution of adoption and the roles and relationships involved.

Much of the literature in the adoption area is generated from the social work, clinical psychology and psychiatric professions. Numerous articles and books have been written about child-rearing techniques and the psychodynamics of the adoptive parent-child interaction. Other authors focus on the incidence and nature of psychiatric disturbances in adopted children. In addition, there are several books on adoption that focus on the "how-to" and legal and social processes. These books are written by

professionals and nonprofessionals, including adoptive parents who want to share their insights and experiences.

This chapter presents a summary of the adoption literature, with an emphasis on the findings of research relevant to this investigation. The research literature is presented first, followed by a discussion of the practice-oriented literature. However, before a discussion of the literature, a brief history of adoption is presented to provide a context for understanding the current interest in adoption records.

The concept of adoption has existed for centuries, primarily as a mechanism to provide an heir but also as a means to expand and solidify familial bonds. Historically, the best interests of the adoptee were considered secondary to the interests of the adopter. English Common Law, the basis of much American law, did not legally recognize adoption as a legal procedure until 1926 (Witmer et al., 1963).

The first adoption law in the United States was passed in 1851 and by 1929 every state had some form of statutory adoption. In 1917, Minnesota became the first state to pass legislation that provided safeguards to protect the adopted child specifically and the adoption process generally. Other states followed, and today all consider the interests of the child as paramount, and nearly all states have as protective measures the sealing of adoption records (Jones, 1976). Lawder et al. (1969) note that "one of

America's early contributions to child welfare legislation and practices was a shift in emphasis from protecting the interests of the adopters and their natural issue to establishing a judicial review of the interests of the adopted child" (p. 1).

Until the 1920s adoption was handled primarily by lay persons; subsequently adoption developed into a professional service, requiring collaboration of social workers, lawyers, psychologists and physicians. With the increased involvement of professionals came efforts to establish guidelines for agency practices. These guidelines included provisions "that the birth record be revised to shield an adopted child from unnecessary embarrassment in the case of illegitimacy and that the identity of the adopting parents be kept from the natural parents" (Jones, 1976, p. 1).

These principles, specifically those regarding sealing records, are based on the assumption that involvement of the biological parents after the adoption would not promote the well being of the child or healthy parent-child bonding. Further, the principles are based on the assumption that the biological parents, having legally terminated their rights and responsibilities, should be allowed to pursue their own lives without the fear of intrusion by the child or adoptive parents. However, the basic assumptions underlying anonymity are being challenged. The research

literature presented subsequently illuminates some of the reasons for this challenge.

The research literature in the field of adoption reflects the history and politics of adoption. The focus of the studies, the questions that are asked and the selection of respondents are indicative of the predominant beliefs about the purposes and effects of adoption. As Shaw (1984) notes, "study of the research findings . . . [in adoption] . . . seems to indicate that some key questions about 'growing up adopted' are as yet not only unanswered but unformulated" (p. 113). The research is also dated; the focus and theoretical frameworks employed coincide with conditions during different time periods. For example, research in the 1940s and 1950s reflects the impact of psychoanalytic theory, with an emphasis on separation and loss as well as parental capacity. Research in the 1960s and 1970s moves the focus to the psychological impact of adoption on the child, generating debates on when and how to tell the child and identifying critical developmental periods in the child's life.

Regardless of the theoretic underpinning, some issues are rarely dealt with. These include the impact of sealed records, the adoptee as an adult, and the birth parents. The relative absence of these topics reflects the major characteristics of adoption law and policy--the secrecy surrounding the process, the adoptee as forever a child,

and the birth parent as immoral and therefore "hidden" from public view. Within this context, the following section describes the research on the effect of sealed records, followed by a discussion of the research on adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents.

THE IMPACT OF SEALED RECORDS

Few studies address the impact of sealed records as their primary focus. Further, several of the studies that do focus on sealed records are based on populations in England, Wales and Scotland, where records are open.

The major study on sealed records was conducted by Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor (1979) in the United States; the findings are presented in their book The Adoption Triangle as well as several articles and papers (Baran, Pannor & Sorosky, 1977; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1975; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1976). The researchers interviewed a voluntary sample of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents. In addition, they analyzed the numerous letters received from adoption participants as a result of publicity about the study. Their findings indicate that adoptees are more vulnerable than nonadoptees to identity conflicts; this vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of background information, information contained in the adoption records. They contend that all adoptees have a desire to know about their origin, although only a few actually initiate a search and reunion.

The effect of sealed records on birth parents also is detrimental. Study findings reveal that birth parents continue to feel the loss and wish to know how their children "turned out." Most birth parents indicate a desire to meet the child, but would not initiate the contact. The impact of sealed records on adoptive parents is described within the context of the controversy about opening records. The researchers report that adoptive parents are generally threatened by this possibility, although their fears subside over time:

> As our study progressed, we were pleased to find that adoptive parents we interviewed came to feel less threatened and realized that the adoptee's quest for genealogical information was a personal need which could not be fully comprehended by a nonadopted person. Even though the adoptive parents' anxiety diminished, there remained a great deal of protectiveness toward the adoptee and concern over the possible negative effects of a reunion. (p. 229)

The authors cite the positive benefits of reunions as their most outstanding finding. Although records are sealed, the reunions occurred because of the perserverence of the participants, and in some cases, because of cooperation from the adoption agencies. The researchers find that for the adoptee reunions resulted in new, meaningful relationships with birth parents, resolution of identity conflicts and enhancement of the adoptee-adoptive parent relationship. For many birth parents the reunions resulted in resolution of feelings of guilt and knowledge about their children's fate. Adoptive parents also benefitted as

their fear that they would lose their children to the birth parents was replaced by a sense of relief and acceptance they they are the "true" parents. These findings lead the researchers to conclude that sealed records are detrimental to the well being of all parties and that adult adoptees should have access to birth records when they reach the age of 18.

The Children's Home Society of California (1977) conducted a mail survey of 309 adoption participants including adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents. The findings indicate that the majority queried favored the availability of the original birth certificate to adult adoptees and their right to a reunion with the birth parents. Fourteen percent of the adult adoptees had experienced a reunion and 18 percent were still involved in the search. Adoptive parents generally were supportive of the adoptees' right to access. More than two-thirds of the adoptive parents responded affirmatively when asked how they would react to the search of their own adopted children Similar responses were indicated when asked how they would react if the birth parents of their adopted child contacted them, seeking reunion.

The positive responses of the adoptive parents generally do not concur with findings from other studies. This may be attributable to the high self-selection bias among the respondents.

Several studies examining the sealed records issue have been conducted in England subsequent to the passage of section 26 of the Children's Act of 1975, the law authorizing access to birth records. Triseliotis (1984) presents an analysis of statistical data on the number and characteristics of adoptees who apply for access. A major finding relates to the percentage of adoptees applying for access to records; Triseliotis notes that "in spite of all the publicity of recent years, access to birth records is still a minority response among adoptees" (p. 48). In the three-year period between 1980-1982, approximately 0.3 percent of adopted adults in England and Wales and 0.7 percent in Scotland applied for access to their birth records. Even accounting for the large number of relative adoptions, the rate would still be low, 0.6 for England and Wales and 0.9 for Scotland. Adjusting for adoptees over 18 and multiplying by 52 (the difference between 18 and 70 years of age), Triseliotis estimates that 21 percent of adoptees inquire over a lifetime. In Scotland, where records have been available for the last 52 years, 7 percent of adult adoptees have sought access.

The researcher also notes two other interesting findings. First, females are more likely to seek access than males (66% compared to 34%), even though the ratio of female adoptees to male adoptees is about the same. Second, adoptee access of records is not associated with a specific

age, e.g., 18, but rather spreads over the life span. Adoptees ages 30-34 comprise the largest percentage (26%) of all adoptees seeking access.

In a study conducted by Leeding (1977) information was collected on 279 adoptees who had applied for access. Over half only wanted to obtain information; the other half wanted to trace their birth parents but only 20 percent wanted to meet them. No adverse effects to participants are found. Of the 28 reunions resulting, 11 are described in positive terms and the remaining "uncertain." Based on these findings, Leeding concludes that adoptees should be able to obtain knowledge of their parentage. Day (1979) examines social worker interviews of 500 adoptees who were inquiring about their background. Most simply wanted information, with three out of ten intent on contacting their birth parent or another blood relative. Day also reports that most applicants are stable and well-adjusted individuals, however, those who are likely to search are those who had unhappy adoptive experiences. Both the findings of Day and Leeding suggest that there has been no misuse of information obtained, and that applicants reveal responsible attitudes toward the potential consequences of their obtaining birth records. These studies illustrate that the anticipated negative impact of records being open does not occur. As Triseliotis (1984) summarizes "The calamities anticipated by sections of the media, politicians, and some

organizations have not materialized. The various studies carried out so far suggest that the vast majority of adoptees act thoughtfully and with great consideration for the feelings of both their birth and adoptive parents" (p. 51).

In the United States most state adoption laws require that records be sealed. There are few studies that examine the effects of concealment on participants, or in those states that permit access, of the availability of records. The few examinations that have been done in those states where records are open simply reveal that few adoptees request their records (Sorosky et al., 1979). Explanations for the low number of inquiring adoptees include lack of publicity about the law and the requirement that birth parents agree to the disclosure. However, there is one study about the perceptions of adult adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents that provides some insight into the potential impact of opening records. The study was conducted in Virginia, where contact with birth parents was allowed if the agency recommends it and the birth parents agree (this law was repealed and currently records are sealed in Virginia). Depp (1982) reports on the positive and negative outcomes of reunions for a small sample of participants (10 adoptees, six adoptive parents, and three birth parents). The findings reveal that adoptees consider the reunions with their birth parents as beneficial to identity formation. It also increases their appreciation

for their adoptive parents. Most of the adoptive parents see the reunion as positive for their children, and report that it does not affect their relationships with their children. The birth parents also indicate the positive effects of the reunion, both for themselves and the adoptees. Based on these findings, the researcher states that "this may be an appropriate time to question whether the secrecy that once seemed necessary to adoption practice may continue to be in the best interests of all parties (pp. 118-119).

In summary, the research literature on the impact of sealed records suggests that the policy of sealed records may not be beneficial or appropriate for the adoption participants. The findings generally indicate positive or neutral effects of opening adoption records.

THE ADOPTEE

As mentioned earlier, there is a large body of research on adoptees. However, much of this research is based on small clinical populations and focused on variables not relevant to this investigation. Two major areas of significance to the issue of sealed records are research on adoptees' search activities and research describing the impact of adoption on the individual's identity formation. The research in these two areas is presented first, followed by a summary of other literature on adoptees.

Adoptee Search Activity and Identity Formation

The adoptee's desire to search for information about his/her background and/or to seek contact with birth parents has been the subject of several researchers. Search activity is relevant to the issue of sealed records because it usually indicates a desire to subvert existing adoption laws to obtain information.

Triseliotis' (1973) study is the first comprehensive examination that elicits information about search activities from adult adoptees. He conducted in-depth interviews with 70 adult adoptees who had contacted the Register House in Edinburg, Scotland to obtain their original birth certificates. Since 1930, adopted individuals in Scotland can obtain official records on their birth, including the names and location of their birth parents. He reports that 60 percent of the adoptees desired contact with a birth parent, 37 percent wanted additional background information and the remaining three percent simply wanted specific pieces of information to fulfill practical goals (e.g., marriage license, civil service application). The experiences and characteristics of the adoptees provide some understanding regarding the desire to search:

> Adoptees who were given no information about their background, or to whom some information was disclosed but in a hostile way which was often depreciative of the natural parents, were generally keen to find their birth-parents . . . In contrast, those who were told something positive about their natural parents, were

> now mostly inclined to search for additional information about their genealogical background. (Triseliotis, 1973, p. 157)

Other characteristics of those inclined to search include unsatisfactory adoptive home relationships and a negative self image. However, Triseliotis notes that the psychological need to know is present in all adoptees; it is intensified where secrecy is paramount and unsatisfactory relationships with the adoptive parents exist.

Triseliotis also reports on the adoptee's feelings subsequent to obtaining information. Those adoptees who learned their parents were married at the time of relinquishment were as hurt as those who found they were illegitimate. Regardless of the circumstances and outcomes, over 80 percent had no regrets about their search activities and felt that the results of their inquiries were beneficial. Triseliotis concludes, based on the findings, that genealogical information is linked to a better understanding of themselves and their situation and "that no person should be cut off from his origins" (p. 166).

Triseliotis' findings generally concur with other studies on adoptees (e.g., Kowal and Schilling, 1985; McWhinnie, 1967; and Sorosky et al., 1979). McWhinnie (1967) comments that the adopted child has problems in adolescence that are related to his/her status as adoptee and involve the resolution of identity. Sorosky et al. (1976) review the literature on genealogical concerns and

development of identity conflicts in adopted persons and present the results of their interviews with adoptees. They state:

> Our findings would tend to validate the impressions garnered from the literature review that adoptees are more vulnerable than the population at large in the development of identity problems in late adolescence and young adulthood because of the greater likelihood of encountering difficulties in the working through psychosexual, psychosocial, and psychohistorical aspects of personality development. In certain of these cases the conflicts manifest themselves as a preoccupation with genealogical concerns and a desire to make contact with the birth parents . . . Many adoptees are preoccupied with existential concerns and a feeling of isolation and alientation due to the break in the continuity of life-through-the-generations that their adoption represents . . . The adoptee's identity formation must be viewed within the context of the 'life cycle' in which birth and death are closely linked unconsciously. (pp. 23-24)

The findings of a recent study of 110 adult adoptees (Kowal and Schilling, 1985) also illustrate the adoptee's psychological need for information. The two most commonly mentioned reasons for needing information were "to find some resolution of confusion or a sense of emptiness" and "for self understanding . . . to know who they looked like . . . and personality traits" (p. 360).

These studies as well as others cite a linkage between the adoptee's need to know and the development of a positive self concept. These researchers frequently refer to Erikson's (1968) theory of development to explain the psychological need to know. Erikson describes identity formation in a psychological context relating to the individual's sense of genealogy in his/her life cycle. He

suggests that ignorance about one's past brings about a break in the continuity of the life cycle. Of particular importance is the essential developmental task associated with adolescence--the achievement of a sense of identity. The failure of this process results in "identity confusion."

Although most studies on adoptees indicate the need for knowledge about origins as essential for the development of positive self concept, Norvell and Guy's (1977) research challenges this presumption. In their study of identity crises in adoptees and nonadoptees, there are no significant differences in self concept scores between the two groups. They conclude, "Adoptive status itself cannot produce a negative identity. If negative elements become incorporated in the adolescent's identity, they more likely than not stem from problems within the home" (p. 445).

Most of the research on adoptees' search activity lacks a comparison group. Two studies which include comparison groups of nonsearching adoptees indicate differences between searching and nonsearching adoptees that may be associated with their desire for more information. Aumend and Barrett (1984) research on 131 adult adoptees compares characteristics of searchers and nonsearchers. The sample was voluntary, and results are based on a response of 49 percent of those who were sent questionnaires. The findings reveal that nonsearchers had more positive

self concepts than searchers and had more positive attitudes toward their adoptive parents. However, a majority of all the adoptees score above the sixtieth percentile on the self concept scale and have positive scores on the parental attitude scale. Another interesting finding is the significant difference in their opinions about opening adoption records. "Seventy-seven percent of searchers and 12 percent of nonsearchers favored a law to open records to adult adoptees on request" (p. 257). The researchers conclude that search activity does not seem to be associated with negative self concept, poor family relationships, or disruptive revelation of adoptive status, as reported by Triseliotis (1973). Further, their research questions the belief "that adoptees need information about their biological families and reunion to resolve their identity conflicts" (p. 258).

Aumend and Barrett summarize the findings of dissertation research on searchers and nonsearchers conducted by Loper (1976). Loper compares personality factors and social variables, rather than identity factors, of three groups of twenty adult adoptees; the adoptees are grouped based on the level of interest in their biological parents. She reports significant differences between the groups, with the "active interest" group showing negative feelings toward their adoptive parents and about their childhood. They also report having no information about

their biological parents. Loper concludes that the desire for more information is associated with social history variables and the personality traits of the adoptee.

In summary, most of the studies on adoptees reveal that the adoptee's need to know is associated with the formation of identity and a positive self concept. Some studies show a relationship between the quality of the adoptive relationships and a desire to search for the birth parents.

Clinical Research on the Adoptee

There is a considerable volume of research emanating from clinical experience in psychiatric and child guidance settings; this literature is individualistic and psychodynamically oriented. A major flaw in all of these studies is the sample composition--the most visible and accessible adoptees are those who have been referred to social workers, courts, psychologists and psychiatrists. Some of the research was conducted because of the belief that adoptees are overrepresented in referrals for psychiatric assessment and treatment (e.g., Schecter, 1960; Toussieng, 1962). Adoption is presented as placing one "at risk" for a wide range of general adjustment and identity disorders. The emphasis on identity disorders relates to the developmental framework used by many of the researchers. Specifically, there is an emphasis on critical life-cycle periods and the problems adoption poses to working through these periods.

During the 1960s the incidence and nature of psychiatric disturbances in adopted children was the subject of several research studies. Findings from these studies indicate that the severity of behavior and emotional problems in adopted children is associated with the age of adoptive placement and the extent of early maternal deprivation (e.g., Witmer et al., 1963). Other studies focus on the problems specifically associated with not knowing one's heritage. Sants (1964) introduces the term "genealogical bewilderment" to describe the confusion experienced by a child who does not know his natural parentage. He describes how genealogical bewilderment results in the development of poor self esteem and a confused sense of identity. Clothier (1943) describes the trauma resulting from severing the individual from his/her heritage, and the impact of this trauma on ego development. Frisk (1964) presents the notion of the "hereditary ghost" that replaces the healthy "genetic ego" because of a lack of family background knowledge. Other researchers present similar conceptualizations, based on the premise that a lack of knowledge of ancestors can be a cause of maladjustment in children and adults (e.g., Paul, 1973; Schechter, 1960; and Wellisch, 1952).

In summary, clinical studies show that adopted children are more likely than nonadoptees to be referred for psychiatric treatment, and to be diagnosed as having

personality disorders or adjustment problems. Adoptees are described as more vulnerable than nonadoptees to the experience of loss and rejection. Further, the studies indicate that adoptees experience problems in identity formation because of a lack of knowledge about their background.

Follow-up Studies on Adoption

Most of the clinical research focuses on the adopted child and is based on samples in treatment or child guidance facilities. Follow-up studies on the life adjustment of adoptees is another popular area of investigation. Most of these studies indicate that adoptees are fairly well adjusted as children and adults. Hoopes, Sherman, Lawder, Andres, and Lower's (1970) study challenges the findings from clinical studies, i.e., that adopted children are more prone to personality disorders than nonadopted children. Their study compared the emotional and cognitive functioning of a sample of 100 adopted children and 100 children living with their biological parents. The researchers report:

> The study finding that deserves primary emphasis is that the adopted children showed no evidence of more pathology than the control children. There were not significantly more adopted children at the lowest or 'disturbed' end of the distributions of the California Test of Personality, the teacher's rating scales, or the ratings of projective response to the TAT cards. (p. 73)

Jaffe and Fanshel (1970) interviewed 100 adoptive families (only the parents were interviewed); based on the perceptions of the adoptive parents, most adoptees had adjusted

well as adults. Further, for those adoptees experiencing problems, the researchers report that "the overwhelming majority of adoptive parents did not attribute any of the problems they encountered with their adopted children to the fact of their being adopted." In a follow-up to this study, Jaffe (1974) presents the results of interviews with 33 adoptees from the same sample. The perceptions of the adult adoptees and their parents are compared. Adoptees are more likely than their parents to identify problems in their current personal-social functioning; however, there is substantial agreement that few problems could be attributed to their adoptive status. Yet, there is pronounced dissensus regarding the way the adoptive status had been presented and dealt with in the families. Twenty-five percent of the parents as compared to only ten percent of the adoptees reported that the adoptees had been given full and truthful information about their biological parents. Further, a majority of the adoptees reported pressing for additional information about their biological parents, whereas about twenty percent of the adoptive parents stated that their adopted children requested additional information. The researchers suggest that these discrepant perceptions may be a result of inadequate communication due to adoptees' feeling uncomfortable or disloyal and the parents' feeling threatened.

Other follow-up studies yield similar findings--that most adoptees are emotionally healthy and adjusting well (e.g., Elonen and Schwartz, 1969; Lawder, Lower, Andrews, Sherman & Hill, 1969; and Raynor, 1980). This is in direct contrast to the clinical studies which reveal the vulnerability of the adoptee to psychiatric disturbances. The differences in findings may be related to the orientation and predisposition of the researchers. As Shaw (1984) notes in his review of adoption literature:

> If clinic-based studies offer a more gloomy view of adoption outcome than common experience would support, follow-up studies risk falling into the opposite error. There is no cause to impute improper behaviour or motives to their authors, but the studies themselves--often carried out by researchers strongly sympathetic to adoption and needing the support and co-operation of adoption agencies themselves-collectively produce a split image of pre- and post-adoptive life, with everything bad attributed to the pre-adoptive state and everything good to post-adoptive family life. (p. 118)

In summary, most of the follow-up studies indicate that adoptees are well-adjusted individuals and experience few problems related to their adoptive status. However, there is some evidence that adoptees and adoptive parents disagree on the way the adoptive status was presented and dealt with in the families.

THE ADOPTIVE PARENTS

There is little research on two areas most relevant to this investigation: adoptive parents' concerns about the status of adoption records; and, parental attitudes and

feelings toward the birth parents. Most of the research focuses on family functioning and parent-child relationships, although some researchers examine reasons for adopting and issues related to infertility. The following presentation includes a discussion of the literature on access to records and feelings toward the birth parents.

Few studies examine adoptive parents' positions regarding access to records. As noted earlier, Sorosky et al. (1979) find that adoptive parents are generally threatened by opening records, although their fears subsided subsequent to interviews and discussions with the researchers. In an earlier investigation, Baran, Pannor and Sorosky (1974) report on two organized meetings with adoptive parents. The first meeting was held in 1972, and included role-play, individual and group discussions. The parents generally were not receptive to adoptee access to records. The parents also objected to agencies offering even general background information to the adoptee without the consent of the adoptive parents. The second meeting, convened in 1973, yielded slightly different results. The authors attribute the differences to the intervening media publicity about the controversy and the differences in group composition. This second group was less threatened by the adoptee's potential search activities. At the same time, they remained protective toward the adoptee because of the possibilty of rejection by the birth parent.

For both groups, the researchers describe the feelings of adoptive parents toward birth parents as both protective and restrictive. The adoptive parents felt the birth parents should be protected from unwanted intrusion from the adoptee. They also felt that birth parents should be restricted in their rights to information because of the decision they made to relinquish.

Feigelman and Silverman (1983) conducted a mail survey of 737 adoptive families in 1974-76 and a follow-up survey of 372 families in 1980-81. The purpose of their research was to examine "the transformations occurring in the realm of American adoptions" (p. 6). Their instrument included questions about the sealed records controversy as well as adoptees' interest in their background and search activities. Most parents indicated support for opening adoption records; 61 percent approved of adoptees learning about their birth parents and 57 percent supported access to all information in their adoption record. However, this positive response did not extend to birth parent access to records. Only 19 percent indicated that birth parents should have the right to contact the adult adoptee and 25 percent approved of releasing updated information on the child to the birth parent. These findings should be interpreted with caution because of the bias in the sample. Seventy-six percent of the respondents had adopted overseas, 80 percent were members of adoptive parent groups,

and 44 percent were preferential adopters (adoption not based on infertility). An analysis of just the responses of infertile adopters reveals they are more likely to oppose adoptees' questioning their genealogy and engaging in search activities; 49 percent of the infertile adoptive parents favored adoptee access to records. The researchers also report that mothers are more likely to indicate approval for adoptees' search than fathers. Also, adoptive mothers affiliated with a parent group are more likely to favor the search than mothers who are not affiliated, 76 percent versus 47 percent.

Feigelman and Silverman queried their respondents about their children's searching behaviors. The researchers hypothesize that parental attitudes toward the search would tend to influence the extent to which their adopted children discuss their origins and pursue reunions. The data support their hypothesis--55 percent of the adoptive parents reported children asking questions sometimes or often when mothers approved of the search, compared with 29 percent when mothers disapproved. Other researchers also report the relationship between parental attitudes (positive or negative) and adoptee search behavior (Sorosky et al., 1979; Triseliotis, 1973).

A few researchers describe the adoptive parents' feelings toward the birth parents. Sorosky et al. (1979) report that the adoptive parents have an "understanding,

accepting, and sympathetic attitude toward the birth mother" (p. 69). Only a few expressed positive feelings toward the father. Witmer, Herzog, Weinstein and Sullivan (1963), in their study on independent adoptions, examine adoptive parents' attitudes toward birth parents in relationship to "adoptive home quality." The researchers find a correlation of -.28 between the home ratings and negative feelings toward the natural parents. "This attitude was taken as a clue to the parent's warmth and acceptance of both people in general and the child in particular" (p. 390). The way the natural parents were described to the child also was related to home quality; there was an extremely low average rating in cases where the natural parents were described negatively.

In summary, based on a limited number of studies, research on adoptive parents' positions regarding sealed records yields conflicting results; of the two major research efforts, one showed support while the other opposition to access. Adoptive parents report positive feelings toward the birth mother. The parents' feeling toward the biological parent and how the birth parent is described to the child has been shown to relate to adoptive home quality.

THE BIRTH PARENTS

Most of the research on birth parents focuses on attitudes and issues prior to the adoption (e.g., reasons for

getting pregnant, feelings about relinquishment, and characteristics of the unwed father). Further, most researchers focus on the birth mother. Researchers generally ignore the birth mother after the adoption proceedings; there are only a few follow-up studies on birth mothers. The absence of research reflects the position of the birth mother in the process--once she has relinquished the child, all ties are severed and secrecy prevails. Generally, researchers have accepted the assumption that the birth mother's permanent anonymity and privacy are essential to her future well being. Sorosky et al. (1979) state, "what is becoming increasingly obvious to us is the fact that everyone else has spoken for and about the birth parents" (p. 35).

Overall, findings from the few studies on birth mothers reveal that they continue to feel the loss for many years after relinquishment and are favorably disposed toward contact with their children. A recent study by Devkin, Campbell and Patti (1984) yields findings that indicate "having surrendered a child is perceived by these respondents as having a protracted negative influence on their lives in the areas of marriage, fertility, and parenting" (p. 271). The study is based on a mail survey of a sample of 334 respondents (321 mothers and 13 fathers), the vast majority of whom belong to Concerned United Birthparents (CUB), a support group for birth parents. Because of

the double self-selection bias (first limited to members of CUB, and second limited to those who completed the questionnaire), findings should be interpreted cautiously. The researchers report that the vast majority of the respondents (96%) had considered searching, and 65 percent had initiated a search. The researchers compare the responses of those who had considered searching (or had not thought of it) and those who had searched. They found that those who searched reported relinquishing the child because of external pressure (e.g., family, social workers or financial pressure) whereas those who had not searched reported relinquishing because of personal reasons (e.g., desire to complete school, unprepared for parenthood). Although most of the parents in the sample considered or had searched, retrieval of the child was not a determinant of search activity. The authors suggest that the "search activity represents an attempt to resolve a significant loss. . . . Evidence of low self-esteem and severe mood disorder was clear in the comments made by searching respondents. Search activity may thus be a means of achieving restitution not of the surrendered child, but of the self" (p. 279).

Findings from the Adoption Research Project reveal similar results (Baran et al., 1977 and Sorosky et al., 1979). Their interviews with 38 birth parents (36 mothers and 2 fathers) and a content analysis of hundreds of

letters focus on the issue of adoption records as well as follow-up functioning. The majority of the respondents (53%) favored opening adoption records to adoptees. Further, 82 percent of the birth parents indicated a desire for a reunion with their children, although most would not initiate it. These researchers also report that the birth parents, most of whom are happy with their current family relations, still feel the loss associated with relinquishment. Many have not resolved their feelings about surrendering a child; even those who desire privacy express the pain they feel. Most birth parents gave up their babies because of the inability to deal with the external pressure and the absence of other viable alternatives. Although they understood the reasons for relinquishment, many expressed fear that their children would not understand--would view the relinquishment as rejection. Most of the parents wonder about how their children are doing and almost 40 percent report thinking about the child on his/her birthday (Baran et al., 1977). Overall, the common belief that birth parents forget about the experience and do not want contact with their children is challenged by the findings of this research and that of Devkin et al. (1984).

Other researchers examine the impact of adoption on subsequent adjustment of the birth mothers. A mail survey of 300 women who had relinquished a child within the

previous three years reveals that gynecological, medical and psychiatric problems were reported by 60 percent of the respondents. The most frequent problem was depression, reported by 40 percent (Burnell and Norfleet, 1979). In a study of 20 women in psychotherapy who had given up children for adoption, Rynearson (1982) reports that "relinquishment appears to have been a fundamentally disjunctive event in the lives of these psychiatric patients" (p. 340). He reports that all the women experience grief at the anniversary of the relinquishment, although the intensity of the mourning diminishes over time. Overall, the follow-up studies indicate that the relinquishment experience has long lasting effects on the birth mothers' individual psyches and family lives.

There are a number of studies that examine reasons for pregnancy and feelings at the time of relinquishment. Most mothers who relinquish their children are not married (Small, 1979). Earlier studies viewed the phenomenon of illegitimate pregnancy as a neurotic act, indicative of some type of emotional or psychological disturbance (e.g., Clothier, 1943; Littner, 1956). Recent studies illustrate that out-of-wedlock pregnancies are not necessarily precipitated by psychological problems (Robbins, Kaplan, & Martin, 1985). Most occur by chance, and are the result of inadequate sexual preparedness among teenagers (Ooms, 1981). The reasons for relinquishment have been examined

by several researchers. Many birth mothers surrender their children because they cannot provide a secure environment and feel that the child will be better taken care of in an adoptive home (Devkin et al., 1984; Smith, 1963). For most, external pressure from parents, agency staff and others affirming this position influenced the decision (Baran et al., 1977; Devkin et al., 1984).

There has been limited research on the unwed father (Herzog, 1966; Pannor et al., 1971). The available research indicates that the unwed father may not be the uncaring figure he is often portrayed to be. Rather, he may be limited in expressing his concerns because of family pressures to deny paternity (Sorosky et al., 1979).

In summary, research on birth mothers is scarce, and primarily focuses on the period prior to relinquishment. Studies on the post-adoption period indicate that birth mothers continue to feel the loss associated with relinquishment and that many desire contact with their children.

PRACTICE-ORIENTED LITERATURE

The practice-oriented literature primarily consists of articles written by social workers directed toward an agency staff audience. The issue of sealed records is discussed within the context of adoption practice generally, with an emphasis on the need for agencies to respond to accommodate the changes occurring in the field. Most of

the articles are not data based; rather, they rely on the experience and expertise of the authors.

Dukette (1984) compares traditional adoptions with current adoption practices within the context of society's and social work's values. She focuses on the value of secrecy associated with traditional adoptions of the past and the current "reaction against tradition," i.e., the movement toward openness. She presents recommendations for adoption practice that include improving agency recordkeeping, counseling for adult adoptees; and offering alternatives to traditional adoption placements (e.g., open adoption, contracts between birth parent and adoptive parent at the time of placement).

Sorich and Siebert (1982) discuss similar issues in their article "Toward Humanizing Adoption." They describe alternatives to traditional adoptive placements that are used by the Child Saving Institute, a private, nonprofit, child-placing agency. The alternatives include: birth parent and adoptive parent sharing of pictures and developmental information for a specified time period following the adoptive placement; semi-open (no identifying information revealed) and open adoptions; and birth parent involvement in selection of adoptive parents (e.g., requests concerning religion, location, size of family and education, and exchange of gifts and letters between birth parents and the adoptive family. The authors believe that

these alternatives will meet the needs of adopted children who desire to know more about their past. "The present alternatives, when appropriate, will facilitate and ensure that the future questions and fantasies of the adopted person can be discussed in a sensitive and informed manner" (p. 216).

Pannor and Baran (1984) and Borgman (1982) promote the practice of open adoption to lessen, if not eliminate, the negative effects of the secrecy associated with traditional closed adoptions. Borgman focuses on older adoptive children, whose particular circumstances would especially benefit by open adoption. "Adoptive planning with school-age children requires a flexible approach that recognizes the child's need to continue past relationships with the biological family and others from whom the child draws emotional support" (p. 225).

The overall position of agencies in the sealed adoption record controversy is discussed by Smith (1976) in an editorial for Child Welfare. She suggests that social agencies have an obligation to respond in a responsible and constructive manner, and be sensitive to the needs of all parties involved. She contends, "Such receptivity will inevitably necessitate reexamination of agency policy and practice; it may well necessitate change in both policy and practice" (p. 74).

Hartman (1984) describes the long term adoption services that agencies may need to assume to help the different members of the adoption triangle. She focuses on services for those involved in a search, including services to birth parents and adoptive parents. She suggests agency counseling, referral to self-help groups and providing background information.

These articles are illustrative of the practice-oriented literature dealing with the sealed records controversy. In addition, the journal Public Welfare devoted a special issue to the topic, "Adoption: Who Has the Right to Know" (1979). The issue includes articles by adoption agency staff, adoptees, a birth parent and adoptive parents. Although all the articles are directed primarily toward a professional audience, two specifically address agency practice issues. Watson (1979) describes the history of social work participation in adoption with a focus on the question, "Who is the primary client?" He cites two "conceptual achievements" regarding this question that pertain to the sealed records controversy: (1) the welfare of the child is paramount, although the rights of all parties are important; and (2) the realization that "one can only effectively serve a child as a primary client in an adoption if one keeps clearly in mind that one also must serve the adopted adult whom that child will become" (p. 14).

Andrews (1979) presents a clinical appraisal of searching, based on describing both older and infant adoption situations. He states that "the trauma of adoption and possibility of disrupted placements can be eased if intensive services are provided by placement agencies. Such an approach--a sensitive clinical approach--is long overdue" (p. 21).

Other articles in the issue present the specific concerns of adoptees (Small, 1979), adoptive parents (Flynn, 1979) and birth parents (Campbell, 1979) as they relate to agency practices.

In summary, the practice-oriented literature suggests new options and guidelines to deal with the adoptive participants, with increasing awareness of the need to serve the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the birth parents.

CHAPTER III

METHODS, PROCEDURES AND DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents background information on the study data base, procedures involved in sample selection, the instrument used, data coding procedures and a discussion of the analytic techniques. Following this is a description of the sample.

THE DATA BASE

The sample of letters used in this analysis is part of a much larger data base. In 1978, an Advisory Panel was appointed by the Secretary of Health and Human Services to draft model adoption legislation and procedures. This legislation and accompanying procedures were to serve as a model for states to use in whole or in part in revising their state laws relating to adoption. The advisory panel drafted recommendations for model legislation and procedures and submitted the documents to then Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Patricia Harris.

The Model State Adoption Act covers the large range of issues relevant to adoption policies and procedures. The Act includes seven titles, each title including relevant sections and subsections. The major titles include: Title I: General Provisions; Title II: Placement for Adoption; Title III: Termination of Parental Rights; Title IV: Adoption Proceedings; Title V: Records; Title VI: Agency Adoption Services; Title VII: Subsidized Adoption. Although public comment on the Model Act focused on many specific sections and subsections, the major issues of concern included: the controversy over the open records provisions, the rights of putative fathers, independent adoptive placements, and relinquishment procedures.

According to law, the Secretary is required to publish the recommendations in the Federal Register for public comment. This was accomplished on February 15, 1980 and notice was given that public comments would be received until May 16, 1980. The public comment period was extended to June 15, 1980 to allow sufficient time for the public to respond to three subsections inadvertantly left out in the original announcement but included in the May 5, 1980 Federal Register.

In addition to the opportunity for public comment through written response, the Children's Bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) held public meetings in each of DHHS's ten regions to receive oral

comments. The meetings were held from April 9 through May 9.

Although the government sent announcements to local newspapers regarding the meetings, most of the individuals who commented probably heard about the announcement in the Federal Register and the public meetings from other sources. According to Diane Broadhurst (personal communication, 1984), the Executive Secretary of the Model Legislation and Procedures Advisory Panel, information on the content of the legislation and the upcoming hearings was disseminated primarily through adoption organizations and agencies. These include groups representing the different participants, for example, adoptive parent groups (e.g., National Adoption Committee), adoptee groups (e.g., Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association, Adoptees in Search, Adoptees Search Rights) and birth parent groups (e.g., Concerned United Birthparents, Origins). The proposed legislation and meetings were described in local and national adoption organization publications, and organization members received specific materials and position papers relating to the legislation. In addition, large adoption agencies with active parent groups disseminated information and agency views on the proposed legislation to their adoptive parents. For example, the Edna Gladney home in Texas places a relatively large number of babies a year and has a wealthy constituency. The agency itself participated

in the public hearings and encouraged its adoptive parents to write and present comments at the public hearings.

Further, individuals belonging to an organization or affiliated with an agency wrote letters to their local newspapers and promoted television and radio coverage of the issue. The media coverage, which was extensive in some areas, promoted a more widespread awareness of the proposed legislation. Although it is unclear how the individuals who commented heard about the legislation, it is probable that most heard through an organization or from an organization member (Broadhurst, personal communication, 1984).

The public comment in response to the proposed act was extensive; over 17,000 letters, testimonies and petitions were received. The American Public Welfare Association, under contract with the Children's Bureau (Department of Health and Human Services), reviewed and organized the comments (American Public Welfare Association, 1980). The comments were categorized into 15 groups: six groups of individuals and nine groups of organizational commentators.

The individual commmentators include:

- Adult adoptees. Any commentator who indicated that he had been adopted. Although the category is labeled "adult adoptees," it also includes several minors.

- Adoptive parents. Persons who indicated that they had adopted a child, but not prospective adoptive parents.

- Birth parents. Persons who wrote from the perspective of a parent who had relinquished a child for adoption or whose rights had been involuntarily terminated.

- Judiciary. Judges, whether federal, state, or local.

- Elected officials. Persons who held an elective office at any level. Also included in this category were staff members speaking for the elected official.

- Concerned citizens. Concerned citizens include all individuals who did not identify themselves as one of the five types of commentators listed above. As a catch-all, it no doubt includes many who could have been included in some other category, had they spoken of themselves in other terms. It also includes relatives of adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents as well as all manner of professional persons such as physicians, attorneys, and social workers who did not speak in some organizational category classified below. It may also include prospective adoptive parents.

The organization commentator groups include:

- Adult adoptee groups. Groups primarily or exclusively representing adult adoptees.

- Birth parent groups. Groups primarily or exclusively representing birth parents.

- Adoptive parent groups. Groups primarily or exclusively representing adoptive parents.

- National organizations. Organizations which have a national focus or constituency, for example, Child Welfare League of America, Children's Legal Defense Fund, and National Association of Social Workers. This, however, does not include adoptee, birth mother, or adoptive parent groups national in scope.

- Voluntary agencies. Adoption, child-placing, child-caring, and social service agencies which are not publicly-funded. Some of these agencies may provide services in more than one state, but would still be considered to be licensed agencies in the states in which they operate.

- State agencies. Public state social services agencies, including local offices of the public state agency.

- State/local organizations. To some extent, this category is, for organizational commentators, analogous to the concerned citizens. It includes a variety of organizations which are not voluntary or publicly-funded agencies and which do not serve a national constituency (state or local chapters of national organizations and state or local interest groups, for example).

- Public agencies. Public agencies include all publicly-funded local agencies not classified as state agencies (county adoption or social services departments, for example, in county-administered states) and the regional adoption resource centers and child welfare training centers funded through grants from HHS.

- Universities. Universities, departments or schools within universities, and entities attached to universities. (American Public Welfare Association, 1981, pp. 6-7)

A summary of the number of commentators by type of comment is presented in Appendix B.

Although the Model Adoption Act advisory panel reviewed the comments and revised the Act to incorporate many of the issues raised, the final version released by the Department of Health and Human Services was substantially different than the proposed version. According to Broadhurst and Gross (1982), the final version is flawed and in many instances inconsistent with existing federal legislation. Consequently, most states have not adopted the Model Act (Broadhurst, personal communication, 1985).

PROCEDURES FOR SAMPLE SELECTION

The central issue of this study is to develop an understanding of how the key participants in the adoption triangle--the adoptee, the adoptive parents and the birth parents--view the adoption experience, specifically as it pertains to open versus sealed records. Consequently, the comments of interest in this analysis are those sent from these three groups. Further, the analysis is limited to written comments and excludes oral testimony and petitions. The content of oral testimony highlights many of the same issues as contained in the letters, yet the oral testimony was limited to individuals who were proximate to and/or able to attend the public meetings. The written comments, on the other hand, are from a larger group of individuals, and include many who may not have been able or desired to attend the meetings. Petitions were excluded from this analysis because they usually just included statements of support or opposition to the Act. This analysis focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the key participants which generally are not elucidated in the petitions.

The data base for this analysis includes 2,881 letters. The distribution is as follows:

Respondent Type	Number	Percent of Total
Adult Adoptee	894	31
Adoptive Parents	1,611	56
Birth Parents	376	13
TOTAL	2,881	

The letters were sent primarily to the office of Diane Broadhurst, Executive Director of the Advisory Panel, located in the Department of Health and Human Services office building. Letters addressed to others also were forwarded to Ms. Broadhurst for response and tabulation. The letters were organized by type of commentator.

THE SAMPLING APPROACH

The 2,881 letters are probably not representative of the population of each of the groups, but rather include the views of those individuals who are the type to respond to an issue of concern to them. These individuals probably belong to and may be active in adoption organizations, since these organizations were probably the primary mode of information dissemination on the legislation and hearings. However, because these individuals are vocal and activists they are also the ones who are most likely to influence policy and decision makers. Thus, this sample is one which serves as an excellent basis for examining policy issues, specifically legislation dealing with adoption records. Consequently, the inability to generalize findings to the respective populations does not affect the meaningfulness or worth of these study findings. The available data base provides an opportunity to learn more about a controversial and heavily emotional topic and to use what is learned to assist policymakers and legislators to make informed

decisions on the issue. This constitutes a major contribution to the state-of-the-art knowledge in the area.

The focus of this policy analysis is to identify the major concerns of individuals in the adoption triangle, and to interpret these views within the context of policy formation. During the initial readings of the letters it became apparent that the same types of themes kept emerging. Consequently, it was not considered necessary to analyze the entire universe of letters. Rather, a sample of the letters would contain the diversity and richness of content.

The question of how many letters to sample was a difficult one to address. There are no clear-cut methodological rules regarding sample size when conducting qualitative analysis. Thus theoretical considerations guided the decision regarding how many letters to include in the sample. After reading and categorizing comments in 30 letters, it became apparent that the comments categorized fell into specific themes topics. Further, at 60 letters, there were sufficient data to document different dimensions of the themes and identify similarities and differences in views across the three groups. I decided that coding at least 100 letters in each of the respondent groups would ensure that there were adequate data to describe the different perspectives as well as to ensure that no major themes were excluded.

Coding at least 100 letters represented approximately 25 percent of birth parent letters and 15 percent of adoptees. However, 100 letters was only about 6 percent of the adoptive parent letters. Further, there appeared to be a higher incidence of form letters in the adoptive parent group than the other groups. Because the comments in the form letters were not going to be content analyzed (the reasons for this are discussed subsequently), it was important to increase the sample size to achieve an approximate number of individually-composed (original) letters from adoptive parents. In the preliminary reading about one-third of the adoptive parent letters selected were form letters. Therefore, I considered 150 letters a sufficient data base to generate an adequate number of individually-composed adoptive parent letters to analyze.

The initial preliminary reading phase also revealed that approximately 10 percent of all letters were simple statements of support or opposition to open records specifically, or the law generally. To accommodate these letters, I increased each of the respondent samples by approximately 10 percent.

The procedures used to select the sample of letters from adoptees, birth parents and adoptive parents were straightforward. Because the letters were in no order (other than by category of writer), a selection of every "nth" one within a writer category was used. The interval

number was based on the total number of letters in each respondent group, and the beginning one was chosen through reference to a table of random numbers.

Sampling Procedure

Respondent Group	No. of Letters in Group	Selection Interval	Sample Size
Adoptees	894	every 8th	114
Adoptive Parents	1,611	every 10th	164
Birth Parents	376	every 3rd	113
Total	2,881		391

INSTRUMENT

An instrument was developed to record characteristics of the letters and letter writers. The instrument covers seven basic areas: writer identifying information (e.g., identification number, and role(s) in adoption process); letter characteristics (e.g., presentation, format, focus, position presented, number of pages, whether letter content analyzed); writer characteristics (e.g., sex, affiliation with organization, how writer refers to him/herself and others); age (e.g., current, when adopted, when relinquished child); search (e.g., search undertaken, outcome of search, support of family members for search activities); family (e.g., other children in family and whether adopted, family members' awareness of situation); and, number and types of themes identified.

The instrument is included in Appendix C. The instrument is designed to facilitate transfer to computer coding forms and subsequent computer input.

To summarize, the instrument is the mechanism used to code characteristics of the writer and the letter. The information recorded provides a descriptive summary of the letters and the adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents who wrote the letters.

The letters also were content analyzed and coded by themes mentioned. An instrument was not developed for this technique as the process was iterative and a formalized instrument was unnecessary.

PROCEDURES

Two major procedures were employed. First, the letters were examined and coded in terms of factual and descriptive data. The instrument described above was prepared for this purpose. Second, the letters were content analyzed using the constant comparative method of Glaser and Straus (1967). This method of coding and analysis is an alternative to traditional techniques that "convert qualitative data into crudely quantifiable form" (p. 101). The constant comparative method involves joint coding and analysis that allows the researcher to examine concepts by identifying underlying uniformities and diversities. This is accomplished by comparing each incident, or comment in this case, with previous comments coded in

the same category. The preliminary content analysis procedures are discussed in this section; the subsequent analytic techniques are described in the analysis section. However, before discussing the content analysis procedures, the data recording procedures using the instrument are described.

Recording the Data

The procedures involved in recording data on the instrument are straightforward. Each letter was read and the information was recorded on the instrument. In some instances categories were added or deleted due to insufficient data in the letters. Because the letters are not responses to a questionnaire, the information contained in them is simply what the writer chose to include. Once the data were coded and checked for consistency, they were input and computer analyzed.

The Content Analysis

The content analysis involved more complex procedures. First, decisions needed to be made regarding which letters would be content analyzed (e.g., should modified form letters be included?). Second, the letters were examined to identify preliminary theme topics. Third, a pilot was conducted to test the appropriateness and meaningfulness of the themes identifed. Finally, the final themes were identified and the letters were content analyzed and

color-coded according to themes. Each of these procedures is described in more detail below.

Selection of Letters for Content Analysis. As discussed earlier, the data base includes various types of letters. For the purposes of analysis, the following five were considered critical:

- Form letter
- Modified form letter
- Letter with attached form
- Simple statement of support or opposition for open/closed records and/or the law
- Original letter

The form letter and modifications present particular problems in terms of analysis. Because they are part of the data base and sample they cannot simply be ignored. Yet, from a theoretical perspective, their contents contribute nothing to the primary purposes of the analysis--gaining a better understanding of individuals' experiences and realities. The form letters are usually prepared by organizations and distributed to their membership. The content of the form letter generally is pragmatic, to the point and contains no sense of feeling or emotion. Consequently, when perusing through all the adoptive parent letters, I felt that as a group they approached the issue more pragmatically and from a distance. However, my perceptions may have been based on the relatively large number

of form letters included in the sample. Thus, I decided not to include the forms as part of the sample of letters content analyzed because I do not believe they reflect the major focus of the analysis--the experiences and views of individuals. Although the form letters will not be content analyzed, if selected in the sampling process, they will be counted and included in a description of the study sample.

Another type of form letter, what I am calling a modified form letter, presents an even more complicated problem. Again, most modified form letters were sent by adoptive parents. As I reviewed and coded the letters during the preliminary reading I began to recognize similar phrases, paragraphs and even the body of the letter. In a couple of instances I located the letter sent by an organization to its membership. The letter identified specific positions and urged the member to write a letter presenting these positions. In many cases, the writer copied verbatim the organization letter, adding only brief introductory and/or closing sections. The issue of whether, and if so under what conditions, to code these types of letters is a difficult one. Methodology books generally do not provide criteria on how to deal with these situations. Again, theoretical considerations guided the decision making. Because I am interested in individual's experiences, I coded modified form letters that contained original statements of opinion. I did not code those sections of the

letter lifted directly from the form because these statements represented organizational rather than personal views. However, if the respondent rewrote the position so that it was appreciably different in style and format, I coded the comment. The basic rule of thumb I followed was that the change reflected a minimum of 50 percent rewriting by the respondent.

There also were letters which had attached forms. In these instances, I coded the content of the letter and ignored the content of the form. However, as with the form letters and modified form letters, they were counted as part of the sample.

The letters which included only statements of support or opposition to the law were counted in the sample but not content analyzed because they contained no data on individuals' experiences.

Original letters, the fifth type, were content analyzed and are the core of the analysis.

Identify Preliminary Theme Topics. The first step in the content analysis process was to generate categories, i.e., theme topics. Initially, I read about 80 letters to gain an understanding of the types of issues addressed and possible themes. Based on this initial reading, approximately 20 themes were identified. I then coded 60 letters, 20 from each respondent group, to examine the appropriateness and meaningfulness of the themes identified. From

this initial coding experience, most of the comments fell into one or more of nine categories. Further, within these nine categories, four seemed to be a subtheme of one of the remaining five. I regrouped the nine categories, consolidating them into five general themes.

Pilot Test. I conducted a pilot test of 60 letters, 20 from each group, using the five themes. Each of the themes was represented by a color; as I reviewed the letters, statements were underlined with the appropriate color(s). A statement could fit into more than one theme although this did not occur often. The coded comments were then organized and typed into lists according to role in adoption process (adoptee, adoptive parent or birth parent) and theme identified to examine the consistency of each of the categories. Copies of these lists were submitted to a panel of five judges for review and comment. These individuals are all social science researchers with experience in qualitative analysis. Individual and group meetings were held with these individuals to obtain their comments regarding the consistency and richness of the themes. Based on their suggestions, one of the themes was changed to accommodate a wider variety of views within the theme. The final five themes are: justice; identity; well being; feelings about others in the adoption triangle; and family.

Content Analysis of the Letters. Each letter was analyzed and comments were color-coded by theme (i.e.,

justice, identity, well-being, feelings for others, and family). The comments were then typed by theme and writer (adoptee, adoptive parent, birth parent). The comments were also organized according to letter identification number to illustrate the number of comments (related to a single theme) in a letter. This I.D. number enabled easy identification of the letter if the commment was unclear and needed to be reviewed in the context of other information in the letter. Each of the lists were then reviewed to ensure that the comments fit the theme category.

ANALYSIS

Two different but complementary techniques were used to analyze the letters. The first type of analysis involves an examination of the data recorded on the instrument. Preliminary analysis of this data involved generating total frequencies for all instrument items, and frequencies by type of respondent (adoptee, adoptive parent, birth parent). Subsequently, frequencies were tabulated for those letters content analyzed (85 percent of the letters) by type of respondent. The descriptive, instrument-coded information provides a numerical count of key characteristics to describe the sample. It also provides a context for understanding the qualitatively-analyzed data and supplements the discussion of the themes. For example, in analyzing the letters a major theme that emerges is "identity"--what identity means to each of the groups and

their opinions on the concept of identity for each other. The instrument includes a section on how each of the writers refers to themselves and others. The labeling of the biological parent as "birth mother," "natural parent" or other references is also an indicator of family definitions, and the references used by each group is incorporated in the discussion of the family theme.

Second, a content analysis was undertaken to identify and describe major themes raised by the writers. As discussed earlier, the preliminary procedures involved in the content analysis resulted in identifying the five themes and color-coding the letters by theme type.

The list of typed comments were then analyzed. Within a theme, different dimensions emerged. For example, in analyzing the justice theme, most comments address at least one of three dimensions--(1) whose rights, (2) the types of rights, and (3) the basis for the rights. Within each of these dimensions, specific categories were identified, for example:

- Whose rights? (e.g., the adoptee, the birth parent, the adoptive parents, and "every" person)
- Types of rights (e.g., rights to know identity, have access to information, and privacy)
- The basis of the rights (e.g., contractual or "universal" human rights)

Each comment, the unit of analysis, was analyzed and coded according to the categories in each of the dimensions. Subsequently, the results were counted and arrayed

in a tabular format. However, the manual counting and tabulating was not done for statistical or report presentation purposes; the frequency in each category guided the qualitative analysis and lent a basis for discussion of the importance of categories within dimensions. Further, the coding by category enabled easy identification of specific comments which exemplified aspects of a dimension. By coding the comments and tabulating results, I also guarded against an inclination to remember specific comments and assume they represented the dominant views or to confirm preexisting perceptions of the actors' opinions.

To summarize, the study involves two techniques of analysis: (1) descriptive analysis, using the factual data recorded on study instruments and generating frequencies for all items, and (2) content analysis of the letters using the constant comparative analysis method. The data base for both types of analyses were the letters. The two techniques, the recording of factual information on a structured instrument and the content analysis, together provide a comprehensive data base from which the dynamics and characteristics of issues surrounding sealed records can be described.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

As mentioned earlier, letters from 114 adoptees, 164 adoptive parents and 113 birth parents were selected for inclusion in the study sample. Of the 391 letters

selected, 333 (85%) were content analyzed, 90 percent of the adoptee letters, 77 percent of the adoptive parents letters and 91 percent of the birth parent letters. The primary type of letter excluded from the content analysis were letters which simply included statements of support or opposition (59% of those excluded). The other major reasons were that the letters were form or modified form letters (34% of those excluded) (see Table 1 in Appendix A). The following sections describe writer characteristics (e.g., sex, age) and letter characteristics (e.g., format and presentation) for those letters that were content analyzed. Because the findings are based on this subsample of letters, the inclusion of characteristics of other letters is not appropriate or meaningful. Finally, there is a brief discussion of the themes that emerged in the analysis. This discussion presents data on all themes for all letters content analyzed. Individual themes are discussed separately in the findings chapters.

Writer Characteristics

Most of the respondents, 73 percent, are female. Eighty-two percent of the adoptees, 44 percent of the adoptive parents and 98 percent of the birth parents are female* (see Table 3). The large percentage of female adoptees is consistent with other adoption studies that

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*In four cases it was not possible to ascertain sex of the letter writer.

are based on voluntary participation (e.g., Kowal and Schilling, 1985; Sorosky, Baran and Pannor, 1975). The adoptive parent sample also includes a sizable percentage of letters written by both parents (38 percent). Nineteen percent of the letters were written by men. The overwhelming majority of birth parents are female; this could reflect the nonstatus of unwed fathers in our society. Because the birth parent sample consists of birth mothers, with one exception, the term "birth mother" will be used when referring to this respondent group.

Another way to look at the sample is in terms of familial role. Most adoptees (92%) wrote in as individuals, although a few letters (1%) include the signature of the adoptee and her/his spouse. Adoptive mothers wrote most frequently (43%), followed closely by those adoptive couples who wrote (38%). Adoptive fathers wrote least frequently (19%). With one exception, the birth mother was the letter writer (see Table 3).

The age of the letter writer also was coded; unfortunately, this information is missing from 52 percent of the adoptee letters, 99 percent of the adoptive parent letters and 87 percent of the birth mother letters. Of the 49 adoptees who indicate their age, 27 percent are between the ages of 31-40 and 41-50, 22 percent between 21-30, 18 percent over 50 and 6 percent 20 or under. The mean and median age for adoptees is 39, and the range is from 12 to

62 years old. The wide range of age distribution concurs with Triseliotis' (1984) contention that being adopted is a life long process, and the interest in one's biological origins is not associated with one particular age group.

The one adoptive parent who indicates her age is 44. Of the 13 birth mothers who include their age in the letter, the majority (62%) are 31-40 (see Table 2).

The letters also were reviewed to ascertain the age of the adopted child, the age the child was adopted, and the age of the birth mother when she relinquished the child. Again, much of this information is not included in the letters. Most adoptive parents (85%) do not indicate the age of their adopted children. Of those who do, the majority indicate that their children are 18 years old or younger. Birth mothers are more likely to report the age of their children (74%). The children range in age from 7 to 50 years old, with the mean age 21 and the median 18. A slight majority of the children (51 percent) are 18 years of age or under, and most of the remaining are between 19 to 30 years old (see Table 4).

Nine percent of the adoptees, 11 percent of the adoptive parents and 59 percent of the birth mothers indicate the age the child was adopted. Of those who include this information, the overwhelming majority in each group note that the child was adopted as an infant, one year old or younger. Sixty-seven percent of the adoptees, 100 percent

of the adoptive parents and 95 percent of the birth mothers state that the adoption occurred with an infant (see Table 4). Thus, if those who indicate the age of adoption is similar to the sample population, this sample reflects the concerns primarily of those involved in traditional infant adoptions, as opposed to older children adoptions.

The age of the birth mother when she relinquished the child is identified by only 16 percent of the birth mothers and just one percent of the adoptees and adoptive parents. Most of the birth mothers relinquished when they were teenagers. Based on the birth mother letters, 29 percent were 15 or 16, 29 percent 17 or 18, 24 percent 19 or 20, and 18 percent 21 or 24.

The sample includes individuals from every geographic region in the country, as well as representing urban and rural areas. Most of the adoptees (52%) are from the western region of the country; 15 percent are from the northeast, and 16 percent are from the south and the north central regions (U.S. Census Bureau Region classifications). There is a large concentration of adoptees located in the state of California, 41 percent of all adoptees. Forty percent of the adoptive parents are from the south region, 32 percent from the north central, 18 percent from the west and 10 percent from the north east. A sizable proportion of the adoptive parents are from two states, Texas (23%) and Ohio (18%) (see Table 2). The large

concentration of adoptees in California and adoptive parents in Texas and Ohio reflects the geographic distribution in the total study data base. Because identifying information was removed from the birth mothers' letters, geographic location could not be determined.

Although the major method for disseminating information about the legislation and public hearings was through organizational efforts, few of the writers indicate an affiliation with an organization (6% of adoptees, 1% of adoptive parents, and 5% of birth mothers). This absence of information does not mean that writers did not belong to an organization, just that they did not mention it in their letters. (Also, form letters, typically from individuals belonging to an organization, were not content analyzed.) A writer was considered affiliated with a group if he/she mentioned it in the letter or wrote on stationary including the organization's motto. The most frequently mentioned group by adoptees was Adoptee Liberation Movement Association (ALMA) and Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) by birth mothers.

Information about the writer's position toward the provision in the Model Act that opens adoptee access to records was coded. The overwhelming majority of the adoptees and birth mothers support this provision, 93 percent and 95 percent respectively. Adoptive parents generally oppose the provision; 82 percent indicate opposition. Nine

percent of the adoptive parents state their support of the provision and another 10 percent support the provision but only under specific conditions (e.g., birth parent permission to reveal identifying information) (see Table 5). The positions taken by the adoption participants toward opening records is similar to that found in other investigations (e.g., Sorosky, et al., 1979). The implications of the participants' positions are discussed within the context of findings presented in later chapters.

Finally, writer search activities were examined. This topic, along with the participant's position, provides an understanding of the sample population in terms of the level and intensity of their feelings about the adoption record controversy. Of the adoptees who mention search activities in their letters (46%), most indicate that they have or are searching for their birth parents; 83 percent report searching. Two percent said they are not searching, 9 percent indicate they are not interested in ever searching and 6 percent indicate they are not searching now but may in the future. Four percent of the adoptive parents report searching, usually with their adopted children, and 17 percent of the birth mothers report search activities. Of the 46 percent of adoptees, 40 percent of adoptive parents and 47 percent of birth mothers who com pleted their search, the overwhelming majority report positive reunion outcomes (see Table 6).

In summary, most of the letter writers are females. Most of the parents who wrote are mothers, although a number of couples also wrote in. Of those who indicate their age, most adoptees are 21 to 50, and birth mothers 31 to 40. A slight majority of the children of the adoptive parents and birth mothers are 18 years old or younger. Most adoptions occurred when the child was an infant, one year old or younger. Most of the birth mothers were teenagers when they relinquished their children. The population includes individuals from every geographic region.

The overwhelming majority of adoptees and birth mothers support open adoption records; the adoptive parents generally oppose them. Of those who report on search activities, most are or have searched, completed the search and have experienced positive reunion outcomes.

Letter Format and Presentation

The birth mother letters are handwritten (69%), whereas 50 percent of the adoptee and only 36 percent of the adoptive parent letters are handwritten. The larger percentage of adoptive parent letters typed may be related to greater access to resources, or a result of an organizational influence. Most of the letters are written on plain paper or personal stationary; however, 12 percent of the adoptive parent and 7 percent of the adoptees write on employment stationary. Approximately two-thirds of the

letters for each group are one page, with most of the remaining letters two pages in length (see Table 7).

Most of the letters are addressed to Diane Broadhurst, the Executive Secretary. A few are carbon copied to other individuals (e.g., the President and Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services). All of the letters were sent in 1980, with many sent proximate to the public hearing dates in their communities.

The Themes

As mentioned earlier, five themes emerge from the letters: justice, identity, well being, feelings about others, and, family. Justice is the most frequently mentioned for each respondent group (67% of adoptees, 69% of adoptive parents, and 70% of the birth mothers). Identity and well being also are identified by a majority of the respondents, although identity is primarily an issue for the adoptees. Feelings about others and family are identified as important issues by less than a third of the respondents (see Table 8).

Most of the respondents mention two or more themes in their letters (88% of the adoptees, 65% of the adoptive parents and 69% of the birth mothers). Adoptees are more likely than the other respondents to comment on multiple themes. For example, 18 percent of the adoptees, as compared to 10 percent of the adoptive parents and 9 percent

of the birth mothers mention four or more themes in their letters (see Table 9).

An examination of the number of comments per letter for each theme type reveals that most respondents comment once on a specific theme type. Respondents are more likely to make more than one comment when either of two themes are being addressed--justice and well being (see Table 10).

CHAPTER IV

THE JUSTICE THEME

Justice, the principle of moral rightness, fairness and equity, is the most prevalent theme in the letters. This prevalence can be explained by the legal underpinnings of the adoption process. Adoption is a legal act; regardless of the social ramifications the action itself is based on legal statutes. The assumption is that these laws, as all laws, are based on what is just and fair--and that individual's rights are recognized. The adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers express concerns related to justice, focusing their comments on whose rights are being protected, violated or ignored and the types of rights involved. Often their reasons for supporting or opposing open adoption records is based on what they consider fair, or what they believe "society" deems as fair. Further, the proposed Model Adoption Act, the document which stimulated the comments of these groups, includes model legislation that, if adopted by legislatures, would change most state's adoption laws. Therefore, the overwhelming concern about justice is expected.

Justice is identified as the most important theme for each respondent group--the adoptees, the adoptive parents and the birth mothers. And, they are equally interested in the theme. Approximately 67 percent of adoptees, 69 percent of adoptive parents and 70 percent of birth mothers include statements in their letters relating to the justice theme. (See Table 11 in Appendix A.)

The analysis of the comments yields three major dimensions that are present in the letters of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers: (1) whose rights are involved, (2) the types of rights, and, (3) the basis for these rights.

As to whose rights are involved, individuals most often discuss the rights of one of three participants in the adoption triangle--the adoptee, the adoptive parent and/or the birth parent. In some instances, pairs of participants are discussed--such as, the rights of the birth parent and the adoptive parents, or the adoptive parent and the child. There also is mention of the rights of "every person" or individual--the universal rather than an adoption participant.

The types of rights identified are numerous. However, three are most frequently discussed: (1) the basic right to know her/his identity, background, parentage and heritage (2) the right to have access to adoption records and information, birth certificate and similar documentation,

and (3) the right to privacy, confidentiality, and freedom from intrusion. Other types of rights are mentioned less frequently and include: right to medical information; right to become acquainted with child/ birth parent; right to have the choice to know identity; right to truth; right to know if her/his child alive; right to know relatives; rights related to relinquishment of child; rights of mother; and right of ownership.

Two bases or justifications for the rights are discussed--(1) contract or legal basis--that is, that the right is based on what was agreed upon in the adoption "contract" or what is "legal" and (2) abstract basis--that is, a more philosophical and less tangible source, a fundamental right based on universal precepts or laws.

The respondents' support or opposition of the open records provision of the proposed Model Act provides a context for understanding the focus of their comments. Adoptees and birth mothers overwhelmingly support the provision, 93 percent and 95 percent respectively. Only nine percent of the adoptive parents indicate unqualified support for open records, whereas 10 percent support the provision under specified conditions (e.g., only with permission of birth parents). The remaining 82 percent oppose the provision (see Table 5).

The following sections present the comments of each of the adoption participant groups regarding the three justice dimensions.

ADOPTEES

Whose Rights

Most adoptees comment on their rights, as individual adoptees, or the rights of adoptees generally. On an individual level, adoptees use the first person to present their opinion, e.g., ". . . I have the right to know . . ."; or the collective "we have these rights . . ." Others comment generally on the rights of all adoptees to have access to information.

The focus on the adoptee's rights, rather than the rights of adoptive parents or birth parents reflects the legal status of adoptees. Adoption laws are designed to deal with the adopted child. The adoptees in the sample are adults, and as adults they are generally denied representation in current decisions about what took place when they were infants. From their perspective, the adoptive parents and birth parents participated as adults in the adoption action, and ostensibly had the opportunity to protect their rights.

Types of Rights

The adoptee letters include statements relating to the justice theme that explain their support for open adoption records. Two rights are focused on most frequently--the

right to know her/his identity and the right to have access to records.

The right to know one's identity is mentioned most often. Some adoptees use the term identity within a psychological context, maintaining their right to a "sense of identity," and "our true identity." Other adoptees discuss identity in cultural and ethnic terms describing the right to know one's background, heritage and parentage. Some adoptees discuss not only their rights related to identity, but the rights of their children; as two adoptees write:

> I feel they (my children) as well as I, have every right to know their heritage.

> I find it incomprehensible for my right to know my heritage, and also my children's to be so flagrantly denied.

The second type of right identified by adoptees is the right to have access to background information, adoption records, birth certificates and similar documentation.

Adoptees write about their right to access, for example:

> Access to your records is a right . . . return to us that which has been taken away.

Another adoptee notes:

> Strangers have access to records but we are not allowed to know.

One adoptee discusses the issue in terms of discrimination:

> The deprivation of an adult citizen's right to obtain copies of personal birth/adoption records is blatant discrimination.

The right to access information is a dimension that consistently appears in the literature pertaining to open records. Both the lay and legal literature describe the deprivation of this right, and, in some cases, the discriminatory effects. Arguments justifying sealed records are viewed by some as rationalizations in defense of discrimination.

Access to records to obtain medical history is a concern to some adoptees; one adoptee writes:

> Having suffered a heart attack, . . . and a hint I might be a carrier of Hemophlia I feel that being denied medical history of our families is not only immoral but borders on murder.

The lack of medical information, however, is often resolved by providing medical data without including identifying information on the birth parents (Harrington, 1984).

Although rights to identity and access to records are cited most often, adoptees also comment on other rights. The right to privacy and confidentiality is described by a few adoptees. One adoptee discusses the rights of privacy of the biological parents relative to her rights to know:

> How can records be sealed and closed and biological parents given a right to privacy as against his or her offspring?

An adoptee who opposes open records comments:

> These adoption records were sealed at the time of my adoption, never to be revealed, and I feel they should thus remain sealed. . . . Please respect my privacy, as guaranteed me in the Constitution.

A few other types of rights are identified by adoptees, including the right to get acquainted--to meet the birthparent:

> Why should we be denied the right to get acquainted? All because of some stupid law that was put into effect without our knowledge or consent.

and the rights of a mother:

> As a mother looking at her own children I am only too aware of how my natural mother must suffer as I do at being denied our most basic and natural right--that of a mother-child relationship.

Basis for the Rights

Adoptees most frequently refer to abstract reasons to justify their rights--these reasons include reference to such terms as "basic human rights," "rights as an adult," "U.S. citizen rights," and "basic human freedoms." However, some adoptees cite circumstances related to the adoption process itself. As one adoptee writes:

> I didn't ask to born nor did I ask to be adopted out, and I shouldn't be punished for a decision in which I had no active part. It's as though we are merely pieces of property "sold" from "owner" to another and until we die we're the property of the adopting "owners."

Other adoptees echo this feeling of being denied rights because of their status as children. They comment:

> Why are we discriminated against when we were helpless children who could not defend our rights or have others to do so?

> Adoptees have become adult victims of contracts designed to provide for them as children. Understandably, as children we had no legal voice in the matter but as adults we must have the right to exercise a voice.

As with the dimension concerning whose rights, the issue of the adoptee being treated as a child is raised. "In most states adults adopted as children remain forever children in terms of adoption law and practice" (Small, 1979, p. 42). Lifton (1979) suggests that the absence of research on the adult adoptee may reflect "society's difficulty in thinking of the Adoptee as someone who actually grows up" (p. 63). The findings from this study reveal the frustrations associated with both being treated as a child, and with having to live with decisions regarding the adoption made by others.

In summary, adoptees write about their rights to know their identities, their backgrounds and the right to have access to records which would provide the information. Adoptees most often focus on their own rights rather than rights of others in the adoption triangle. Adoptees consider these rights "basic human" rights, due to every person, citizen and/or adult. Most (93%) of the adoptees support open records and consider it their right to have access to information in the records. Adoptees do not comment on their relationships with their adoptive parents as a reason for seeking to know their identities. Rather, most adoptees comment on their closeness with their adoptive parents and state that they are not searching for "new" parents, but only information on themselves and their heritage. Yet, their insistence that the search for

information is not associated with their adoptive family relationships is a position that may be more acceptable than simply a need to know. Adoptees are expected to be grateful to their adoptive parents, and a desire to search is considered an action disloyal to the parents that took them in and raised them. Thus, their declaration of strong adoptive family ties may be viewed as a way to promote the acceptability of the search.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Whose Rights

Adoptive parents most frequently discuss the birth parents' rights; however, they cite their rights as adoptive parents and the rights of adoptees almost as frequently. Adoptive parents' concern with the rights of the birth parent reflects the social mores which label the birth mother as a woman shamed. Although societal attitudes toward unwed parents have changed, the adoptive parents still seem to view the relinquishment as an embarrassment for the birth mother. Because the circumstances of the child's relinquishment are seen as undesirable, it is understandable that adoptive parents express strong feelings about the birth parent's rights, specifically the rights of privacy. At the same time, the adoptive parents' discussion of their own privacy rights parallels that of the birth parent. Their concern with the rights of the

birth parents may be simply a rationalization for an extension of their own rights. Similarly, the discussion of adoptees' rights is directed toward the right of the adoptee to be left alone--that the birth parents not be able to intrude. The adoptive parents' comments regarding whose rights reveal a position which favors the status quo of sealed records and the relative rights and responsibilities of those involved.

Types of Rights

Most of the adoptive parents' comments focus on the privacy and confidentiality rights of the different participants in the adoption process.

In discussing their own rights to privacy and confidentiality, they refer to the promises made at the time of the adoption and the betrayal of trust open records would cause. Adoptive parents' comments reflecting this concern include:

> Please protect our rights as parents! Do not let us be subject to a changing law that once guaranteed us complete confidentiality and security in the adoption of our children.
>
> At the time of their adoption, we were promised that the records would be sealed, and in exchange we promised to love, protect, and be supportive of these children all their lives because from that date on we were their parents. We have kept our promise! What about the State?

In discussing their rights concerning confidentiality of adoption records, adoptive parents express concern

regarding intrusion by the birthparents. As one adoptive mother writes:

> We were told the records would be kept very CONFIDENTIAL and expected it to remain so . . . what are we to do if one of them comes knocking at our door?

An adoptive father describes an extreme situation which could occur if records were open:

> Any regulations should be certain to provide that the biological parents of the child should have no knowledge or means of gaining knowledge of the adoptive parents of the child. The most extreme thing that could happen would be that a rapist could require the names of the adopted (sic) parents and with probable consequence blackmail and other unfortunate results.

The examples they provide about unsolicited visitation by the birth parents are not realistic given the position in the Model Act that would not open records until the adoptee became an adult. Further, there is no evidence to substantiate adoptive parents' fears that they would lose their children to the birth parents if records were open. Studies conducted in England, where adoption records are accessible, indicate that the availability does not result in adverse situations (Day, 1979; Leeding, 1977; & Triseliotis, 1984). The extreme scenarios described by the adoptive parents appear to be an overeactive response, similar to the position that restrooms would become unisex if the Equal Rights Amendment were passed. It is unclear whether the parents who wrote these comments believe these extreme situations will occur, or whether the comments are exaggerations to make a point.

A major concern expressed by the adoptive parents is the privacy of the birth mother. The adoptive parents discuss the promises made to the birth mothers, as well as possible future consequences if this privacy is not protected. The secrecy that characterizes the adoption process is identified as an issue in some of the comments. Specifically, the comments focus on the birth mother's need for secrecy. This concern appears to be based on the stigma of illegitimacy--that the secrecy surrounding the adoption process has been fostered by societal attitudes about sexuality, which ostracized unmarried women who became pregnant. The comments reflect this concern for secrecy, to keep hidden the birth mother's past to allow her to build a new life. Adoptive parents also cite the consequences of not protecting this right to privacy such as, "more abortions," "unfit parents keeping the child," and "child abuse."

Typical comments about the birth parent's right to privacy include:

> Many mothers want this kept secret and would not think of adoption if their identity may be revealed later.
>
> . . . opening of confidential birth records . . . seems to almost violate the rights of biological parents who may have established lives of their own and wish to remain anonymous.
>
> (The proposed law) eliminates the confidentiality which exists for the birthparents. This is a primary factor in the decision to continue the pregnancy . . .

Adoptive parents also discuss privacy in terms of protecting the rights of both adoptive and birth parents. One adoptive father comments:

> After assurances of confidentiality have been made to many thousands of natural parents and adoptive parents over the years, it is unthinkable that adoption agencies and others should now be told to breach those promises.

An adoptive mother writes:

> The adoptive parents and the birthparent entered into the adoption through an agency knowing all information was confidential and believing it would always be so.

Adoptive parents also cite the confidentiality rights of the adoptee. They argue that opening records "is a violation to our children," and that a child "has a right to protection from such an unsolicited upheaval."

In other instances the adoptive parents express concern over the rights of the adoptive "family"--the adoptive parents and the child. As one mother states:

> When we adopted our daughter, we both felt a sense of security and protection for ourselves as well as for our child because of the privacy of the entire transaction being sealed by the courts from the public.

A couple writes:

> The three most important participants are left with no protection. The child and the adoptive parents!

The fear of intrusion by the birth mother is illustrated in the following comment from an adoptive mother:

> While we are forever grateful to the girl who gave up her rights as a parent to our daughter, it is also not fair to allow her to change her mind 18 years later and disrupt our life and the life of our daughter should she so choose.

Clearly, adoptive parents consider an invasion of privacy and the betrayal of confidentiality as the primary reasons that open records are unjust. However, a few parents identify other topics related to the justice of open or closed records. Two related topics concern the adoptee's rights of knowing one's identity and the access to information. Adoptive parents who identify these issues support open records.

One adoptive mother writes:

> I feel as they are adults, they have the right to know who they are.

She includes a postscript, "I love my daughter and she loves me." Other adoptive parents write about their children's "birthright to information about their backgrounds," their "right to biological identity," and their "being deprived of a basic human right by being denied access to information regarding their origins."

Although a few of the adoptive parents in the sample support open records, this is not reflected in other types of rights, especially those related to the relinquishment of the child by the birth parent and rights of the adopted child and birth parents to meet.

The issue of relinquishment usually is raised by adoptive parents to explain denial of access to the adoptees. The following comments from adoptive mothers illustrate this position:

> Every kind of advice is available to mothers (or parents) who are about to give up a child for adoption before they sign those papers. I realize some may later regret their decisions but please consider which is more fair--and which does more hurt.

> I feel when the natural parent made the decision to give the child to someone else to raise them she gave up her claim to that child.

Similarly, adoptive parents are generally opposed to contacts between adoptees and their birth parents, contending that the right to have this contact is unjust. Comments illustrating this position include:

> We feel it is very unwise to have "birthparents" have any contact with the adopted child. It isn't fair to anyone involved.

> The biological parents should not have the right to contact the adoptee. Adoption is not a temporary condition and the law should protect this right.

Less frequently mentioned are the rights of the adoptive parents as <u>the</u> parents of the child, and the rights of the adoptee to one set of parents.

An adoptive mother states:

> We have appreciated the security we have felt knowing that these children are ours, and protected as certainly as if they had been born to us.

A couple writes concerning the fairness to the child:

> That child should not have to deal with two sets of parents. This is <u>unfair</u> to the child.

Basis for the Rights

The adoptive parents' comments focus primarily on the privacy and confidentiality rights of the different participants in the adoption process. The adoptive parents contend that these rights are based on the adoption "contract"; what was agreed upon at the time the adoption was finalized. The parents remark that opening records "would represent a complete and absolute violation of faith between the adoptive parents and the adoption agency" and "betray the confidentiality promised." These findings corroborate other research results. For example, in the Sorosky, et al. investigation (1979), some adoptive parents who wrote to the study researchers "expressed hostility toward the study and resented any encroachment upon the sanctity of the sealed record agreement" (p. 73). The comments from adoptive parents in this study sample express similar hostility toward developers of the Model Act; the adoptive parents argue that opening records retroactively represents a disregard for the "contract" agreed to at the time of adoption.

In summary, the comments of the adoptive parents focus on the rights of privacy and confidentiality. The substance of these rights is to protect primarily the privacy of the birth parents and adoptive parents and confidentiality of the records. According to the adoptive parents, the basis for these rights is the adoption contract, the agreements

and expressions of trust made at the time of adoption. A few adoptive parents discuss the rights of the adoptee to know her/his background; these parents are among the few in the adoptive parent sample who support open records.

BIRTH MOTHERS

Most (98%) of the birth mothers support open records; their comments and concerns reflect this position.

Whose Rights

A majority of the birth mothers focus on the right of the adoptee--especially the right to know her/his identity and have access to records. Almost as many comments are related to the rights of the birth mothers; these comments focus on the issue of privacy, conditions of relinquishment and the right to pursue contact with the adoptee. The birth mothers do not discuss any issues concerning the rights of the adoptive parents. Some birth mothers discuss the rights of "every person"--the types of rights discussed are usually those pertaining to knowing one's background and parentage.

As one birth mother writes:

> Society cannot justify for any reason, withholding information regarding a person's birth. Each and every human being has the right to know his origin, regardless of what that may be.

Types of Rights

The right of the adoptee to have access to her/his records is of primary importance to the birth mothers.

> I feel that it is not right for an adoptee's records to be kept closed. A person has a right to know who they are and what their background is.
>
> No one should be denied their heritage and genetic background.

Birth mothers also write about their experiences and feelings related to relinquishment, and how the conditions of relinquishment are being used to deny the adoptee's access to records. In some instances, birth mothers report being deceived or not fully realizing the consequences of their actions:

> It is totally inhumane for any person to be denied knowledge of their source if they so desire. . . . I was promised open records for her, if she wanted them after she was 18. Presently I have found this was a total deception.
>
> Had I been older maybe I would have known that I was also putting my name to a document that would have forever denied her her own facts of life.

Most of the birth mothers who discuss their rights focus on the right to privacy and confidentiality. In most cases, birth mothers indicate they have not wanted the "right" to privacy, and that the privacy issue is being used to benefit others, specifically the adoptive parents and the "bureaucratic" interests.

A birth father who relinquished his child 17 years ago writes:

> Statutes of this ilk also seem to assume that individuals like myself want privacy from their children or have forgotten them. The logic that can be distilled from all this is that vested bureaucratic interests are involved to maintain the status quo and the natural parents' rights must be given short shrift.

A birth mother who surrendered her son 15 years ago writes:

> Upon signing the surrender document, my privacy was never promised to me, for that matter, it was never discussed. It baffles me to know a law exists supposedly protecting a child from his natural mother. . . . What right did these pompous and insensitive individuals have, to decide for another human being, that he be denied the truth of his identity and origin. I say along with millions of others, no one has that right. In order to keep records closed, there will be those who will argue that natural parents need to be protected. Protected from what? Our own children?

Other birth mothers comment that they never desired privacy:

> Who dares to have the right to speak for me when they say I want secrecy? I don't now and I never did.
>
> I adamantly feel that adult adoptees should have an unqualified right of access to their records. Please don't listen to the opposition's point of view that natural parents want privacy from their own child or have forgotten; that thought is ludicrous!
>
> I wish to say that at this time I DO want my privacy invaded by my daughter, Olivia.

The overwhelming sentiment of the birth mothers is that they are not concerned with their privacy or confidentiality; they support adoptees' right to know their biological heritage, and to initiate a meeting if the adoptee desires.

A few birth mothers argue that they, as birth mothers, are not entitled to rights of privacy; that the rights of the adoptee to know his/her parentage takes precedence over privacy rights of the birth mother.

> Although the natural mother has signed away the rights and responsibility to the child she bore, she still holds one innate responsibility. That is the knowledge of birth, the background of the child's heritage and their medical history--a large picture of one's identity. . . . I am a natural mother and I feel that anyone who puts up the sign "I Want Privacy," is just copping out on their responsibility to another human being.
>
> They (our children) are entitled to what every other citizen in this country has, access to their birth certificates. The small handful of natural parents who may want anonymity (I have never met one) gave up that right at conception. Adoptees should have the right to face their parents and have these parents supply information to which they are absolutely entitled.

However, a few birth mothers in the sample oppose open adoption records, and feel that open records would violate their rights to privacy. One birth mother writes:

> Quite a few years ago I had a baby out-of-wedlock and chose to give her every opportunity for a good life; a life I could have taken away and had total privacy and confidentiality. . . . Now I'm told that without my knowledge she (my daughter) can find out all. . . . I cannot sign this letter only because I want the privacy and confidentiality offered to me so many years ago.

Another birth mother, who has married, writes that her family is unaware that she gave up a baby for adoption prior to her marriage. She comments:

> I was told the records would be kept strictly CONFIDENTIAL and was horrified when I found out about the proposed Model Adoption Act. . . . I want the birth records to remain confidential. . . . I took the Welfare's word that I could never be traced and want to keep it that way.

A pregnant teenager who is placing her baby for adoption states:

> It upsets me that my child would be able to come find me when he is grown-up, even if I don't want him, too. I think this rule is very unfair.

These three comments are not typical of the opinions of most of the birth mother sample.

Some birth mothers discuss their rights to access to information as well as the adoptees' rights, as the following comments illustrate:

> I firmly believe that both child and birthparent have the right to know any information that will end all doubts and questions they may have.

> It seems though, that I have no rights at all as a mother or a human being to even know that my child is safe, healthy, or even alive. If my son some day wanted to know who I am--even at legal age--he, too, would be denied the right with the law as it is. Is this fair?

However, the prime concern of birth mothers is access of records to the adoptees, not to themselves.

Basis for the Rights

Birth mothers are most concerned with the rights of the adoptees, specifically the rights to access information from the adoption records. Birth mothers contend that adult adoptees are entitled to these rights both because of the innate right to know one's heritage as well as the fact that the adoptee was not involved nor represented in the adoption contract, thus she/he should not be bound by decisions made by others.

The following comments by birth mothers illustrate their position on rights to information based on "universal" law or what are basic human rights:

> When my son reaches the age of 18, should he wish to find me and learn of his true heritage, I would hope he could do so, unhampered by archaic laws denying him his basic human rights.
>
> They (our children) are entitled to what every other citizen in this country has, access to their birth certificates.

In other cases, birth mothers argue that the adult adoptee should not be bound by decisions made by others and that the birth mothers did not intend for the information to be inaccessible. The birth mothers seem to be challenging the validity of the adoption contract, particularly its applicability to the adoptees. As several birth mothers comment:

> I strongly believe it is my son's human right to have all information regarding his adoption and genetic history available to him, if and when he should ever decide to exercise that right. I did not request the anonymity that has been imposed upon me by the law, and feel it (closed records) only serves to place barriers in my son's path towards self-knowledge and self-respect.
>
> If my son should choose to find me I feel that it is his right; he never signed relinquishment papers, I did.
>
> I believe that although I surrendered my right to know at that time, I did not surrender his right. Should he decide that he wants access to his history, he must have it. To be denied that right is the grossest violation of rights possible.

Birth mothers reference both the "abstract" universal law and the more "concrete" adoption contract to justify

adoptee's rights to have access to records, and to argue that the adoptee's right to know supercedes the birth mother's right to privacy.

In summary, birth mothers are concerned with their rights and the rights of adoptees, their children. They discuss the rights of adoptees to have access to adoption records and their right to know their heritage. The birth mothers discuss their rights to know also, but more frequently comment on issues related to privacy and confidentiality. Most birth mothers do not want the records confidential, and some feel that their rights to privacy are secondary to the adoptees' rights to know their heritage. Some of the birth mothers discuss the injustices related to the relinquishment process, specifically in terms of ways they had been deceived or misled. The birth mothers do not identify or discuss any rights of adoptive parents.

SUMMARY

Although each of the groups has a distinct and unique position in the "adoption triangle," there are some similarities in the comments. Adoptees and birth mothers express similar concerns, reflecting the majority opinion of both groups that adoption records should be open. Adoptees most frequently comment on their rights, specifically the right to know their identities and the right to have access to information. They contend that these rights are "basic

human rights" available to all citizens, yet they as a group are denied this right to knowledge. Birth mothers also write about the rights of the adoptees to know their parentage. Some birth mothers use reasoning similar to the adoptees to justify the rights, while others contend that the adoptees had no say in the adoption process, therefore they should not be bound by decisions made by others. A few adoptive parents comment about the rights of the adoptees to have access to records; these adoptive parents are among the few in the sample to support open records.

A major justice issue raised by birth mothers and adoptive parents is the right to privacy and the confidentiality of records. However, the positions taken are dramatically opposed, again reflecting the difference in their positions on the proposed law to open records. Adoptive parents support keeping records sealed to protect the privacy of the birth parents. The adoptive parents argue that birth parents have begun new lives and that they agreed to give up the child with the assurance that there would be no intrusion into their "new life." However, the birth mothers in the sample present an entirely different view, certainly not one that the adoptive parents believe birth parents hold. Overall, the birth mothers write that they do not want privacy or confidentiality; in some cases they were not told at the time of relinquishment that their children would not have access to information about them.

The birth mothers argue that adoptees should have this right and that it is more important than anyone's right to privacy or confidentiality. Further, they indicate a desire to meet their children, if the adoptees agree. The adoptive parents also discuss their rights regarding the confidentiality of records, contending that to open the records would be to betray the trust and agreement at the time of adoption. In all matters relating to rights of privacy and confidentiality, the conditions of the contract are used as the primary justification.

CHAPTER V

THE IDENTITY THEME

The development of identity and the existence of identity conflicts are primary concerns expressed by adoptees, and referenced to a lesser extent by adoptive parents and birth mothers. The adoption status is an additional component of one's identity, a component that may be difficult for the adoptee to integrate because of an absence of background information. Comments such as, who am I?, where did I come from?, and what is my status or role?, illustrate the respondents' concern with identity issues. References to identity formation are most often related to the adoptee and the search for her/his heritage. In the previous chapter the issue of identity is discussed in terms of justice--the right to know one's identity. However, comments focusing on dimensions of identity touch on more than just the issue of rights. This section analyzes the different dimensions relating to identity.

Understandably, adoptees are most vocal about identity concerns; approximately 61 percent of adoptees include statements in their letters relating to identity issues.

Thirty-one percent of the adoptive parents and 23 percent of the birth mothers include comments regarding identity in their letters. (See Table 12 in Appendix A.)

The identity issue is most frequently discussed in terms of the adoptee's identity formation. The adoptees and the birth mothers focus on identity issues relevant to the adoptee. However, birth mothers also describe their own identity crises--"incompleteness" resulting from not knowing their offspring. Adoptive parents discuss components of their own identities and how opening adoption records affects their status. They talk about themselves as the "real" parents and predict that a consequence of open records would be to convert adoption to a temporary versus permanent condition of parenthood.

The gender of the respondents is an important aspect to consider in interpreting concerns related to identity formation. Most of the adoptees are female (82%) and all but one of the birth parents are birth mothers. Identity formation is experienced differently by males and females. Gilligan (1984) argues that attachment is an essential aspect of gender identity for females. Thus, the predominance of female adoptees and birth mothers in the sample may reflect female concern with unresolved attachment issues. The importance of attachment is revealed further in the specific comments of adoptees and birth mothers.

The following sections present the comments of each of the adoption participant groups.

ADOPTEES

The adoptees discuss their identity, or lack of it, related to the inability to research their heritage. The common underlying theme of all the comments is a sense of incompleteness; the adoptee is not whole--a part of her/him is missing. In most of the comments the feeling of incompleteness is implied, however, in some the adoptees identify it as a direct consequence. One adoptee reports feeling "incomplete without knowledge of parental roots" and another cites the need "to be a whole and complete person, which you can't be with a chunk of your life missing."

The wholeness/incompleteness theme pervades the adoptee's comments. Another pervasive theme reflected in the comments is the intensity of the feeling--the pain, desire and/or anger related to the adoptee's need to know. Because the comments are from letters, and not in-person interviews, it is difficult to quantify or even begin to describe the feelings. Yet, in reading all the comments, the feelings emerge--the terms the adoptees use, the demanding tone, the beseeching. Two adoptee comments exemplifying this intensity read:

> Why do I have to go through the rest of my life having to guess who I am? When people talk about looking up their family trees, all I feel is hurt. . . . Just knowing who they are would be enough for me. . . . Please, please, open my records. And if you can't, at least cry for me, as I remain lost to who I am.

> I have no roots--no culture to identify my self with. I am truly a "Nowhere Man." . . . I was nearly 3 years old when I was adopted. Can I pretend that I was only born then? . . . Was I a non-person up until the time of my adoption? Is any adoptee supposed to accept that? Could you?

The sense of incompleteness and the intensity of feelings characterize most of the comments. In addition, there are specific identity dimensions that the adoptees cite as important. These include: (1) the adoptee's roots, origins, heritage--the identity components leading the adoptee to ask who am I? and where did I come from?; (2) the adoptee's genetic and medical history, and blood heritage--the focus here is not so much on the parentage but on the characteristics passed biologically, especially knowledge of hereditary diseases and medical tendencies; (3) nationality--the adoptee's parents' national and/or ethnic origins; and (4) looking like someone--the singling out of "looking like someone" as an important dimension of one's identity.

Adoptee Origins

Most adoptees focus on knowing their heritage, their origins. They argue that in addition to it being their right to know there is a psychological necessity for them to know. The expressions used to discuss identity in terms of their heritage include "where I came from," "who am I,"

"rootedness," "parentage," and "background." Examples of adoptee comments focusing on knowing their heritage include:

> I still have the constant thought in the back of my mind, "Where DID I come from?"
>
> I have never been quite sure just who I am.
>
> I will be 40 years . . . I am beginning to search out my unknown, unanswered beginnings.
>
> I am not searching for a family, I have that. I simply want to know, who am I?

The psychological need to know is a common theme in the literature on adoption. Several researchers indicate the linkage between an individual's knowledge of his/her genealogy and the development of identity (Sorosky et al., 1979; Triseliotis, 1973). Erikson's (1968) theory of development is used as a framework to understand the necessity to know one's past to achieve a sense of identity. Erikson discusses the importance of one's larger sense of heritage--the necessity of continuity and wholeness for identity development. Of particular concern is the psychohistorical dimension, that part of one's identity that links the genetic past with current and future generations. Sants (1964) describes the "genealogical bewilderment," resulting from not knowing one's heritage and leading to problems in an individual's establishing her/his identity.

Biological Heritage

Some adoptees describe the need to know their biological heritage, their heredity and medical histories. In

most cases this desire is combined with a general search for their origins; in fewer instances the biological component is the primary focus. Adoptees refer to a number of unanswered questions concerning topics such as weight at birth, inherited diseases, medical history and genetic background.

Nationality

A few adoptees focus on knowing their nationalities as an important aspect of identity. A 49-year-old adoptee writes:

> To feel guilty about having curiosity about one's origins--not a person, i.e., "What was my 'mother' like?" but rather, "Am I English, Irish, where did I come from?" is something that only an adoptee can know.

Another adoptee comments:

> I myself was a foundling. Did you ever in your life not know what your true nationality was?

Physical Resemblance

A couple of adoptees comment on the desire to know "if I look like someone" and "why I like the things I do." In another instance, the questions about physical similarity are answered through a successful search as one adoptee writes "I now know people who look like me." Another adoptee comments "For the first time in 30 years, I know what nationality I am, where I got my green eyes and the knowledge of why I was conceived."

Concern for Offspring

The concern with identity, especially heritage and medical history is not limited to the adoptee--some adoptees express concern regarding their children's needs to know their heredity. In one instance the lack of knowledge has affected the decision to begin a family:

> I have recently married, and my husband and I would like to find out more about my past heritage before we start a family of our own.

The dominance of females in the sample seems to be reflected in the concern for their own children. Identity may be viewed not only in terms of an attachment to the biological past, but also to future offspring.

In summary, adoptees express the desire to know their heritage, their origins. In addition there are some adoptees who focus on biological/medical information, nationality and physical resemblance dimensions. The desire to become whole--a complete person--is occasionally accomplished through a successful search for the biological parent(s). Finally, the issue of identity sometimes extends to the adoptees' children and the inability of the adoptees to relate information to children about their heritage.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS

The adoptive parents focus on quite different identity dimensions than the adoptee. Most of the comments relate

to the identity of the adoptive parents. The primary concern is the status or role of the adoptive parents. Three dimensions of the adoptive parent status are evident in the comments: (1) the contention that the adoptive parents are the "real" parents; (2) correspondingly, that the opening of records will change the permanence of adoption, and adoptive parents will be viewed as foster parents or baby-sitters; and, (3) the dimension of ownership--that with adoption comes the sense of ownership of the child.

Adoptive Parent Status

Adoptive parents' letters include comments emphasizing their status as the parents of the child. Some of the statements are impassioned pleas "to leave well enough alone" whereas others are merely statements of fact. Examples of both types are:

> I think it is time we heard from the REAL "real" parents. The people who have devoted lifetimes to these children and love them not one ounce less and, in many cases, probably a great deal more than many natural parents love their children. Let's hear it for us--the "ADOPTIVE REAL PARENTS!!"

> We're a family and are "real" parents.

In discussing their position as the real parents, some of the adoptive parents describe their feelings toward their children.

One adoptive couple writes:

> Because our children are adopted, there is a strong inclination for some to think that the love that we have for our children is not as real, as strong and as good as the love parents have for children who have

> not been adopted. . . . We have developed those same bonds of love and acceptance with our children as have every parent the world over. We, as families, are no different than families everywhere . . .

Another comments:

> We have raised him with all the love of a natural parent; you see we have a natural child and there is no difference in the love we feel for them.

The adoptive parents' identity formation seems to be dependent on their ability to view themselves as the parents of the child. Adoptive parents may be experiencing a process that parallels the child's in resolving identity problems--the need to reinforce for themselves the feeling of being "flesh and blood relatives." Sorosky et al., (1979) note that some parents "fail to develop an emotional sense of parental identity" (p.65). The researchers relate this failure to the excruciatingly thorough investigation of them by the placing agency, an investigation which made them submerge doubts and ambivalent feelings toward parenthood. The need for adoptive parents to feel secure in their role as parents may be why some of the adoptive parents from this study sample emphasize the status by using such terms as "real," "true," and "only" parents.

Adoption--Permanent or Temporary?

The concern regarding the adoptive parent's status as the "real" parents is further emphasized by adoptive parents who write that open records will change adoption to a temporary condition. Although this dimension is mentioned most frequently, the specific phrase "long-term

foster care" is used repeatedly, indicating that there may be some organizational influence on the content of the letters. However, the threat of temporariness also is expressed in other terms such as "long-term babysitters" and "foster home family." The following comments are illustrative of adoptive parents' feelings toward open records, and what they believe will be the consequences.

> Please don't make adoptive families feel temporary and unimportant anymore. . . . My husband and I are beginning to feel as though our children are ours only to raise and that we will have to be prepared to move over some day for the only peole who really count . . .
>
> It reduces the adoptive family to the status of a foster home, merely providing care until the "real" mother shows up.

Permanency is built into the adoption process; both legal statutes and agency practice reinforce the notion that the newly created family (the adoptive family) would be permanent and that the child would be unencumbered by other ties. The complete severence of ties between the child and the biological family is intended to encourage permanence. Adoptive parents argue that opening adoption records would have the effect of rejoining the severed ties and result in adoption as a temporary placement institution. Foster (1979) remarks that "the overwhelming majority of adopting parents feel outraged, incensed, and betrayed by the current drive to open records. Quite correctly, they see this as an action that would change their role from that of true parents into a role resembling that

of long-term foster parents with the child having a kind of divided loyalty" (p. 37). Lifton (1979) states that, based on her interviews with adoptive parents, the prospect of open records leads to adoptive parents' fear of losing their children, their children rejecting them to be with the biological parents. Although recent studies have indicated a growing support for open records, the adoptive parents in this sample argue that opening records would change the basic purpose of adoption--to ensure a permanent family situation for the child.

Ownership

A few parents raise the issue of ownership in terms of describing their status as adoptive parents and as a "family." Again, the issue is one of permanence versus temporariness in defining the role of adoptive parents.

One adoptive mother, in describing the adoption process, comments:

> Once they [adoptive parents] receive a child--they love him and the child becomes theirs 100%.

Another writes:

> She is ours for life according to the law, and because of the love we have for her.

The issue of ownership can be viewed as having its roots in the legal concept of child as chattel. The total and complete severence of ties and of responsibilities to the biological family reflects the property-based culture of our society. Although few of the adoptive parent comments

address explicitly the concept of ownership, there seems to be implicit support. References to the adoptive family as the "real" and "permanent" family of the child suggests that the child belongs to them.

The Adoptee's Identity

Most of the adoptive parents discuss dimensions of their own identities, however, some write about issues concerning their children's identities. These adoptive parents generally support open records and believe their adopted children have the right to know their heritage. The parents write not only of their children's need to know, but of their own personal agony in seeing their children suffer.

One adoptive mother who has been searching for her daughter's birth mother for the past seven years comments:

> No one but the adoptee and the adoptive parents, know what agony an adoptive child goes through not knowing just who they are.

Another adoptive mother writes:

> Knowing who one's antecedents were gives a person the feeling of being a part of a bigger whole--his past family, his present family and the one he may have in the future. My daughter particularly feels this lack and the need to know of her heritage.

A couple of adoptive parents who oppose open records also comment about the adoptee's identity. An adoptive couple who indicates they would be "disappointed that if in a moment of anger our daughter decided to seek natural parents" writes:

> What was their natural heritage was legally terminated when the natural parents agreed to adoption.

In summary, adoptive parents are most vocal about their own identity, although some express concern about the adoptee's identity. Adoptive parents focus on their identity as the "real" parents, the permanence of the adoptive family, and the ownership of the child. Adoptive parents identify with the family ideology that exists in American society. They consider their family as legitimate and desire both legal and social recognition. Some adoptive parents also discuss the adoptee's rights, employing arguments that both support and oppose sealed records.

BIRTH MOTHERS

Identity does not emerge as a significant issue for the birth mothers; less than a fourth of the sample comment on the issue. Most of the comments focus on the adoptee's identity, although a few birth mothers describe aspects of their own identities.

The Adoptee's Identity

Consistent with what is described earlier in the justice chapter, birth mothers support open records and the rights of the adoptee to know her/his heritage. Sometimes the birth mother describes this in terms of contact with the adoptee, in other cases the right to knowledge is simply asserted. Typical comments include: "We want her to easily find her heritage," "I, as a birthparent, plead, "LET OUR

CHILDREN KNOW," and "the adoptee could (if records were open) have the opportunity to find all about him or herself." One birth mother writes about the importance of her child contacting her to learn of her "hereditary" abilities:

> I would sincerely like to be able to see that my child can contact me if she so wishes and that she has access to heredity, her father has artistic and musical ability in his family that I am not sure will ever be discovered in her now.

Birth Mother's Identity

In those few instances that birth mothers focus on their own identities, the emphasis is on the feeling of completeness--being a whole person. Similar to some of the feelings expressed by adoptees, the separation of the birth mother and child results in a feeling of incompleteness for the birth mother.

As one birth mother writes:

> As a birth mother I have known the joy of giving life, the pain of losing a part of your very own being and the torture of living a life never to know how your baby made it through life or if he ever did at all.

Another writes that "There is a void in my life not knowing this child."

The wholeness of identity is achieved when the adoptee and birth mother are reunited, that is, they inititate contact and usually meet. Two birth mothers who experienced reunions state that "I now feel like a "whole" human being again," and, "We are like different people! Made whole again."

In summary, the birth mothers are concerned with the identity of the adoptee and the rights and needs of the adoptee to know her/his origins. In those cases when the birth mothers focus on their own identities, the concept of wholeness is important. Their comments reveal an emphasis on the attachment they feel toward the adoptee, an attachment which is not recognized by others or realized by themselves. These unfulfilled relationships result in the birth mothers feeling an incomplete sense of identity.

SUMMARY

The issue of identity is most frequently discussed by adoptees. They are most concerned with the need to know their heritage. Other dimensions of identity discussed include genetic, biological and medical histories, nationality and physical resemblance. Birth mother comments somewhat echo those of the adoptees; birth mothers discuss issues related to the adoptee's identity such as the need to know background information. When the birth mothers discuss their own identities they describe feelings of incompleteness and the sense of wholeness resulting from reunions with their children. Again, their feelings are similar to those expressed by adoptees; the sense of incompleteness pervades adoptee comments dealing with their search for origins.

Adoptive parents write about issues concerning their own identities, maintaining that they are the <u>real</u> parents,

that open records would result in adoption becoming akin to long-term foster care and that that the child is theirs. In a few instances adoptive parents discuss adoptee's identity, most often indicating support of open records and recognizing the need for the adoptee to know her/his parentage.

CHAPTER VI

THE WELL BEING THEME

A majority of each of the respondent groups express concern regarding the well being of the adoptee and, to a lesser extent, their own well being.

The stated intention of the adoption statute is to promote the best interests and well being of the child. The courts assume that the concealment of adoption records is necessary to preserve the best interests of the child. Major reasons for the concealment are to keep hidden that the child may be illegitimate and to provide a single family identity for the child. In the last two decades these premises have been challenged primarily by adoptees and some professionals in the field. Triseliotis (1984) writes that there is a psychosocial need in all people to know their personal history. Lifton (1979) reports that adoptees identify the lack of genealogical knowledge as detrimental to their well being. Further, she contends that the argument that sealed records are in the best interests of the child has been articulated by those who benefit from the anonymity--the adoptive parents. Whatever the position

taken toward adoption records, there is the belief that the well being of the child, and the other participants, is being addressed.

The "well being" comments included in the letters provide a context and emotional understanding for the writer's position on open records, supplementing straightforward statements concerning the justice of the situation and the rights of individuals. Fifty-three percent of the adoptee letters, 54 percent of adoptive parent letters and 65 percent of birth mother letters include statements on well being. (See Table 13 in Appendix A.)

Each of the groups most frequently discusses the well being of the adoptee. Some birth mothers and adoptive parents discuss their own well being and occasionally the well being of others. The major dimensions of well being that are discussed include (1) the desire to know one's identity or offspring and the need to know one's medical history; (2) feelings--primarily pain and frustration but occasionally happiness; (3) "best interests" generally, i.e., the welfare of the child and what is considered "best" for the child; and (4) stability of the family--mentioned by only a few adoptive parents. The comments of each group are presented separately below.

ADOPTEES

The Need to Know

The major concern of the adoptees is the need to know their medical and genealogical histories--this need is considered a requisite to their psychological and physiological well being. Adoptees write primarily about issues concerning their own well being, although they occasionally mention the needs of their children.

The paramount need to know medical histories is sometimes precipitated by an existing medical condition. Two adoptees write:

> As a diabetic since childhood, I face a lifetime of wondering what possible other diseases I could be more predisposed to develop, due to my genetic background.
>
> Since I can give my doctors no family medical history, I must submit to surgery every time a lump is discovered in my breast.

Other adoptees write about their fears, anxieties and guilt associated with not knowing medical histories to share with their children:

> I now have a son and just recently found out that he has a hearing problem which is rare and he inherited it from me. . . . Had I known it might have been prevented.
>
> As a mother of a child who contracted a rare blood disorder--the frustration of being denied any of my natural parents medical history is indescribable.

A few adoptees express concern regarding their decisions to have children and one comments on her current pregnancy:

> Although I had two normal children I fully realized the genetic risk with an unknown background. I asked myself if I had the right to parenthood and marriage with no genetic background.
>
> Can you imagine the fears of a pregnant woman who does not know what genetic deformities she might pass on to her child?
>
> I hope that I never bear children who will of course share my burden with respect to lack of genetic information.

Finally, many adoptees simply comment on their desires and need to know medical/genetic information. Adoptees write:

> . . . as time goes on--and doctors continually ask for past medical histories of families, there is a definite need for information for our sake.
>
> I feel that for medical purposes, you should know something about your real parents.

Although many adoptees mention the need to know their medical histories, the comments usually supplement a discussion of the general need to know background information. In some cases, it seems as if the medical history need is used as an additional justification for this general need to know. Historically, the psychological need to know has not been viewed as an acceptable reason to open records; obtaining medical data is a more understandable and presumably justifiable need. However, as noted earlier, medical data can be obtained without releasing identifying information, yet most of the adoptees who write want the records accessible to obtain not just medical information but identifying information as well.

Feelings

A number of the adoptees describe their feelings associated with not being able to know, and the effect this lack of knowledge has on their well being. The intensity of the feelings is evident, as illustrated by one adoptee's comment:

> . . . unlock the doors and prevent even one other human being from suffering the humiliation and frustration that I have.

The secrecy associated with adoption is identified by one adoptee as "the most damaging aspect." Other interviews and studies of adoptees reveal that most adoptees assume they were born illegitimate, therefore sealing records to protect the child from this "secret" is ludicrous (e.g., Lifton, 1979). The comments from this sample of adoptees are consistent with findings from other studies. One adoptee states that not knowing "is much more painful than anything I might find out about my past," and another comments that "I have suffered much emotional pain concerning the 'mystery' of my birth." Another adoptee writes:

> The secrecy surrounding adoption, in my opinion and from my own personal experience, is the most damaging aspect.

Some adoptees write about their feelings of happiness and fulfillment resulting from meeting their natural parent(s) and learning about their cultural and medical history. Twenty adoptees indicate that their search has resulted in a reunion with their birth parent(s); with one

exception, the reunion outcome is described as positive. Typical comments include:

> Do you have any idea what it's like to go to the doctor because you are ill and have the doctor ask what hereditary illnesses are in your family? . . . I can't possibly tell you in any words the relief, the pleasure, the contentment I now have knowing who I came from.
>
> I cannot tell you the anguish I had within me, wondering where I came from and what I would give my children. Since finding my natural mother I have found peace within.

The findings from this study concur with other investigations of reunion outcomes. In most instances, reunions are fulfilling experiences and are perceived as beneficial by both adoptees and birth parents (Depp, 1982; Sorosky et al., 1979).

However, a few adoptees contend that it is in their best interest not to know their birth parents. One adoptee writes about the potential effect open records would have on her and her parents.

> Passage of this law would disrupt a lot of lives, including possibly mine and the wonderful Mom and Dad who loved, supported, raised me and who earned that title! . . . Don't make me live with the fear that someone might be getting in those records with the intent of finding me! I am very happy with the way things are!

Another adoptee writes:

> I feel for the poor children who will be caught in this unbelievable policy. I am adopted myself and do not care to know about my so called "real parents."

In summary, adoptees voice support for open records; they describe their painful feelings resulting from not

knowing their heritage. The adoptees emphasize the need to know their medical histories, for the well being of themselves and their children.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Most of the adoptive parents focus on the well being of the adoptee. Some parents discuss their own well being and that of the adoptive families, others the well being of the birth parents, and some the best interests of "all parties" involved in the adoption process. The tone of the letters and comments reflects their opposition to open adoption records. Almost all of the letters include statements relating the pain, confusion, frustration and similar feelings that would result if adoption records become accessible.

The Adoptee's Well Being

In discussing the well being of the adoptees, the adoptive parents usually refer to them as children. Because most of the adoptive parents do not indicate the age of their child, it is not possible to know whether the adoptees are children. However, the concept of the adoptee as "child" regardless of age has been discussed in the literature. The United States is a property-based culture, and, as such, it may result in parents feeling a sense of ownership about their children, a feeling that does not disappear when the children become adults (Benet, 1976).

The implication in the opinions expressed is that opening records would have a negative effect on the adoptee's well being, regardless of her/his age.

The concern for the adoptee is expressed strongly and with considerable intensity of feeling.

One adoptive mother writes:

> If all adoption records are opened . . . Their biological parents will have access to them. They could move in next door or across the street and insist that the child owes them something; they could call every week or every day and completely undo all the adoptive (real) parents have done. That would only confuse the child and tear his love and commitment to shreads.

Other adoptive parents write about the potential suffering opening adoption records would cause:

> The child's welfare would definitely be at stake and many, many lives would be disrupted. . . . Don't let our children suffer, needlessly.

> He read the article that appeared in our local paper. He now is worried that someone will come and take him away from us. . . . I am so afraid of the damage you are going to do to the child if you change this law.

Several adoptive parents write about the potentially deleterious effects of the adoptee meeting the birth parents, or the possibility that this meeting could occur, for example:

> I believe that the retroactive effect would cause much more unhappy effects than happy reunions!

> Our adopted daughter says it "would blow her mind to all of a sudden have a parent show up."

The Adoptive Parent's Well Being

Some parents discuss their own pain and frustrations regarding opening adoption records and the effect this could have on the adoptive family.

Adoptive parents express their fears about intrusion by the birth parent(s), as two mothers write:

> I do not want to have to be afraid that every time the doorbell rings it might be her biological parents.
>
> The thought of a stranger suddenly appearing to claim our children is unbearable.

Other adoptive parents write about their feelings generally, for example, one couple writes:

> Any laws of this type (open records before age 18 and birth mother search) would only lead to the breakdown of the adoption process and cause heartache in any happy family where adopted children have been lovingly received and raised up from infants or young toddlers.

The Birth Parent's Well Being

Some parents write about the birth parents, again emphasizing the potential suffering which would result from opening adoption records. Adoptive parents write:

> The liberal accessibility to records minimizes the difficulties faced by many birthparents who have surrendered children for adoption. A later contact with the adopted child may be seriously detrimental to these persons.
>
> . . . I think that the biological mother would rather have an abortion than . . . face the possibility of that child coming to her in 18 years if she doesn't want anyone to know she had a child out of wedlock.
>
> No child should be allowed to force themselves on an unwilling biological parent. The emotional strain of such a meeting, on both parties, is unthinkable.

Well Being of All Participants

Finally, about one-fourth of the letters include comments on the well being of "all parties." Again, the emphasis is on the painful feelings for all involved and the desire for stability. Comments typically read:

> Opening the doors to the destruction of all confidences will only lead to heartache and sorrow to all concerned in the long run.
>
> Adoption should be confidential and permanent in order to create a stable atmostphere for all people concerned.

In summary, adoptive parents focus on the well being of the adoptees; however, some parents write about the consequences to others involved in the adoption process. The primary emphasis of the comments is the pain, suffering and similar types of feelings which would occur if records are opened.

BIRTH MOTHERS

The birth mother comments reflect concern about the adoptees well being and their own well being; approximately the same number of comments are focused on each group.

The comments relating to the adoptee emphasize the adoptees' emotional needs to know their parentage, especially medical and genetic information. In addition, the birth mothers convey their reasons for relinquishment, i.e., to do what was in the best interests of their child, and their feelings subsequently.

The Adoptee's Well Being

Comments regarding the adoptee's need to know convey a desire to share necessary medical and hereditary information. Birth mothers comment on general medical background and hereditary disease such as diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. As one birth mother writes:

> We have several hereditary diseases in our family. It is very important that she (my daughter) know that she is particularly vulnerable to these diseases. . . . There are no words to express the agony that I have lived with all these years wondering about her welfare.

Birth mothers also write about their children's need to know their parentage and the frustration and pain they perceive adoptees feel because they are unable to find them, the birth mothers.

One birth mother states:

> It is very painful to me to think that my children (twins) may perhaps be engaged in a frustrating, discouraging search for their natural parents.

Another writes:

> We who relinquished babies for adoption did so that those babies might have full, happy lives. If their happiness depends on knowing from whom and where they came, please give them that right.

Some birth mothers describe their reasons for relinquishment, emphasizing that the paramount concern is the best interest and welfare of the children. Birth mothers write that they gave up their child so "he might have a better life than I could give him" or "she could be happy." A typical comment reads:

> I am the natural mother of a child given up for adoption 28 years ago because I felt I had no other choice and felt this was in the best interest of my child.

Another birth mother found her son when he was 22 and "heavily into drugs" with no job. She believes that not knowing why he was relinquished led to his emotional disturbances. She writes:

> I sincerely feel that, had he access to me at 18, he wouldn't have gone off the deep end as he did. His adoptive mother agrees--he HAD TO KNOW he was loved by me, and not given up because I didn't want him.

However, one birth mother writes that she supports the confidentiality of the records because it protects her son from learning the unpleasant circumstances of his birth:

> When I relinquished my son I did it to protect him. I didn't want to tell him that I was deserted by his father, and my family didn't want me to bring him home. . . . I don't want to be found, confronted, or anything. I hate what happened, and hate everything connected to it. I hate 1963.

In a few instances birth mothers write that they want the child to know the reasons for the relinquishment--that it was not a rejection but rather the situation where the birth mother could not financially or emotionally support them. Several of the birth mothers indicate that they had "no other choice" or "were pressured by agencies." However, the predominant theme is that, whether the relinquishment was voluntary or involuntary, the birth mother did the "right thing" for the child's welfare.

The Birth Mother's Well Being

The birth mothers also describe relinquishment in terms of its effect on their own well being; the pervasive theme is the never forgetting and the constant pain over the years.

One birth mother currently searching for her child writes:

> I gave my son up 14 years ago for the same basic reasons any mother gives up her child--to give him security and a better chance in life than I could have given him. It has been 14 years of hell for me. . . . Law or no law--I'll find my child. I loved him enough to give up my own flesh and blood; I love him enough to make it my business to find him and I also love him enough not to interfere in his life or make myself known to him unless I know this is what he wants.

Other typical comments are:

> Even though we birth mothers give up our children when they are born, we still love and care for them as if they are with us every day.
>
> I am a birthparent who feels the pain and magnitude of surrendering a child for adoption ten years ago.
>
> It is very hard to express my feelings for the past twenty years in a letter. But there has been a great deal of pain. How long must one suffer for one mistake.
>
> I have never forgotten her and know from 18 years of heartache that what I was told about time healing all wounds is untrue. . . . The emptiness and sadness I feel on my daughter's birthday and all other days cannot be filled by other children

These types of feelings are revealed in other studies that show that years after the adoption birth parents still experience mourning, feelings of loss and lack of self confidence. Not only is the experience similar to mourning over

a death, the urge to search for the lost one is commonly observed among the bereaved following a death (Parks, 1972). Devkin et al. (1984) suggest that the desire to search may "be a means of achieving restitution not of the surrendered child, but of the self" (p. 279).

One birth mother expresses her pain in terms of others who may be in a similar position. She writes:

> I pray that no pregnant girl, under pressure from others, who is confused and scared will surrender her child. Only to spend the rest of her life with sorrow and regret.

Other birth mothers write about their need to know about their offspring, and the pain associated with not knowing. The overwhelming desire to meet their children, to know about their welfare, or even just to know if their children are alive is evident in many of their letters. Two birth mothers write:

> Only a mother who has suffered and been denied the right to know something of her child's well being can truly understand my plea to you; please recommend these records be opened.

> I would like to know on a regular basis about his welfare, and know that I would be consulted if, by some misfortune, he were ever left alone again.

Lee Campbell, former president of Concerned United Birthparents, describes the need to know what has happened to their offspring as a component critical to the completion of the birth parent's healing process (1979).

Yet, a few birth mothers write that opening adoption records would have negative consequences, not only for them

but for their families as well. They convey the pain that relinquishment caused, and write that opening records would intensify these feelings.

A birth mother who also is an adoptee writes:

> I myself have given a baby up for adoption and that was bad enough (although it was the right thing to do). . . I also have never met my real mother, but I have a step-mother, who, to me is my real mother. There is a reason why my mom gave me up and the pass (sic) should remain the pass. . . . This Law would make pregnant girls live in fear of the children they would and should give up.

Another birth mother wrote about the potential harm for all parties if the records become accessible:

> I cannot help but think that it (the new law) will cause a biological mother that is thinking of adoption more anxieties and more problems in making that difficult decision. . . . Everyone wins from an adoption provided of course that the mother receives the physical, emotional, and psychological assistance she needs and the screening procedure of adoptive parents is as careful as ever. The mother is able to rebuild her life as she would have it, as I have done, having the knowledge that she has given her baby the best chance at a good loving home.

The potential harm to her current family is described by one birth mother:

> This Act could very possibly destroy my husband's future because of my past.

Generally, though, birth mothers support open records. They write that closed records have detrimental effects on the adoptees and themselves. Birth mothers also describe feelings related to the relinquishment, specifically emphasizing their own pain and their objective to serve the best interests of the child.

SUMMARY

Most individuals' comments focus on the best interests and well being of the child. The adoptees and birth mothers express concern for the need of the adoptee to know her/his heritage, especially medical information. Their letters support the position that opening records would promote the well being of the adoptee. Adoptive parents' comments generally express the opposite view--that opening records would result in pain, confusion and suffering for the adoptees. The adoptive parents indicate particular concern for the potential deleterious effect an unannounced visit by the birth parent would have on the child.

Adoptive parents also write about the negative impact open records would have on their families as well as the birth parents. The adoptive parents fear intrusion by the birth parents; they also contend that many birth parents do not want to be found by their children, and this contact may cause both parties anguish.

Birth mothers' letters indicate that they <u>do</u> want to be found, and the lack of knowledge about their children is cause for a great deal of suffering. Birth mothers also discuss their feelings about relinquishment, both in terms of the suffering, the reasons for their decision, and their current thoughts.

CHAPTER VII

FEELINGS ABOUT OTHERS

In their letters, adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers convey how they feel about others in the adoption triangle. Individuals write about their feelings toward others to justify, explain and/or qualify their position on whether adoption records should be accessible. Sometimes their comments relate feelings in terms of well being; these comments are discussed indepth in Chapter VI.

Overall, the number of letters which include comments relating feelings about others are proportionately less than for the three previously discussed themes. The proportion of those commenting on the theme is similar across the groups. Twenty-eight percent of the adoptee letters, 32 percent of the adoptive parent letters and 33 percent of the birth mother letters include comments on feelings toward others (see Table 14 in Appendix A).

ADOPTEES

Most of the adoptees who describe feelings about others focus on feelings toward adoptive parents. Usually the

comments are statements of love, caring and appreciation; in many instances the comments indicate that any search undertaken by the adoptee is not related to a negative or unfavorable relationship with the adoptive parents.

As several adoptees comment:

> I am very grateful and I do love my adoptive parents very much. If I had the opportunity to personally choose my parents I could not find more a loving and supportive family anywhere.

> . . . absolutely NOTHING can take away the love that I feel for my adopted parents.

Other adoptees follow up their statements of love and appreciation with a discussion of their continued desire to know their origins, for example,

> I will always be grateful to them for their (my adoptive parents) love, guidance and care, but my heart still yearns to know if my brother and sisters are still living and what their lives are like.

> For adoptees, their Mom and Dad are the ones who loved and cared for them while growing up. Finding their biological parents in no way changes who their Mom and Dad are. Instead, it allow the adoptees to understand themselves and where they come from.

Generally, the findings from this sample of adoptees suggest that the desire to access records and/or initiate contact with the birth parents is not related to an unsatisfactory relationship with the adoptive parents. This finding is consistent with results of some research and inconsistent with others. For example, Sorosky et al., (1975) find that poor adoptee-adoptive parent relationships are not related to the adoptee's desire to search. Other

factors, such as being told of their adoption late and disruptively, are more important as predictors of the desire to search. A more recent study of searching and non-searching adoptees by Aumend and Barrett (1984) reveals that the desire to search is not associated with unsatisfactory revelation of the adoptive status or poor relationships with their adoptive parents. However, Triseliotis (1973, 1984) finds that unsatisfactory adoptive family relationships as well as poor self image and nondisclosure of background information are critical factors that individually or combined are related to the adoptee's searching desires. Raynor (1980) also reports a relationship between an adoptee satisfaction and adjustment and a desire to contact birth parents. Yet, both Triseliotis and Raynor do not find a relationship between adoptee satisfaction and adjustment and a desire for additional background information.

The adoptive parents' involvement in the adoptee's search and their support of the search is described in several letters. Again, the major feeling is one of love and appreciation of the adoptive parents' understanding of the adoptee's needs. Several adoptees who are currently searching or who have completed the search for their birth parents write:

> My adopted parents are behind me all the way in my search and feel it is a right of every adoptee to know his own heritage.

> My adoptive parents were in full support of my search as they felt that as an adult I have a right to know of my background. They never felt threatened.
>
> I love and appreciate my adoptive parents (whom I consider my REAL parents) and our relationship has been strengthened by my newly-established friendships with my biological family and the resulting improvement in my overall well being.

Some of the adoptees indicate in their letters whether the adoptive parents are supportive in the adoptee's search efforts. Of the 16 adoptees who discuss parental support, 14 (88%) write that their parents support their search activities and 2 (13%) do not. In addition, 5 adoptees describe the search assistance and understanding of other family members. The positive feelings engendered by the adoptive parents' involvement in the search is referenced in both the research and social work practice literature. Depp (1982) and Lifton (1979) report that the adoptee-adoptive parent relationship is enhanced as a result of the search activities, bringing the adoptive family closer together. Practitioners write of the need to involve adoptive parents in the adoptee's search to facilitate a positive and constructive experience (Dukette, 1984; Flynn, 1979). Although most adoptees do not indicate a desire to search (Triseliotis, 1984), for those that do the adoptive parent participation is viewed as beneficial.

Most adoptee comments on the search convey positive feelings toward the adoptive parents' involvement; however, a few adoptees in this sample report regret that their

adoptive parents feel threatened by the search or refuse to participate.

Some adoptees describe feelings toward their birth mothers; again, the emphasis is on the love they feel and appreciation for the birth mother making the right decision. The expressions of feeling include a desire to let the birth mother know that she or he, the adoptee, does not resent her.

One adoptee writes about her feelings toward her "natural mother"; the statement is preceded by a profession of love for her adoptive parents, then reads:

> If I could only tell her (my natural mother) that I love her for making the best decision for her little girl 31 years ago, that her decision has made everything in my life possible.
>
> . . . if the records are opened maybe I can tell my mother all the wonderful things I've stored in my heart for her over the years. I would never intrude on her life, I just want to thank her.

Another adoptee writes:

> For the first time since I was born, 30 years ago, she can look at me, see how well I am and realize that she did do the right thing by putting me up for adoption.

Along with the feelings of compassion the adoptee feels for the birth mother is the feeling that the birth mother doesn't forget about the relinquishment process or the child, the adoptee.

One adoptee comments:

> I know that my natural mother is in her 60s now and I want to be able to tell her that I have a wonderful family and that I never ever resented her. I feel in my heart that a woman can never forget that she has had a child and that she probably would want to know how that child has turned out.

Another writes:

> I know my biological mother has these same feelings (feeling like an incomplete person), after all, a woman never forgets giving birth to a child.

In summary, adoptees express feelings of love and compassion for their adoptive and birth parents. They appreciate the support of their adoptive parents in the search effort and express gratitude toward their birth mothers for making a difficult but "right" decision to relinquish.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Adoptive parents primarily write about their feelings toward birth parents. Most adoptive parents express feelings related to the possibility of intrusion into the birth parent's life (by the adoptee) or into the adoptive family's life (by the birth parent) These concerns are reported earlier, as they relate to the rights of privacy (Chapter IV) or well being (Chapter VI) of the birth parents, adoptive parents and adoptees. The "feelings" comments that are described in this chapter echo these concerns for privacy and well being, specifically (1) that it will be painful for the birth parent(s) if the adoptee were to find them and (2) that the adoptive parents will

live in fear of the birth parent returning to claim their child.

However, some of the comments express feelings of love and gratitude toward the birth mothers, and a concern for their current well being.

A few of the comments deal with the issue of relinquishment, with adoptive parents professing love and appreciation. Two parents write:

> We love our son's birth mother--she not only loved him enough to give him life but to give him to us knowing we would love him and raise him as our own son. For this reason, we would not think of showing up on her doorstep 18 years from now--we love her and respect her privacy and her new life.
>
> We are very thankful for a young girl's willingness and foresight to give her up to a home atmosphere she was unable to provide at that time.

Another mother describes the love the birth parent had for the child:

> The biological parents of both of our children gave them the gift of life and loved them enough to place them for adoption.

One couple ensures that her children also understand the love the birth parent felt for them:

> They were raised with the thought that their birth parent loved them as much as we do.

A few of the adoptive parents describe their feelings toward their children; most of the comments deal with the potentially negative effects of open records on the adoptee, an issue described in detail in earlier chapters.

In summary, adoptive parents primarily describe their feelings toward the birth parents. Most of the comments focus on the issues of privacy and well being. A few comments relate to feelings about the relinquishment, with adoptive parents expressing gratitude and love that birth parents had the courage to place their children for adoption.

BIRTH MOTHERS

Birth mothers write primarily about their feelings toward their children, the adoptees. Most of the comments emphasize their love for their children and the desire to meet them.

Typical comments include:

> You do not love your child any less because you gave birth to that child out of wedlock. . . . I still have the same concerns for her welfare today.

> Even though we birth mothers give up our children when they are born, we still love and care for them as if they are with us every day. Our hope is that they will come back one day and ask the questions they have always wanted to ask.

Some birth mothers describe the love they have for the child they relinquished within the context of their current parental situation:

> I realize that the parents who adopted and raised her must love her as much as I love the children I was fortunate enough to be able to raise. But as her natural mother, even a non-parenting, mother, I love her also.

> I have never stopped loving that child even though I have since had four more beautiful children.

Some birth mothers describe their feelings about the relinquishment, emphasizing that they have not forgotten their children and continue to have strong loving and caring feelings. Typical comments include:

> Even though I released her for adoption I have never stopped loving her and will never forget.
>
> The child may be severed from us but the memories, beautiful and traumatic shall remain a part of us forever.

Other birth mothers describe the pain they feel when they think about their children. One parent writes:

> There has not been one day or year gone by that I haven't thought about my son and at times cried about it.

The intensity of the birth mothers' feelings toward their children, years after the relinquishment, is evident in the letters and belies the commonly held belief that birth mothers do not maintain loving feelings for their children. Approximately 87 percent of the birth mothers write that they relinquished their child more than 12 years ago. (This percentage is based on the 76 birth mothers, 74 percent of the birth mother sample, who report the age of their children.) Devkin et al. (1984) find that elapsed time since relinquishment is associated with search activity, with parents who had relinquished children more than 12 years ago being more likely to search. Although the age of the child may be a factor influencing search activities, the intense feelings and desire to search also may be

related to the maturity of the birth parent and unresolved feelings about the relinquishment. The few birth mothers in the sample who indicate a desire to forget had just recently relinquished.

Some birth mothers describe their feelings toward their children and the adoptive parents. This is illustrated in comments by one birth mother who describes positive feelings about finally meeting her child--

> It took me 15 years to find out my child was healthy and loved. But I, too, love her dearly. . . . I know after 15 years she has a strong love for her adoptive parents and I will never destroy this. I want her life to feel complete knowing all her parents do care and love her.

Some birth mothers describe their feelings toward the adoptive parents. Two types of feelings are expressed. First, birth mothers profess their appreciation, and sometimes love, for the adoptive parent, and the recognition that adoptive parents care deeply for their children. Second, birth mothers write to assure the adoptive parents that they have nothing to fear; the birth mothers acknowledge that adoptive parents may fear their interference, but the birth mothers write that they have no desire to interfere or hurt the adoptive parents. Devkin et al. (1984) in their study of birth parents also find that a desire to retrieve the child is not associated with search activity.

A birth mother who placed her infant for adoption 16 years ago, when she was 17 writes:

> If his adoptive parents have raised him well and he loves them, I love them too. No one needs to be afraid of me.

One birth mother describes her desire to meet the adoptive parents, and another writes about the successful relationship she has with her child's adoptive parents.

> I would also like to meet and express my gratitude to her adoptive parents for giving her through the years many things I couldn't.

> I have also met with my daughter's adoptive parents and we have established a highly successful relationship and it is my theory that it is only the narrow minded and uneducated natural parent and adoptive parents who are unable to cope with the situation in a like manner.

This finding suggests that the option of "open adoption," where the birth parents and adoptive parents meet prior to the adoption, would be feasible for some individuals The possibility for positive relationships between the birth and adoptive parents is also described by Campbell (1979) who has established an ongoing positive relationship with her son's adoptive parents.

Others write proclaiming their desire not to disrupt the adoptive family, although still indicating a desire to meet their children.

> I always will love her (my daughter) and I am hoping when she will be 18 that she would like to see me and talk to me. . . . I never would try to take her away from her adoptive parents.

> I care a great deal about my child's adoptive parents and would never hurt them.

In summary, the birth mothers write about their feelings toward the adoptees, particularly the love they continue to feel. Some birth mothers describe their feelings toward the adoptive parents, emphasizing the appreciation they feel toward the adoptive parents and assuring them that they do not want to disrupt their lives.

SUMMARY

The adoption participants most frequently describe feelings of love, caring and appreciation. Adoptees most often discuss their loving feelings toward their adoptive parents, and how their desires to know their origins do not alter these feelings. Adoptive parents are more likely to convey feelings toward the birth parents, especially the birth mothers. The tone is generally positive, however, some adoptive parents express concern regarding intrusion by the birth parent and to the birth parent. Most of the birth mothers write about their feelings toward the adoptees, desribing the constant love they feel and desire to meet them, yet not to intrude or disrupt their lives.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FAMILY THEME

Some of the adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers refer to individual family relationships or the family as a "unit" in their letters. In the adoption process, a new family is formed when the birth parent(s) terminates rights and the adoptive parents assume custody and rights. However, does the existence of this new family, now the legally recognized family of the adoptee, imply that familial relationships with the birth parent and other relatives do not exist? Some of the letters include comments regarding birth parent relationships; others affirm the privacy of the new family and how changes in adoption law, such as opening records, would jeopardize this family unit.

Adoptees are most likely to comment on family relationships; 37 percent of the adoptee sample write about family, as compared to 16 percent of the adoptive parents and 15 percent of the birth mothers. (See Table 15 in Appendix A.)

In discussing family relationships, individuals describe (1) specific relations, such as aunts, uncles, brothers, children and/or (2) their "family" as a unit. The discussion of individual relations usually relates a desire to know these individuals, or know information about them. References to the family as a "unit" are usually associated with concerns that open records would jeopardize the stability of the family unit.

In addition to the respondents' comments on family relationships, the terms they use to describe themselves and others in the adoption triangle reveal their perceptions on family relationships. Terms such as adoptee, adopted child, natural parent, adoptive parent and parent reflect to some extent the respondents' definitions of familial relationships.

ADOPTEES

The vast majority of adoptees whose letters include comments about family describe individual relationships, most often referring to their own children. Twenty-seven of the adoptees (26%) indicate in their letters that they have children. The remaining 74 percent do not indicate whether or not they have children. Most of the children of the adoptees are biological offspring; only three report having adopted a child. Most of the adoptees in the sample are female, thus the concern for children or

anticipated offspring is understandable. The maternal feelings that are experienced with pregnancy and after are reflected in the adoptees' letters. Many of the comments convey the desire to share information with their children about their heritage. Typical comments include:

> Now that my own children have reached the age that they are having their own children, all of us wish we knew more about my background.
>
> I can't begin to tell you the void I feel not knowing my origins and my heritage, especially when each of my children were born.

In a few cases, the adoptees express satisfaction from knowing their origins and being able to tell their children about them.

Other comments are focused on the need to know medical and genetic background, especially in terms of the health of the adoptees' children. Adoptees who are or anticipate being pregnant as well as those already with children write about this concern, as illustrated in the following comments:

> I am a 25-year-old woman who would like nothing more than to bear children, but because of the secrecy surrounding my birth, I am afraid.
>
> I have recently married, and my husband and I would like to find out more about my past heritage before we start a family of our own.
>
> I am 22 years of age and expecting my first child. I am so excited about it because it will be the first blood relative I'll have ever known and to have someone who (may) resemble me means a lot.

Some adoptees write about individual relations in terms of blood relatives; the desire to know them is the dominant theme:

> Who are my blood parents and what other relatives do I have? Sisters, brothers, even half or whatever?
>
> All my life as a child I wanted to know who my parents were, if I had any brothers or sisters, aunts and uncles and what my roots were.
>
> If you aren't adopted you can't begin to understand what it feels like to know you have relatives out there somewhere.

One adoptee who is 54 years old is still searching for her blood relatives; she writes:

> I've searched for my parents, a brother and two sisters most of my life. All these years I've had no one related to me.

The focus on biological family ties implicitly challenges the validity of adoption by asserting the importance of the blood tie. The institution of adoption is fraught with contradictions relating to biological and cultural issues. The western culture places a high value on heredity--"To many people, heredity is a blanket explanation of human variety" (Benet, 1976, p. 192). At the same time, the western ideal of adoption is to sever all links between the adoptee and birth family; the adoptive family is the legally and socially recognized family of the child. Adoptees are ususally told of their adoptive status at an early age, yet, the implicit message is to forget being told because they have a family, their adoptive parents.

Lifton, an adoptee and staunch advocate of open records, describes the biological/cultural dilemma as the "Game of As If;" she comments:

> Everyone pretends as if the Adoptee belongs to the family raising him or her, belongs on all levels, not just the social-psychological one. This version is not unlike the emperor who has no clothes, in that everyone must pretend the Adoptee never had any other parents. The adoptive parents embrace the child as if it were of their own true blood and asks the child to live as if this were true. To share the illusion. (p. 14)

The adoptees in this sample express an interest in biological ties, apparently overcoming societal pressure to act "as if" the adoptive family is the only family. Their comments reinforce the importance of the biological basis of family in society--individuals can be separated by a legal action, adoption, but this legal action cannot deny continued existence of the blood ties between the individuals. The adoptees' recognition of the significance of blood ties in terms of their own children is not unexpected---"who does she/he look like?" is a constant reminder to adoptees that they don't know but that their children will know.

The identification with the biological family is also evident in the terms used to describe the birth parents. Most of the adoptees refer to their birth parents as their "natural parents" (58%) or their "birth parents" (24%) (see Table 19 in Appendix A). They refer to their adoptive parents as their "adoptive parents" (85%) (see Table 18).

The term "parent" is used by only eight percent of the adoptees to describe their adoptive parents and ten percent to describe their birth parents (see Tables and 18 and 19).

The distinction between "natural parents" for the family of procreation and "adoptive parents" for the adoptive parents is significant for several reasons. First, it reveals adoptee recognition of two sets of parents, not a single set established in law. Second, the terms used may reflect an underlying ambivalence experienced by the adoptee. By using the term "natural" for their birth parents, are they implying that their adoptive parents are their "unnatural" parents? Kirk (1964) raises issues regarding the inherent difference between families of procreation and adoptive families. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing and accepting these differences. Taken one step further, recognizing these differences means that adoptees are faced with an additional stress--reconciling their feelings about the difference in terms of how to define their biological family relationships. In a broader societal context, the differences have implications for how the adoptive family and the "related" biological family are defined. These broader implications are discussed in Chapter 10.

In summary, adoptees' letters include a focus on their own children and specific relatives, such as brothers,

sisters, aunts and uncles. Their primary concern is the need to know information to share with their children and the desire to meet their relatives.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Adoptive parents are more likely to focus on the "family unit" as compared to specific individual relations. The comments reinforce their position regarding the laws on sealed adoption records and is a predominant focus in their discussions of family. The adoptive parents assert that opening adoption records, as proposed in the Model Act, would jeopardize their family unit. Adoptive parents write:

> If the MODEL STATE ADOPTION ACT is passed, . . . our family is in jeopardy! . . . We are a family. We have strived to create a strong and close family unit through unconditional love, attention, discipline, and with the help and grace of God.
>
> The regulations . . . would undermine the unity, strength and stability of our family. . . . The idea of opening up the adoption records to anyone over the age of 18 is inconceivable, and would undermine the whole security of parent/child relationships.

A few parents write about the parent-child relationship, stressing the potential negative impact of the proposed model law. Adoptive parents maintain that opening records would "bring unhappiness to both parents and children" and would "undermine(s) the parent-child relationship we have established with these children."

The possibility of the adoptive family becoming a temporary family institution, akin to long-term foster care, is also raised. However, as discussed in Chapter V, the phrase "long-term foster care" appears to be associated with an organized effort to oppose the Model Act. Two adoptive parents who express their concerns about becoming "foster homes" write:

> You are threatening both lives as a "family" by passing such an ignorant act. . . . By passing this act, you are in reality making a foster type home situation and not a secure family life which everyone deserves.
>
> If the Model States Adoption Act were passed, our home, . . . would be reduced to almost foster home status. The sanctity of the home is the backbone of our democracy and this Model States Act would be doing more chopping away of that backbone.

The adoptive parents' concerns reflect the distinguishing characteristic of western adoption law--its intolerance of the notion of a semi-adopted status. The obligation to support is assumed totally by the adoptive parents, and the children's rights (e.g., inheritance) relate to the adoptive parents. The adoptive parents fear that opening adoption records will change the legal and social status of parents' relationship to the child.

Yet, an examination of the terms adoptive parents use to describe themselves reveals that only two refer to themselves as the "real parents." Most (68%) refer to themselves as the adoptive parents, although 31% simply refer to themselves as the "parents" (see Table 16). Most

adoptive parents refer to the birth parents as either the "birth parents" (35%) or the "biological parents" (36%); however, some adoptive parents call the birth parents the natural (25%) or real parents (2%) (see Table 19). The terms used by the adoptive parents reflect the inherent contradictions in their perceptions of familial relationships. On the one hand, they strongly affirm the notion that they are the parents and the family of the child. Yet, their use of "adoptive parent" rather than simply "parent" may indicate a recognition that a family other than the adoptive one exists.

Finally, a few adoptive parents write affirming their status as the real family:

> She is our child that knows only us as her "parents." We are a family.
>
> We're a family and are "real" parents.

In summary, adoptive parents describe the importance of preserving the family unit, asserting that opening sealed records would jeopardize the sanctity and unity of the family.

BIRTH MOTHERS

Birth mothers most frequently focus on individual relations, usually expressing a desire for the adoptee to meet and/or know about her/his sisters, brothers, and other relatives. Some birth mothers state that their children

know about the adoptee, and would also like to meet him/her.

> I would do anything in the world to see my daughter and possible grandchildren. I have three other children by my marriage and they all know about Jan and hope that the day will come when our entire family will be reunited.
>
> He (the adoptee) also has a sister and brother who would like to know of him also. . . . It would be nice to know if I'm a grandmother and if so to have their picture also.

These birth mothers indicate a desire to include, in some way, the children they relinquished with their current families. Some of the birth mothers (14%) refer to their children by the names they gave them at birth. A majority of the birth mothers (61%) use the term son or daughter when referring to the adoptee (see Table 17). The absence of a descriptor prior to the term, such as "natural," "adoptive" or "birth" daughter is also an indication that the birth parents consider these children as family members. Further, they most often refer to themselves as the "natural parents" (62%) and the adoptive parents as "adoptive parents" (82%) affirming their legitimacy as having a familial relationship with the child (see Tables 16 and 18).

The societal assumption that birth mothers forget about their children is not evident in this sample. Rather, the birth mothers hope that eventually their children will contact them and meet their other blood

relatives. The changing societal sexual mores is also reflected in the comments. At the time most of the birth mothers relinquished, single parent mothers were generally looked down upon, and illegitimacy was scorned. In today's more permissive society, the birth parents in the sample seem to accept acknowledgement of their illegitimate pregnancies because the possibility of meeting their children exists.

A few birth mothers contend that the adoptive family is the real family. Two birth mothers who oppose open records and do not desire a meeting with their children write:

> The family that raised my baby is his or her family.
>
> I felt (my daughter) lucky to be adopted and have a real family.

Another birth mother who desires to meet her child indicates that she does not expect this meeting to jeopardize the adoptee's family relationships. She writes:

> I want very much for my daughter to find us, her natural family including four brothers and sisters, father, grandparents, aunts and uncles. . . . This (finding parents) will not change their family relationship with those who gave them years to bring them up.

In summary, those birth mothers who write about family issues focus on individual relations, specifically the desire to have the adoptee meet his/her blood relatives.

SUMMARY

The adoptees and the birth mothers are more likely to focus on individual familial relationships. Both expressed the desire for the adoptee to meet blood relatives. The adoptees are especially concerned with finding out genetic and medical information to be able to make informed decisions regarding pregnancy and to ensure that critical genetic history is shared with their children. The adoptive parents focus on the family unit, expressing concern that opening adoption records would threaten the stability and sanctity of the family.

The terms used to describe themselves and others are an indication of their perceptions of the familial relations. Adoptees and birth mothers describe the birth parent as the "natural parent," whereas adoptive parents are more likely to refer to them as the "biological" or "birth" parent. The use of "natural parent" rather than "birth" or "biological" parent seems to indicate a relationship that goes beyond the biological ties. All three groups refer to the adoptive parents as the "adoptive parents," revealing a recognition of the difference between adoptive and nonadoptive families. Yet, adoptive parents maintain they are the parents of the child, a position not entirely consistent with the terminology they use. Further, adoptive parents are more likely to refer to the child as their "adopted child," while most birth parents refer to them as their

"son" or "daughter." The terms used seem to reflect the attitudes of the respondents, although conflicting messages, especially from the adoptive parents, are apparent.

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

SUMMARY

Letters from adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers were content analyzed to examine attitudes and opinions regarding sealed adoption records specifically, and the adoption experience generally. The letters were written to federal governmental officials in response to the adoption records section of the proposed Model State Adoption Act. The Model Act includes a provision to open records to adoptees upon their reaching the age of majority, and the retroactive application of this provision.

Of the 2,881 letters written, 391 letters were selected for inclusion in this study. A systematic random sample from each of the groups yielded 114 letters from adoptees, 164 from adoptive parents and 113 from birth mothers. Two types of analysis were done. First, the characteristics of the letters (e.g., format of letter, number of pages) and respondents (e.g., position taken toward open adoption records, and age, sex and search activities) were coded. These data provide a description

of the sample. Second, 85 percent of the letters were content analyzed to discern predominant themes illustrating the primary concerns of each of the respondent groups. Form letters and letters only including statements of support or opposition to the law were not content analyzed because the letters did not contain comments reflecting individual's attitudes or opinions about the adoption experience. The content analysis involved systematically reading through the letters several times, and identifying and categorizing statements that reveal participant perspectives on the adoption experience.

The content analysis resulted in the emergence of five themes, themes that reveal the primary concerns of the adoption triangle participants. The themes are:

> Justice: Statements relating to justice focus on what is viewed as fair, whose rights are being protected or violated, and the basis for rights demanded or denied.
>
> Identity: Statements relating to the identity theme focus on the respondents' definitions of identity, especially their own, and the effect of sealed adoption records on the adoptee's identity development.
>
> Well-being: Statements relating to the well-being theme focus on the psychological and emotional condition of individuals involved in the adoption experience, and the extent to which sealed records affects this condition.
>
> Feelings About Others: Statements related to this theme focus on how each of the respondents feels about the other participants in the adoption triangle.

Family: Statements related to this theme focus on respondents' references and descriptions of familial relationships and the meaning of these relationships.

Comments related to the justice theme are most prevalent for each of the groups. Identity is a primary concern of the adoptees, but also is mentioned by adoptive parents and birth mothers. A majority of all respondents convey concern about the well being of the adoptees, and to a lesser extent, themselves. Comments expressing feelings about others appear in less than a third of each of the respondent group's letters. Each participant group focuses their comments on one other group: the adoptees express feelings toward their adoptive parents, the adoptive parents toward the birth parents, and the birth mothers toward the adoptee. Comments about familial relationships appear least frequently. Adoptees and birth mothers write about individual relations, such as aunts, brothers and children; adoptive parents comment on the family unit by focusing on the family in a societal context.

The following section presents a cross-cutting analysis of respondent comments. Similarities and differences across groups are highlighted, followed by a capsule summary of each respondent group's perspective on the adoption experience.

CROSS-CUTTING ANALYSIS

The respondents' letters reveal different perspectives regarding the adoption experience and their position on adoption records. There is little within group variation in respondent characteristics and attitudes; the variation that exists is among the groups. At the same time, there are alignments of respondent groups across themes and their rationales for the specific postiions they assume. In some instances, adoptees and birth mothers focus on similar issues whereas in other cases the adoptive parents and birth mothers express similar concerns. Further, two groups may pay attention to a specific issue but hold divergent views. The following discussion presents a cross-cutting analysis of the themes addressed in the respondents' letters.

Justice

Of all the themes, justice is the most frequently addressed for each respondent group. Three dimensions of the justice theme emerge--whose rights are involved; the types of rights; and, the basis for these rights. The adoptees and birth mothers express similar concerns across two of these dimensions. The adoptee's rights regarding knowledge of her/his identity and access to records are of primary importance to adoptees and birth mothers.

The alignment of these two groups regarding the justice theme is not surprising given their respective

positions on open records. Both groups express overwhelming support for opening adoption records. The adoptees' concern for their own rights is to be expected. The birth mothers' concern for adoptees' rights, which birth mothers express as often as they do their own rights, is also not entirely unexpected. Because most birth mothers in this sample would welcome being "found" by their children, expressing the position that adoptees should have the right to access increases the probabilty that birth mothers will benefit. Further, the politics of adoption policy would make it inadvisable for birth mothers to advocate solely on their own behalf. The law and practices focus on the best interests of the child/ adoptee and the permanence and stability of the new family. The concern for the rights of the adoptees is consistent with the notion that the primary client in adoption is the child.

Adoptees' rights are not of primary importance to the adoptive parents. The most obvious explanation for this absence of concern may be that the adoptive parents believe that the adoptee's rights are protected under current statutes. Sealed records protect the adoptee's rights to a secure and stable family life. Another explanation may be the age of the adoptees. Perhaps the adoptees who are the children of the adoptive parents <u>are</u> children, i.e., less than 18 years old. As children, the issue of sealed records would not apply to them or concern their immediate

rights. Because most adoptive parents do not indicate the adoptee's age, this explanation is speculative. Another explanation may be the adoptive parent's view of the adoptee as a child, regardless of her/his age. For example, in two studies adoptive parents refused to allow their children, adult adoptees, to participate in the research (Jaffe, 1974; Raynor, 1980). This type of action suggests that adoptive parents are not willing to accept their children as adult adoptees--adults who are capable of making their own decisions.

Adoptive parents and birth parents focus on the same dimension--birth parent rights--but diverge in viewpoint. Both groups identify the rights of the birth parents as a critical issue, specifically the rights to privacy and confidentiality. However, the adoptive parents contend that opening adoption records would violate birth parents' rights to privacy whereas birth mothers state that they do not want privacy and that the adoptees' rights of access supersede the birth parents' rights to privacy. Further, both groups (adoptive parents and birth mothers) base their positions on the contract that was developed to establish the adoption.

Adoptive parents, as a group, are alone in their concerns for the rights of adoptive parents, specifically their rights to confidentiality. Neither adoptees nor birth mothers comment on the rights of adoptive parents.

This could reflect the position taken by many individuals, the birth mother and adoptee respondent groups included, that current law and practice protects only the rights of the adoptive parents, at the expense of others' rights. From these groups' perspective, there is no need to comment on adoptive parents' rights. Adoptive parents understandably cite their own rights as important. Figure 1 summarizes those dimensions of justice most important to the three respondent groups, indicating the various alignments.

Identity

The identity theme yields a somewhat similar picture. The adoptees and the birth mothers cite the adoptee's need to know her/his identity as a critical dimension. The biological relationship between these two groups may explain the common desire for the adoptees to know their roots, their heritage. The biological versus cultural orientations of these groups belies the importance placed on environment in the development of one's identity. Further, both groups talk about feeling incomplete, and the need to know their biological kin to have a sense of wholeness. The birth mothers discuss their own identities, and in those cases where reunions took place, the feeling of wholeness that resulted. The comments related to identity also may reflect the gender of the adoptees and birth mothers, most of whom are women. Gilligan (1982) describes the importance of attachment in the development of gender

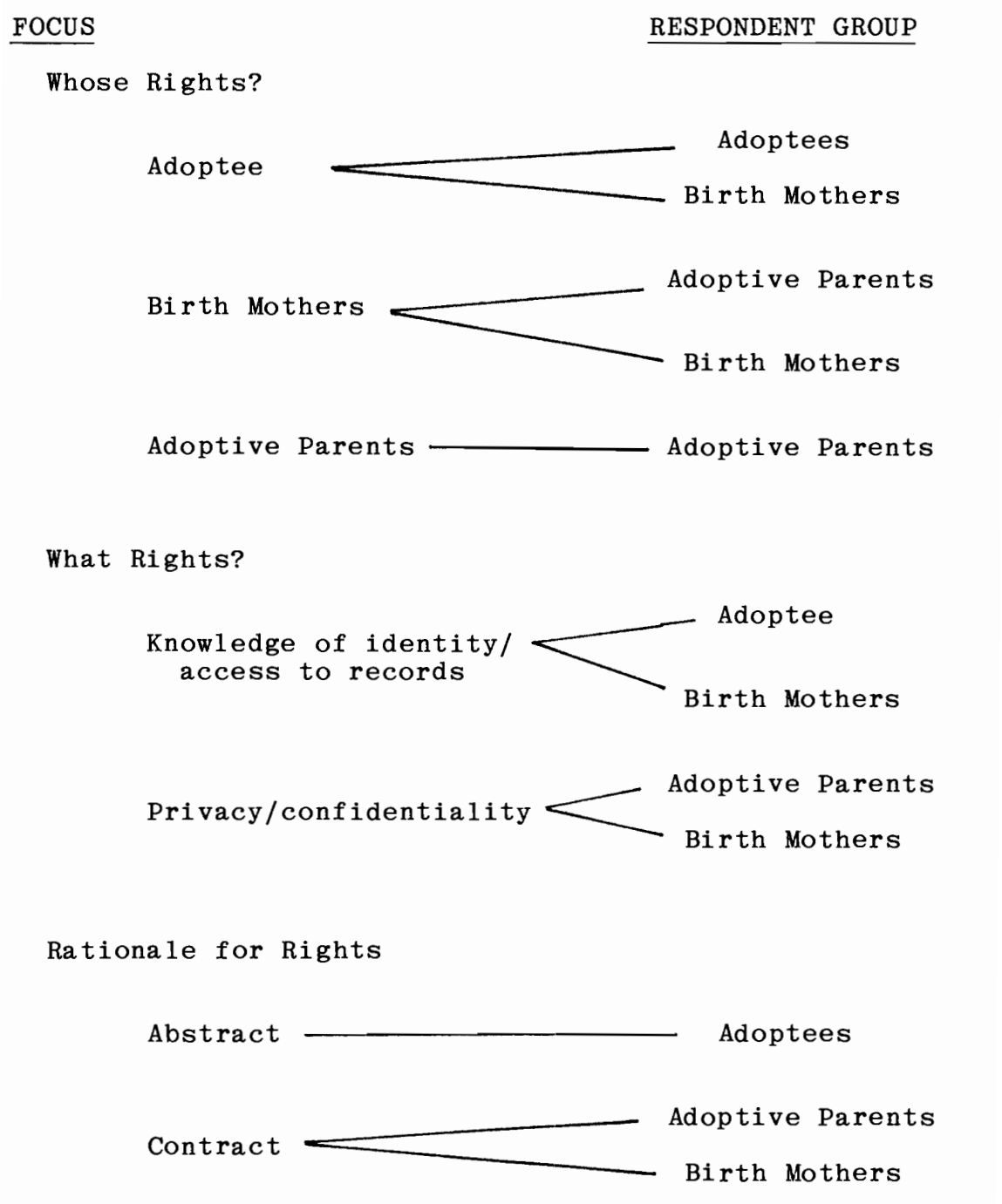

FIGURE 1

JUSTICE: Primary Focus of Respondent Groups

identity. Identity for females is essentially defined in terms of relationships and connections with others. The adoptees, although secure in their relationships with their adoptive parents, still maintain an affiliation with their birth parents, primarily their birth mothers. The birth mothers describe their own identity problems in terms of the absence of a relationship with their child--an attachment that apparently has not disappeared simply because the child was given up for adoption.

Adoptive parents discuss their own identities, their role as the parents of the child. Adoption policy and practice support this position. The adoptive parents view the proposed legislation as a threat to their role as the real, only and true parents of the child. The adoptive parents' emphasis on their role seems to deny the existence of another "family" of the adoptee, acting as if the child was "born" when he was adopted. Yet, biologically, other blood relations do exist; the adoptive parents generally choose to deny the biological kin's assumption of any role toward the child. Adoptive parents identify with the family ideology in American society. They have fulfilled their roles as parents to the child and desire legal and social recognition.

The concerns voiced by the adoptive parents raises related issues regarding how families generally are created, transformed, reconstituted, and, subsequently

"defined." These broader issues are discussed in a subsequent section. Figure 2 presents the focus and alignment of the respondents.

Well Being

A majority of each of the respondent groups comment on the well being or best interests of themselves or others in the triangle. All three groups of respondents express concern for the psychological well-being of the adoptee. In this area the adoptive parents are aligned with the adoptees and birth mothers, however, the adoptive parents' notion of well being is based on different conditions than the adoptees or birth mothers.

Adoptive parents maintain that opening adoption records will cause psychological harm to the adoptee. They also contend that any meeting with the birth parents would cause unnecessary trauma to the child. Adoptees and birth mothers, on the other hand, state that the adoptee's psychological well-being is hampered by sealed records.

This discrepancy between the groups may be explained by two factors. First, the adoptive parents write as if they are primarily parents of children, children who for the most part are not at an age where open records is an issue. Because only 19 adoptive parents (15%) indicate the age of their children, it is not possible to determine if this is the case. Further, as noted earlier, adoptive parents tend to refer to or treat adoptees as children, even

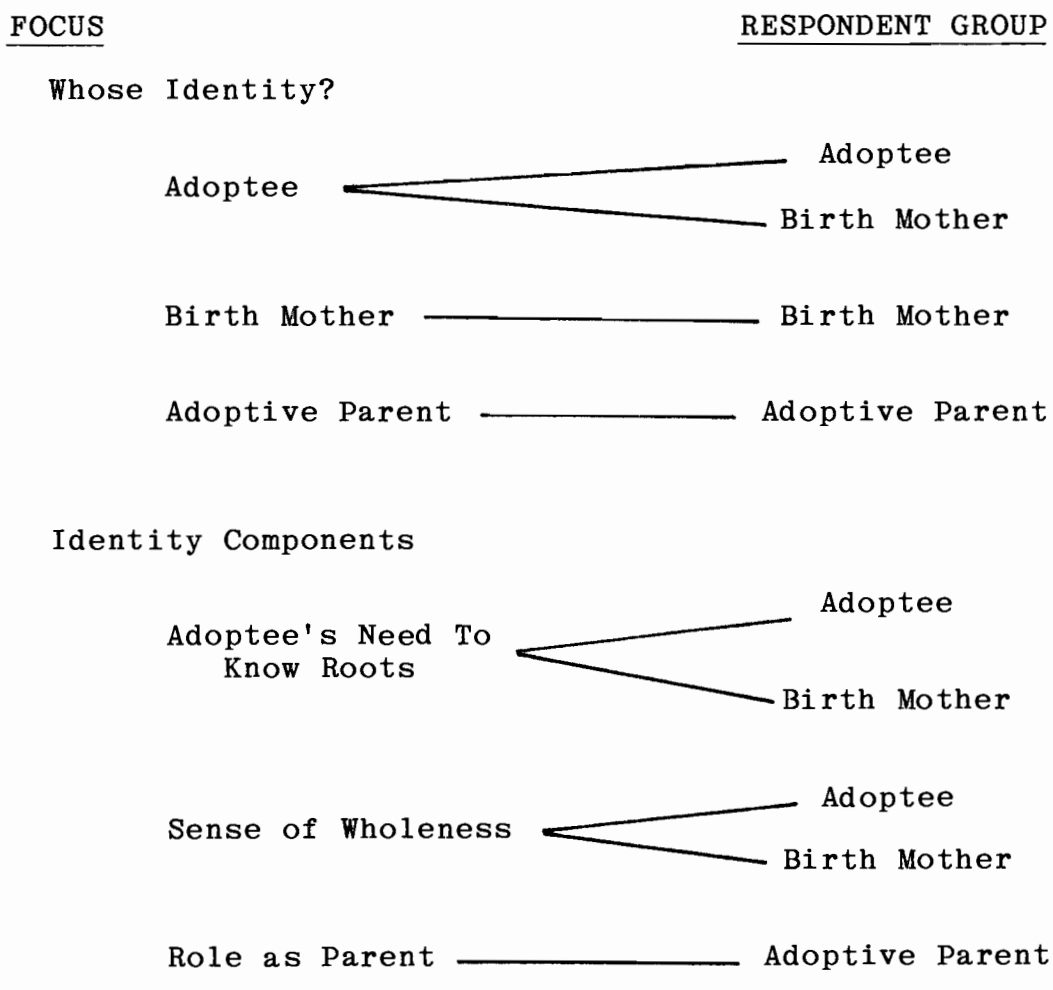

FIGURE 2

IDENTITY: Primary Focus of Respondent Groups

when they are adults. Second, the adoptive parents can justify sealed records by commenting on the best interests and well being of the adoptee; the law is based on this premise, therefore their perspectives concur with common belief.

Adoptive parents also could be projecting their concerns for their own well being onto the child. Although adoptive parents do not write much directly about their psychological well being, the impression one gets from reading the letters is a sense of fear, frustration and pain among adoptive parents in their discussions of the impact of opening adoption records. Research and anecdotal evidence reveals that open adoption records or successful search experiences do not have negative outcomes for adoptive parents, raising the questions, why are adoptive parents so threatened? and, what are they afraid of? Perhaps some of the distress they feel may be related to feelings they had prior to the adoption. Adoption is considered second-best parenthood; the preferred method is to have one's own biological children. The pain associated with infertility and the subsequent ordeal of obtaining a child may be experiences that the adoptive parents want to forget; opening adoption records may reopen these wounds by making visible the adoption itself and the "real" biological kin.

In addition, there is the fear of the unknown--what will happen if the adoptee meets her/his birth parents? Although most of the adoptive parents write about the stability and strengths of their families, there still seems to be an intense fear of "losing" their children to the birth parents. Adoptive parents also appear to feel betrayed--by their children, who they raised as their "own," and by the law that promised them sealed records.

Yet, the well being of the adoptive parent is not considered a primary concern to any of the respondent groups. Apparently most respondents feel that the well being of adoptive parents is not an issue because the status quo, i.e., sealed records, benefits this group.

Birth mothers comment on their own well being almost as much as they comment on the adoptee's well being. They discuss their well-being in terms of the relinquishment--the years of pain following the relinquishment. Birth mothers also talk about the effect of not knowing their offspring on their psychological well being.

An interesting aspect of the well-being, justice and identity themes is the time dimension. Birth mothers and adoptees focus on the past and present, whereas adoptive parents focus on the future. This can be explained by the legal status of adoption records--in most states adoption records are sealed. Thus the adoptees and birth mothers are reacting to the current legal policy. Adoptive parents

are projecting to the future--the proposed Model Adoption Act includes proposals for opening records for adult adoptees (and birth parents with adoptee's agreement). As far as the adoptive parents are concerned, the well being or best interests are protected under current law, but would be threatened if the proposed legislation were enacted in their states.

Figure 3 presents the most salient dimensions of the well-being theme that were raised, and how the groups responded.

Feelings Toward Others

Adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers describe their feelings toward each other, although this theme does not emerge as frequently as the previous three. A third or less of each respondent group convey feelings about the other. An interesting pattern emerges--each respondent group focuses their feelings on one other group: adoptees about their adoptive parents, adoptive parents about birth parents and the birth mothers about the adoptees.

Adoptees express love and appreciation toward their adoptive parents. Because the adoptees support open records, and many are searching or desire to search, the expressions of appreciation appear to be a form of reassurance. The adoptees are not looking for new parents, nor is their search in reaction to an unhappy relationship with their adoptive parents.

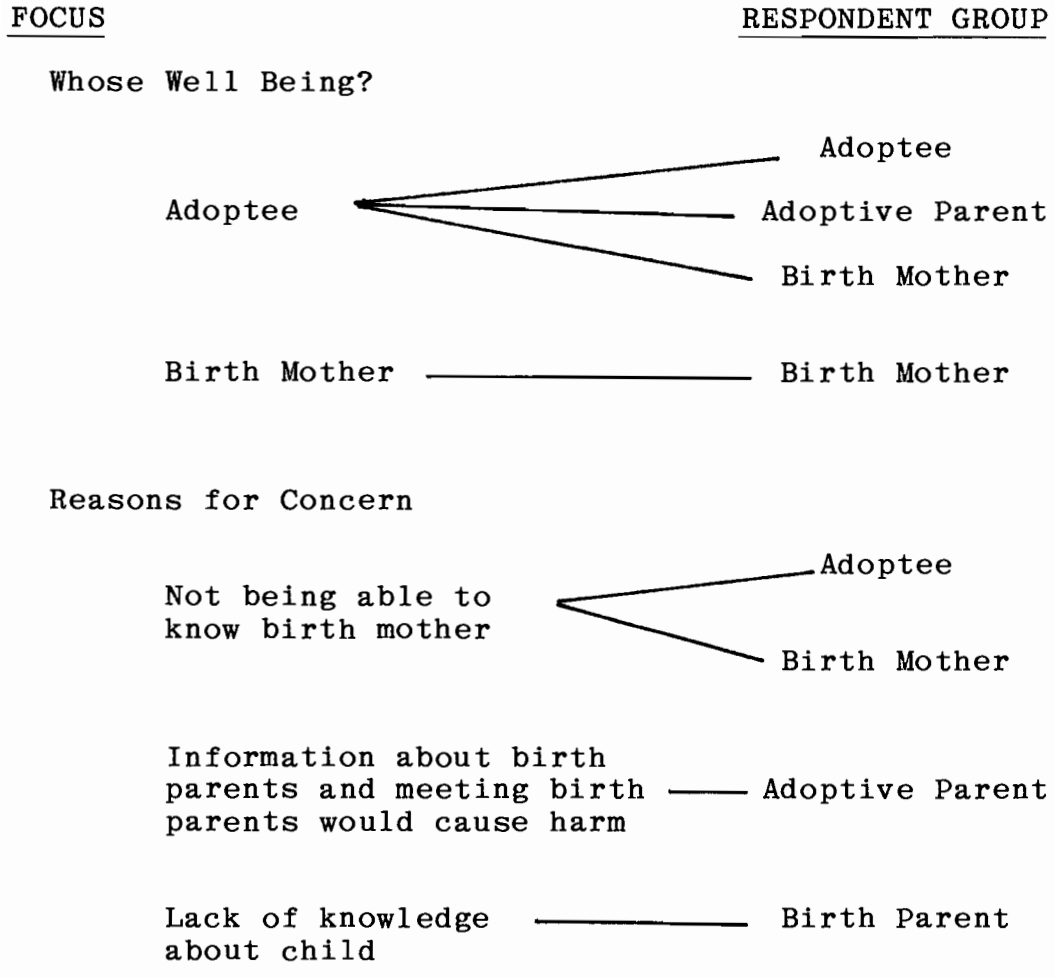

FIGURE 3

WELL BEING: Primary Focus of Respondent Groups

The adoptive parents also express love and appreciation, but their feelings are directed to the birth parents. The adoptive parents recognize the painful decision made by the birth parents, and appreciate their decision as it has resulted in their, the adoptive parents, now having a child. At the same time, as many adoptive parents express fear of the birth parents--fear that they may intrude and negatively affect the adoptive family and child. It is interesting that the birth parents are also the focus of the adoptive parents regarding the justice theme--protecting the birth parents' rights to privacy. In both this instance and the adoptive parents' feelings of fear of intrusion, the adoptive parents' comments are inconsistent with what birth mothers write. Birth mothers generally do not want privacy, however, they also adamantly state that they have no intention of intruding or otherwise interfering with the adoptive families. The birth mothers' position is that they are willing to be found by their children, the adoptees, but not to become involved in a parent "role." Again, the age of the adoptee may be important in understanding the emergent patterns. Although the Model Act is explicit in stating that the records would be open only when the adoptee reaches the age of 18, the adoptive parents write as if the records would be open and available at birth. This would affect their current situation, assuming that many of their children are under 18 years old.

Perhaps they fear that if laws are changed to open records for adoptees at age 18, the next step would be to open them completely.

The birth mothers express feelings of love for the adoptees, their children. These expressions of love are often combined with comments relating to their desire to meet them and the constancy of their thoughts about them. The birth mothers' feelings are inconsistent with the adoptive parents' belief that the birth parents want to forget the "incident." Indeed, the severing of ties built in adoption laws and agencies' policies and practices in counseling unwed mothers who intend to relinquish are based on the presumption that the birth mother wants to forget--to erase the experience from her memory. The birth mothers in this sample feel quite the opposite. One explanation for the difference may be related to changing societal values. Historically, adoption was a way to get "rid" of an embarrassing pregnancy. However, this method generally has outgrown its usefulness in today's more permissive society. Another explanation may be the self-selection characteristic of the sample--perhaps those who are inclined to write are the type of individuals who are willing to expose their personal histories and beliefs because of the strength of their feelings. Also, birth parent support groups, who generally support open records, have encouraged their members to write.

The intensity of feelings toward others is evident in all the respondents' letters. This is not unexpected as these individuals, of the many adoptive parents, adoptees and birth mothers in this country, took the initiative to write to the government. Figure 4 presents the most salient dimensions of this theme and how the groups responded.

Family

The last theme is one relating to family--comments focusing on immediate and extended family as well as "family" in the societal context. Although this theme emerges less frequently than the others, it raises important issues about how we as sociologists define family as well as how family is defined in the legal, governmental and social service agency context. The respondents' comments will be discussed here; a more thorough discussion on the implications of the study findings for how we view the family is presented in a later section of this chapter.

The adoptees and the birth mothers both focus on their own immediate families. The adoptees describe the importance of their heritage in terms of their own children, being able to tell their children about their biological roots. The adoptees also comment on the importance of knowing medical and genetic background to ensure that proper precautions and care are taken in raising their children.

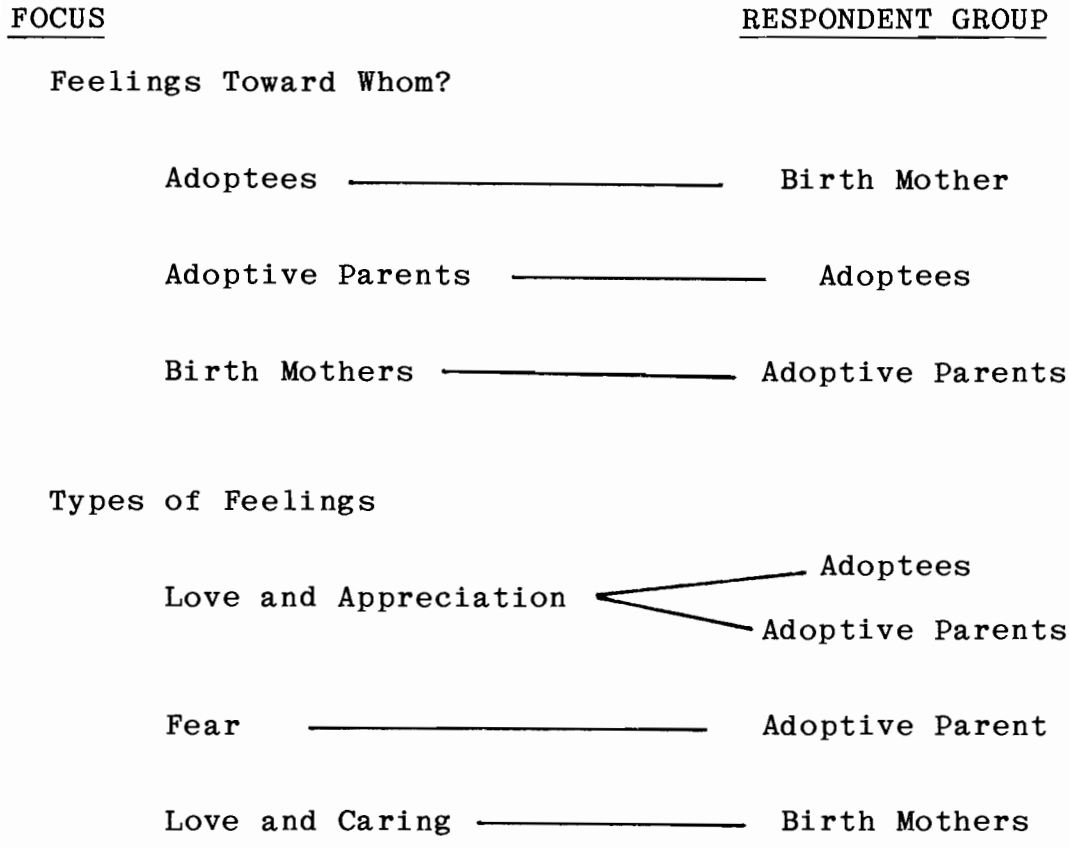

FIGURE 4

FEELINGS TOWARDS OTHERS:
Primary Focus of Respondent Groups

Birth mothers also refer to their immediate families, specifically the desire for their parents, siblings and children to meet the adoptees. The birth mothers consider the adoptees members of their families, while at the same time disavowing any desire to assume a parent role to the child.

Adoptive parents focus on the "family" unit, the family in a societal context. They express concern that open records would jeopardize what they believe to be the acceptable, and societally desirable form of family--the traditional nuclear family unit. Again, adoptive parents express opinions consistent with the intent of the majority of current legal statutes which preserve the notion that the best interests of the child be with the two-parent nuclear family model.

Summary

To summarize, justice is the most frequently mentioned theme for each of the groups. The right to access to records and the right of privacy are the two major dimensions addressed. Identity, the need to know one's roots, appears as a theme important to adoptees, with less than one-third of the adoptive parents and birth mothers commenting on this. Psychological well being of the adoptee is identified as a significant theme by a majority of all the respondents. Feelings toward others, although not a predominant theme, appears in letters of all the groups. Love and

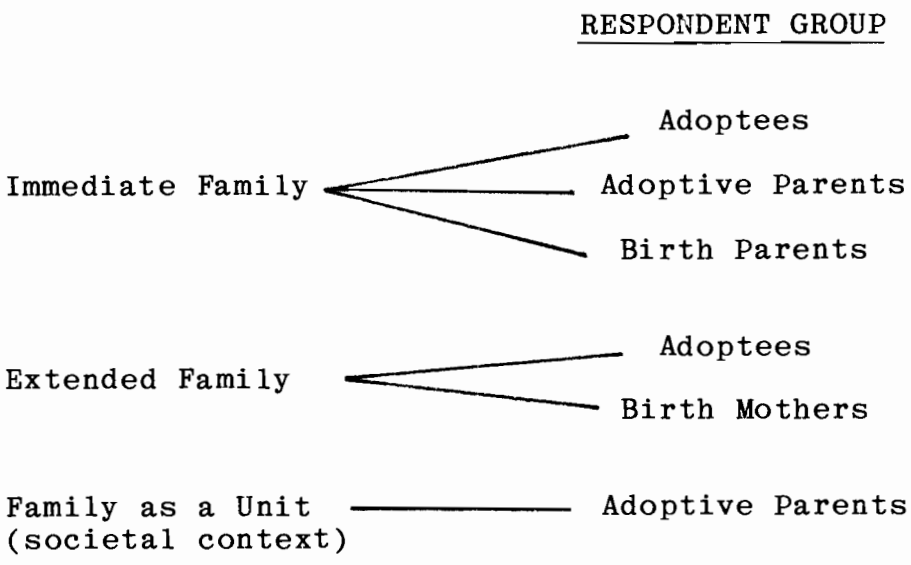

FIGURE 5

FAMILY: Primary Focus of Respondent Groups

caring are the feelings expressed most often, adoptees describing these feelings toward their adoptive parents, the birth mothers toward the adoptees and the adoptive parents toward the birth parents. However, adoptive parents also express fear of the birth parents, a fear that the birth parents will intrude and disrupt their otherwise stale family. References to family are included in about a third of the adoptees' letters, and considerably less in the adoptive and birth mother letters. The adoptees and birth mothers describe their immediate families, whereas adoptive parents are more likely to discuss the family as a societal unit. Adoptees and birth mothers often express similar opinions and focus on similar issues. Adoptive parents are more likely to diverge from these two groups and express opinions which support the status quo situation in the adoption process today.

RESPONDENT COMPOSITE PERSPECTIVES

The previous discussion has summarized the findings from the theme viewpoint, noting how groups align with respect to dimensions relating to each theme. It also is useful to present participant composites, perspectives that typify each group.

Adoptee Perspective

Adoptees are most concerned with justice and identity issues, the right and need to know their identities and the right to have access to their adoption records. Their own

psychological well being is tied into being able to find out about their heritage. Adoptees describe feelings of love and affection toward their adoptive parents, seemingly to disavow any notions that the adoptees' desire to know their roots is because they are unhappy in their current homes. In referring to family, adoptees comment on the need for their own children to benefit from knowledge of their heritage.

Adoptive Parent Perspective

Justice is also the number one issue for adoptive parents; they focus on the rights of privacy and confidentiality for the birth parents and themselves. Their concern with the adoptee relates to the potentially negative effect of open records on the psychological well being of the child. The adoptive parents express feelings of love and appreciation toward the birth parents, while also revealing fears of the birth parents' intrusion in their lives if records were opened. The adoptive parent's identity and family both involve the same dimension--the family as a unit and what that means. They describe themselves as the "real" parents and advocate the need to preserve the traditional family unit. Yet, their fear of the birth parent undermines their position that they are the real parents and secure in this role. The conflicts reflected in their feelings suggest that the adoptive relationship is a tenuous one--not temporary, but tenuous.

Birth Mother Perspective

Justice and well being are the two themes most frequently identified by birth mothers. Birth mothers maintain that the adoptee's right to access to records supercedes the birth parent's right to privacy and confidentiality. Further, most of the birth mothers in this sample do not want privacy from their offspring. The well being of the adoptee is a concern of the birth parents; they believe that opening adoption records will be beneficial for those adoptees who want to know their bilogical kin. Birth mothers express feelings of love for their children, a love that has remained constant through the years. The adoptee's need to know her/his identity is discussed by birth mothers; their own identities are not viewed as important, although they do suggest that they lack a sense of wholeness by not knowing their children. References to family usually include comments on the birth mother's immediate and extended family, and the hope that the adoptee will meet her/his biological relations.

CHAPTER X

STUDY IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the theoretical and practical implications of the study findings. The findings reveal the perspectives of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers. Their experiences as participants in the adoption process have implications for sociology of the family--how the adoptive family is yet another example of transformations occurring in familial relationships. The findings also have policy implications; the data provide new information about the meaning of adoption to the participants. This information is useful for policy development and practical application.

ADOPTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

This research investigation examines the comments of participants in the adoption triangle--their concerns, experiences and attitudes. The focus is on the adoption process, specifically the issue of adoption records. Yet, the themes that emerge raise important issues related to

societal images of the family. Adoption can be viewed as yet another variant of how families are formed. In recent years, sociologists and other social science professionals have struggled with the meaning of family in a societal context. The occurrence of divorce, remarriage, homosexual pairings, voluntary childlessness, single parenting, etc., has resulted in a rethinking of the family as a social institution. Sociologists have researched and written about alternative family forms--the traditional nuclear family just one among many family forms. The adoptive family has not been included in these investigations, although it represents a variation in the way families are formed and the way they can change. This study brings families created through adoption into the realm of social science inquiry, and describes how this inquiry adds to our understanding of family in today's society.

The adoptive family presents a paradox. On the one hand, it deviates from the traditional family form. Families are traditionally based on biological kin; children are the biological offspring of their parents. Adoption diverges from this traditional family of procreation image--unrelated individuals are brought together and a family is created. The paradox exists in terms of how this family is perceived by themselves, society and the law. The image is that this family is a traditional nuclear family--no different than other families where children are born into

their families of origin. The law defines the adoptive family as the family of the child, denying the differences. Essentially, society and the adoption participants are supposed to act "as if" the adoptive family is the original and only family--no other previous family exists.

The adoptive relationship appears to be a tenuous one, with all the participants in some way both affirming and denying separateness from the biological parentage. Adoptees experience conflict between the desire to search and the feelings of loyalty they have toward their adoptive parents. Adoptive parents express caring feelings for the birth parents while at the same time fear their potential interference. Birth mothers acknowledge that to relinquish was the right decision while continuing to feel an attachment for the child.

Perhaps the tenuity can be attributed to the cultural conditions under which western laws were developed. Adoption is a recent legal phenomenon in western cultures--in England the first adoption act was passed in 1926. In contrast, nonwestern countries have been practicing adoption for centuries. Adoption is a strong tradition in these nonwestern societies because of the strong extended family system. In the west, adoption laws were developed to compensate for the break-up of the extended family resulting from industrialization and urbanization. A distinctive feature of western adoption practice is to provide

a family for an unwanted child, the ideal being the total severence of ties between the adoptee and her/his birth family. The newly created adoptive family would fit the societally acceptable nuclear family model. These adoption practices contradict the importance our society places on biology. The biological ties between adoptees and birth parents exist, yet recognizing them is inconsistent with the western ideal of adoption. This conflict appears to place stress on the adoptive relationships.

The adoptive family is not unique in this position--we find that similar patterns of tenuousness exist in other variant family forms. For example, a blended family may act as if there are no other familial relationships external to their family unit (Chilman, 1983). She notes, "They attempt to deny the reality of their reconstituted family and to create the image of the traditional intact nuclear family" (p. 158). Further, there has even been a tendency for the new husband-wife unions to use adoption as a way of affirming the new stepparent relationships (Feigelman and Silverman, 1983).

The blended family and the adoptive family are both examples of the struggle to deal with new family formations. Although social science literature is abound with literature which includes variant alternatives as family units, the image of the traditional nuclear family still predominates societal thinking. The findings from this study

yield interesting implications for rethinking how family membership is defined, and conflicting familial loyalties and boundaries. The family clearly is not a neat package uniformly wrapped for all individuals. In adoptive families, the law defines the membership; the adopted child's biological family is not included. Yet, the reality for the adoptee, especially, and also the other triangle participants is the existence of biological relations.

Respondent references to the "natural" mother, birth mother, and biological kin belie the notion that the boundaries of the adoptive family are internally limited. Adoptees write of their desire to know their biological kin. Birth mothers state they they never forget--they continually think of and have intense feelings for the children they relinquished. The assumption that adoptive families are like other families is being challenged. Yet, there still is a strong inclination to deny the existence of differences between adoptive families and families of procreation. The findings from this study have implications for the recognition of relational ties beyond the adoptive family and how the roles and relational norms are defined.

The adoptive parents recognize that relational ties exist, while at the same time deny their significance. Most adoptive parents tell the child she/he is adopted and relate a story of how this came about. The telling usually

begins when the child is young (4-5 years of age) and the story is embellished as the child grows older and becomes more inquisitive. Thus, adoptive parents are recognizing the existence of another person, or persons, to whom the child is related. At the same time, the adoptive parents seem to deny the significance of these individuals to the child, and to their family as a whole. The recognition for the adoptees begins at an early age--he/she is the "chosen" child, a special child.

Relational ties do exist; their open and accepted recognition is essential if we are to understand and begin to define the roles and relational norms in the adoption experience. Kirk (1954), in a book that influenced much contemporary thinking about adoption, contends that when differences that are built into adoption by social and legal contrivances are denied by the adoptive parents, the permanence and stability of the (adoptive) family are threatened. Recognizing and accepting that relational ties exist is a beginning to acknowledging the differences between adoptive and biological families, and that these differences do not mean one is better or worse than the other.

The recognition of these relational ties leads to another more complicated issue--how do we define relational norms and roles? Sociologists have begun to examine relations in other family forms and to understand norms and roles. For example, as blended families become more

prevalent, researchers are examining how family participants, particularly stepparents, define their membership and loyalties. An examination of letters in this study reveals some thoughts on participant roles. Several possibilities exist for the birth parent-adoptee relationship: (1) absent relation, (2) child, and (3) friend. The birth parent could simply assume the role an absent, known or unknown, relation. Information about the birth parent or adoptee could be known by all participants, but there may not be personal contact; or, personal contact could be limited to a single visit, contingent on the desire of the adult adoptee and/or the birth parent. Studies in England, where records are open, reveal that most adoptees do not seek information. Further, of those who do apply for information, many are not interested in contacting their birth parent. In other instances, contact is initiated to fulfill curiosity needs, but no relationship develops. These conditions would result in the "absent relation" role of the birth parent, an individual who is related to the adoptee, but not part of her/his life environment.

Another outcome of personal contact could be the assumption of a "child" or "friend" role. A few of the adoptees write about their assuming the role, albeit late, of "child" to the birth parent. A more frequently mentioned role possibility is that of "close friend"; someone who cares about you and wants to share your happy and sad

life experiences. Adoptees and birth mothers comment on the very special friendship that develops after the reunion. Most of the adoptees and birth mothers in this study sample report positive reunion outcomes.

The relationship between the adoptive parent and birth parent is generally a denied one, yet ties exist. Some adoptive parents are involved in their child's search; ultimately, it would seem that some form of relationship could emerge. With the increasing occurrence of open adoptions,[1] the dynamics of the adoptive parent-birth parent relationship will become more meaningful in terms of sociological inquiry. Two possibilities come to mind--(1) friend, and (2) extended family. Parents of those adoptees who develop a relationship with their birth parents may also choose to become involved with these birth parents. They may choose to define the relationship as a "friendship," minimizing the significance of the biological ties. Although this would more likely occur in those instances where adoptees are involved, birth parents and adoptive parents could develop a relationship independent of the adoptee's actions. For example, in open adoptions, the adoptive parents and birth parents may communicate periodically to exchange information about the adoptee, or to

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[1]Open adoption involves the birth mother or birth parents meeting the prospective adoptive parents prior to the adoption.

discuss medical problems that may have occurred subsequent to the adoption. The relationship could also be viewed as extended family; because the adoptee has biological ties to another family, the adoptive family could choose to view this family as part of an extended family. The degree of closeness and frequency of contact would vary by families, similar to the relationships which exist generally between immediate and extended families.

The preceding discussion presents possibilities for role assmption by the adoptee, birth parent and adoptive parent with respect to others in the triangle. Most of the roles described assume knowledge of biological kin, and a desire to initiate and maintain contact. However, the first possibility mentioned includes the "unknown" absent parent. That is, there is an open recognition of an absent relation, but no involvement follows. This may be the choice of most families and adoptees. The important point is whether a choice exists. Dukette (1984) points out the inadvisability of prescribing contact between adoptive and birth families, similar to the limitations which now exist proscribing relationships:

> One of the faults of traditional adoption was the lack of choices it provided for the adoptee to learn about or be in touch with his or her past or for the biological parent to express preferences about a complete break or later overtures. There is a tendency now to repeat the mistake of a rigid policy that offered few variations by being equally rigid in the opposite direction. (p. 241)

There appears to be a need for balance whereby agencies, the legal institution and other intermediaries in the process support the movement to acknowledge genealogy in constructive ways while also promoting strong adoptive identifications.

Finally, there is the relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents. This would seem to be the easiest relationship to conceptualize and define, that of parent and child. Yet, study findings reveal that the absence of biological ties may result in a parent-child relationship different than one where the child is born into the family. As discussed earlier, there is the tendency to oversimplify the relationship and act as if differences do not exist. In the '40s and '50s, adoption agencies attempted to match biological traits of child and parents, reinforcing the idea that differences do not need to exist.[2] At the same time, parents are encouraged to tell their children at an early age that they are adopted--they are different. Kirk (1954) discusses this dilemma and introduces the theory of "shared fate." This theory suggests that the adoptee has to come to terms with having been relinquished by the birth parents, and adoptive parents need to acknowledge the inherent difference, their

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[2]Subsequently, agencies became less concerned with matching biologcial traits and more concerned with ensuring the appropriateness of the adoptive family for the child.

infertility, in their own parental status. Shared fate means the acknowledgement of the condition of parent-child mutual needs, "enlarged and emphasized by the discrepancies and losses both parents and children have suffered" (Kirk, 1954, pp. 157-158). Mutual aid, especially in the form of empathic sensitivity, follows and strengthens the relationship bond.

The familial roles for adoptive families follow the relational norms for the family unit--with an additional component--the adoption. This additional component implies responsibilities for the parent and child to assume in allowing the adoption factor to become a positive influence in the relationship. Although the legal process of adoption is a single event; the social process of adoption is a life-long condition.

The respondents in this study represent what is viewed as the traditional nonrelative adoption. Most of the adoptees were relinquished and adopted as infants to two-parent families. The findings of this study reveal many interesting themes regarding participant perspectives, themes which could inform sociologists of the family as well as policy and practice in adoption actions. However, just as the findings provide insights on understanding the concept of family generally, the findings also have implications which go beyond the traditional infant nonrelative adoptions included in this study. The following section

highlights some of the implications for traditional adoptions as well as broader policy implications.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study have implications for policy in several areas, including: (1) legislative and practice concerns regarding adoption records; (2) recent developments in adoption, specifically intercountry and open adoptions; and (3) technological advances in reproduction.

Legislative and Practice Concerns

Legislative interest in sealed adoption records began in the mid-1970s and remains high. From 1981 through 1983, bills affecting adoption records were introduced in 45 state legislatures and the District of Columbia Council. The primary issue being addressed by state legislatures is the question of access by adult adoptees to information about their genetic heritage in court and birth records. Other topics concern the kinds of information included in records, access to medical information, contact between birth parents and adoptees, and contact between adoptees and siblings (biological and half-siblings) (Harrington, 1984).

Legislative response to a psychological need is unusual in social legislation. The findings from this study can be used to inform legislative policymakers about the

concerns of adoption triangle participants. The themes that emerge provide valuable input for decisionmaking in the area of adoption records. The respondents are concerned with justice; although some of the "rights" mentioned are not within the purview of legislatures, some are. Specifically, it is important for these policymakers to understand the adoptees' reasons for desiring information. Also, the attitudes of the birth parent may be contrary to what legislators currently believe. The birth mothers in this sample express an openness to adoptee contact. The adoptee's quest for identity, and the concern for her/his well being are two important themes with policy relevance. The concealment of records has been perceived historically as beneficial to all adoption participants. The perspectives emerging from this study reveal that the practice may be inimical to the needs of adult adoptees and birth mothers. As legislatures continue to examine the issue of adoption records and possible resolutions, the perspectives of the adoption participants can provide an important source of information. The juxtaposition of the perspectives provides a more complete picture of adoption than a single viewpoint of a research effort or lobbyist group.

The findings also apply to social work practices. The concerns of the respondents expressed in their letters provide valuable insights into areas agencies and caseworkers

could consider during and subsequent to the adoption process. For example, adoptees and birth mothers describe the types of information that are important to them. Some of this information (non-identifying material) could be included in the agency records and released on request. Agencies that have adopted a policy of releasing non-identifying information would find the comments of the study respondents useful in making decisions regarding specific data to compile. Others who do not have this policy may find that much of the information desired is acceptable to release. For example, some agencies may not realize the need of birth parents to know simply that their child is alive. Notifying the parents of the status of the child may be within agency policy, but never done because no one realized the importance.

The results of this examination suggest the need for services for the adoption participants at the time of adoption and during the subsequent years. The predominant agency practices of counseling limited prior to the adoption may not meet the psychological needs of some birth parents. Further, the findings suggest a reorientation toward agencies' definitions of adoption participants. The biological siblings or other relations, once informed of the existence of a half-brother/sister (or brother/sister) may, themselves, contact the agency to inquire about their relatives. The notion that all biological ties are severed

is questionable, and one that needs rethinking by agency staff. This implies follow-up contact and services, as needed, for all adoption participants and biological relatives.

Overall, the findings from this study are consistent with other studies that examine search activities by birth parents and adoptees. The findings suggest a reorganization of adoption policies so that agencies would, at a minimum, routinely collect sufficient medical and social background from all parties in the adoption triangle. Such information could be updated periodically, and made available to adult adoptees and birth and adoptive parents. Further, the study findings reaffirm recent agency initiatives to view the full dimensions of the adoptive experience.

Recent Developments in Adoption

The controversy about sealed adoption records is usually viewed in terms of traditional infant nonrelative adoptions. However, the findings from this study may apply to other forms of adoption, including intercountry adoptions and open adoptions.

As the number of infants available for adoption has been decreasing, there has been a concomitant increase in the number of intercountry adoptions. In 1983, approximatley 8,000 children were adopted from abroad; more than half of these children were from Korea (Maza, personal communication, 1985). The tendency is toward transracial,

intercountry adoptions. Although intercountry adoptions still represent only 15 percent of all nonrelative adoptions, the issues raised in this research examination have interesting implications for intercountry adoption policies and practices. The findings indicate a strong need for adoptees to have information on her/his heritage. Recognition of the adoptee's need to know her/his roots becomes a more thorny issue when the biological relations live in another country. Further, many of these adoptions are independently arranged; thus, the likelihood of records being compiled and updated as may occur in an agency, is doubtful. Perhaps, the findings have greatest application to prospective adoptive parents--if an intercountry adoption is pursued, the adoptive parent may have to negotiate the compilation of current and future information on the birth parents.

The concept of open adoptions was introduced by Baran, Pannor and Sorosky (1976) and elaborated upon in 1984; "Open adoption is a process in which the birth parents and the adoptive parents meet and exchange identifying information. Birth parents relinquish legal and basic child rearing rights to the adoptive parents. Both sets of parents retain the right to continuing contact and access to knowledge on behalf of the child" (Pannor & Baron, 1984). The findings from this study suggest that open adoption may be a preferred approach for some families. Open adoptions

would resolve many of the issues related to identity and well being raised by adoptees and birth mothers. Currently, adoptees and birth parents are going to great expense and time to find out information about their kin. Open adoption provides an environment that allows adoption participants to make deliberate decisions about the type and extent of relationships they desire. The difficulty exists in defining a role for the birth parent that does not undermine the primary parenting position of the adoptive family. Research on families who are involved in open adoptions is an avenue of investigation which would illuminate further the potential for meeting the needs of all adoption participants.

Technological Advances in Reproduction

In adoption, the child is biologically conceived by one set of individuals, then raised by another set, their adoptive parents. Recent technological advances in reproduction yield situations similar to that of adoption. The findings of this study, in particular the responses of the adoptees, suggest a need to reexamine the potential impact of new "artificial" methods of reproduction, the surrogate mother and artificial insemination by donor (AID). These methods of reproduction have become increasingly common in recent years because of increases in infertility, increased awareness of genetically transmitted diseases and

disorders, and the decline in the number of healthy infants available for adoption.

The surrogate mother situation is similar to adoption as the surrogate mother, like the birth mother in adoption, is voluntarily relinquishing her offspring. The birth mothers in this study describe different ways they would like to be involved with their children. This information may provide some insights into how surrogate mothers may react to the relinquishment, especially as their children get older. A greater understanding of the needs of the surrogate mother at the outset may limit future complications in the child's family.

The intent of artificial insemination by donor (AID) is that the child be reared as offspring of the consenting man and woman, that the donor remain anonymous, and that the donor not assume any of the rights, privileges, or obligations of parenthood. Children conceived through artificial insemination are in the same position of many adoptees in the 1940s and even 1950s--during this period many adoptees were not told of their adoption. Secrecy was viewed as essential. The process and results of AID are unobtrusive; unlike adoption and surrogate mothering, it is not obvious to others that the father is not the biological father. Yet, the issue of identity and biological roots has been raised by children conceived through AID. The findings of this study indicate the adoptee's need for

information. There are no policies and practices set out for families involved in AID--perhaps none are necessary. Yet, the findings from this study suggest the need for up-to-date information on biological parents. Because of the intense secrecy surrounding AID, this issue has received scant attention.

SUMMARY

The findings from this study have implications for sociology of the family. The findings suggest a rethinking of the adoptive family and of the social realities and dynamics of this institution. Further inquiry into adoptive relationships would aid in our understanding and help to define the roles and relationships involved. The findings also have practical implications. The perspectives of the adoption participants provide a new source of information for legislative and social service agency policymakers. Study findings also suggest some new directions for agency practices in the adoption field. Some of these practices may apply to intercountry adoptions or "open adoption" approaches. Finally, study findings are relevant to recent technological advances in reproduction, applying what we have learned from the adoption experience to artificial reproduction methods such as surrogate mothering and donor insemination. The offspring of these artificial methods

may, in the future, reveal identity conflicts similar to those experienced by adoptees.

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APPENDIX A

TABLES

Table 1

Number and Percent of Letters Analyzed and Reasons for Those Not Analyzed, by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type			
	Adoptee (n=114)	Adoptive Parent (n=164)	Birth Mother[1] (n=113)	Total (n=391)
Analyzed	(103)90%	(127)77%	(103)91%	(333)85%
Not Analyzed (total)	(11) 9%	(37)23%	(10) 9%	(58)15%
Reasons	(n=11)	(n=37)	(n=10)	(n=58)
form or modified form	(5)45%	(13)35%	(2)20%	(20)34%
statement only	(6)55%	(21)57%	(7)70%	(34)59%
not applicable (focus not on sealed records)	0	(3) 8%	(1)10%	(4) 7%

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 2

Adoptee's, Adoptive Parent's and Birth Mother's Sex, Age and Geographic Region

	Respondent Type		
	Adoptee	Adoptive Parent	Birth Mother[2]
Sex[1]	(n=103)	(n=124)	(n=102)
Male	(13)13%	(23) 19%	(1) 1%
Female	(84)82%	(54) 44%	(101)99%
Both	(6) 6%	(47) 38%	0
Age[1]	(n=49)	(n=1)	(n=13)
12-20	(3) 6%		
21-30	(11)22%		(1) 8%
31-40	(13)27%		(8)62%
41-50	(13)27%	(1)100%	(3)23%
50+	(9)18%		(1) 8%
mean	39		39
median	39		33
Geographic Region[1]	(n=85)	(n=105)	(n=1)
Northeast	(13)15%	(10) 10%	
South	(14)16%	(42) 40%	
North Central	(14)16%	(34) 32%	(1)100%
West	(44)52%	(19) 18%	

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 3

Familial Role of Respondents
by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type		
Role[1]	Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=123)	Birth Mother[2] (n=102)
Mother	0	(53) 43%	(100)98%
Father	0	(23) 19%	(1) 1%
Both	0	(47) 38%	0
Adoptee	(95)92%	0	0
Adoptee & Spouse	(7) 7%	0	0
Other	(1) 1%	0	(1) 1%

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 4

Age of the Adopted Children and Age Child Adopted, by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type		
	Adoptee	Adoptive Parent	Birth Mother[2]
Age of Adopted Children[1]		(n=19)	(n=76)
1-18	NA	(11) 58%	(39)51%
19-30	NA	(5) 26%	(31)41%
31-40	NA	(1) 5%	(5) 7%
41-50	NA	(2) 11%	(1) 1%
mean		21	21
median		17	18
Age Child Adopted[1]	(n=9)	(n=13)	(n=61)
1 or younger	(6)97%	(13)100%	(58)95%
2	(1) 1%		(2) 3%
4-8	(2) 2%		(1) 2%

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 5

Position Toward Provisions in Model Legislation to Open Adoption Records, by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type		
Position[1]	Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Support	(96)93%	(1) 9%	(98)95%
Oppose	(7) 7%	(104)82%	(5) 5%
Both (e.g., support open records but only with permission of birth parent)	0	(12)10%	

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 6

Search Activities, Including Whether Searching, Search Status and Reunion Outcome, by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type		
	Adoptee	Adoptive Parent	Birth Mother[2]
Whether Searching[1]	(n=47)	(n=5)	(n=21)
yes	(39)83%	(5)100%	(18) 86%
no	(1) 2%		(2) 10%
no, not interested	(4) 9%		0
no, not yet	(3) 6%		(1) 5%
Search Completed[1]	(n=39)	(n=5)	(n=17)
yes	(18)46%		
no, still searching	(14)36%	(2) 40%	(8) 47%
no, gave up	(4)10%	(3) 60%	(7) 41%
death of birth parent	(3) 8%	0 0	(2) 12% 0
Reunion or Search Outcome[1]	(n=20)	(n=5)	(n=17)
positive	(19)95%	(2)100%	(8)100%
negative	(1) 5%		

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 7

Letter Presentation, Stationery Used, and and Number of Pages, by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type		
	Adoptee	Adoptive Parent	Birth Mother[1]
Letter Presentation	(n=103)	(n=127)	(n=103)
typed	(52)51%	(79)62%	(34)33%
handwritten	(51)50%	(46)36%	(69)67%
both (e.g., form with handwritten attachment)		(2) 2%	0
Stationery			
association	0	0	(1) 1%
employment	(7) 7%	(15)12%	0
plain	(73)71%	(82)65%	(97)94%
personal	(23)22%	(30)24%	(5) 5%
Number of Pages			
1	(70)68%	(78)61%	(71)69%
2	(26)25%	(42)33%	(26)26%
3	(6) 6%	(2) 2%	(3) 3%
4	(1) 1%	(5) 4%	(3) 3%

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 8

The Frequency and Percentage of Letters Including Comments for Each Theme, by Respondent Type

	Respondent Type		
Theme	Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Justice	(69)67%	(88)69%	(72)70%
Identity	(63)61%	(39)31%	(24)23%
Well Being	(55)53%	(68)54%	(67)65%
Feelings About Others	(29)28%	(41)32%	(34)33%
Family	(37)36%	(20)16%	(15)15%

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 9

The Number and Percentage of Themes Identified in Letters, by Respondent Type

Number of Themes Identified in Letter	Respondent Type: Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
1	(23)22%	(44)35%	(32)31%
2	(30)29%	(52)41%	(40)39%
3	(32)31%	(19)15%	(22)21%
4	(17)17%	(10) 8%	(8) 8%
5 or more	(1) 1%	(2) 2%	(1) 1%

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 10

Number of Comments Per Letter by Theme Type and Respondent Type

Themes and Number of Comments	Respondent Type: Adoptee	Adoptive Parent	Birth Mother[1]
Justice	(n=69)	(n=88)	(n=7)
1 comment	(60)87%	(85) 97%	(52)72%
2 comments	(8)12%	(3) 3%	(17)24%
3+ comments	(1) 1%	0	(3) 4%
Identity	(n=63)	(n=39)	(n=24)
1 comment	(61)97%	(38) 97%	(23)96%
2 comments	(1) 2%	(1) 3%	(1) 4%
3+ comments	(1) 2%	0	0
Well Being	(n=55)	(n=68)	(n=67)
1 comment	(48)87%	(60) 88%	(53)79%
2 comments	(1)13%	(7) 10%	(12)18%
3+ comments	0	(1) 1%	(2) 3%
Feelings About Others	(n=29)	(n=41)	(n=34)
1 comment	(26)90%	(36) 88%	(30)88%
2 comments	(3)10%	(5) 12%	(4)12%
3+ comments	0	0	0
Family	(n=37)	(n=20)	(n=15)
1 comment	(33) 8%	(20)100%	(13)87%
2 comments	(4)11%	0	(2)13%
3+ comments	0	0	0

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 11

Number and Percent of Letters and Comments Related to the Justice Theme

Letter Characteristics	Respondent Type: Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Number and Percent of Letters Including Statements Relating to Justice Theme	(69)67%	(88)69%	(72)70%
Total Number of Statements Relating to Justice Theme	79	94	95

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 12

Number and Percent of Letters and Comments Related to the Identity Theme

Letter Characteristics	Respondent Type: Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Number and Percent of Letters Including Statements Relating to Identity Theme	(63)61%	(39)31%	(24)23%
Total Number of Statements Relating to Identity Theme	66	40	25

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 13

Number and Percent of Letters and Comments Related to the Well Being Theme

Letter Characteristics	Respondent Type: Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Number and Percent of Letters Including Statements Relating to Well Being Theme	(55)53%	(68)54%	(67)65%
Total Number of Statements Relating to Well Being Theme	62	77	83

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 14

Number and Percent of Letters and Comments Related to the Feelings About Others Theme

Letter Characteristics	Respondent Type: Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Number and Percent of Letters Including Statements Relating to Feelings About Others Theme	(29)28%	(41)32%	(34)33%
Total Number of Statements Relating to Feelings About Others Theme	32	46	38

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 15

Number and Percent of Letters and Comments Related to the Family Theme

Letter Characteristics	Respondent Type: Adoptee (n=103)	Adoptive Parent (n=127)	Birth Mother[1] (n=103)
Number and Percent of Letters Including Statements Relating to Family Theme	(37)36%	(20)16%	(15)15%
Total Number of Statements Relating to Family Theme	41	20	17

[1]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 16

Terms the Respondents Use to Describe Themselves

	Respondent Type		
Terms[1]	Adoptee (n=89)	Adoptive Parent (n=101)	Birth Mother[2] (n=81)
Adopted Child	(9)10%	NA	NA
Adoptee	(79)89%	NA	NA
Adoptive Parent	NA	(69)68%	NA
Real Parent		(1) 1%	(2) 2%
Natural Parent			(50)62%
Biological Parent			(1) 1%
Birth Parent			(22)27%
Parent		(31)31%	(6) 7%
Other	(1) 1%		

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 17

Terms the Adoptive Parents and Birth Mothers Use to Describe the Adoptees

Terms[1]	Respondent Group: Adoptive Parent (n=105)	Respondent Group: Birth Mother[2] (n=101)
Adopted Child	(41)39%	(1) 1%
Child	(25)24%	(35)35%
Son/Daughter	(35)33%	(62)61%
Adoptee	(4) 4%	(1) 1%
Birth daughter		(2) 2%

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 18

Terms the Adoptees and Birth Mothers Use to Describe the Adoptive Parents

Terms[1]	Respondent Group: Adoptee (n=40)	Respondent Group: Birth Mother[2] (n=34)
Adoptive Parent	(34)85%	(28)82%
Real Parent	(2) 5%	(1) 3%
Parent	(4)10%	(1) 3%
Adoptive Family/ Married Couple		(4)12%

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

[2]With one exception, all birth parents are mothers, therefore the term birth mother is used.

Table 19

Terms the Adoptees and Adoptive Parents Use to Describe the Birth Parents

Terms[1]	Respondent Group: Adoptee (n=62)	Respondent Group: Adoptive Parents (n=94)
Birth Parent	(15)24%	(33)35%
Natural Parent	(36)58%	(24)25%
Biological Parent	(6)10%	(34)36%
Real Parent		(2) 2%
Parent	(5) 8%	(1) 1%

[1]The frequency and percentages are based on those letters that include the information.

APPENDIX B

EXHIBIT ON ALL COMMENTS RECEIVED IN RESPONSE TO MODEL ACT

EXHIBIT I

SUMMARY OF ALL COMMENTS RECEIVED,
BY COMMENTATOR GROUP AND TYPE OF COMMENT

Type of Comment / Commentator Group	Written	Oral	Petition**	Total	Percent of Total
Adult Adoptees (AA)	894	110		1,004	13.8
Adoptive Parents (AP)	1,611	156		1,767	24.3
Birth Parents (BP)	376	54		430	5.9
Concerned Citizens	3,606	81		3,687	50.8
Elected Officials	12	7		19	.3
Judiciary	6	2		8	.1
AA Groups	7	7		14	.2
AP Groups	15	13		28	.4
BP Groups	1	2		3	*
National Organizations	14	1		15	.2
Voluntary Agencies	136	42	-	178	2.4
State Agencies	36	13		49	.7
State/Local Org.	22	13		35	.5
Public Agencies	12	12		24	.3
Universities	4	-		4	.1
Subtotal	6,752	513		7,265	42.5
Petitions			9,838	9,838	57.5
TOTAL	6,752	513	9,838	17,103	100.0

* Less than .1 percent

** Petitions have been treated separately throughout because there was no way to determine what groups might have been represented.

(APWA, 1980, p.14)

APPENDIX C

STUDY INSTRUMENT

Variable No.	Valid Codes	Column No.
RESPONDENT INFO		
1. ID	____	1-3
2. Type of Respondent: Dominant		4
Birthparent	1	
Adoptive parent	2	
Adoptee	3	
3. Type of Respondent: Multiple		5
Birthparent - adoptive parent	1	
Birthparent - adoptee	2	
Adoptive parent - adoptee	3	
Other, specify _____	4	
Not applicable	9	
LETTER CHARACTERISTICS		
4. Presentation		6
typed	1	
handwritten	2	
both	3	
5. Format		7
form letter	1	
modified form letter	2	
letter with attached form	3	
individual	4	
6. Letter focus		8
sealed records/Model Act	1	
BP visitation only	2	
sealed records & BP visitation	3	
above and other aspects of law	4	
other aspects of law only	5	
7. Familiarity with law		9
reference to section(s)	1	
no reference to section(s)	2	
8. Number of pages	____	10

Variable No.		Valid Codes	Column No.
9.	Stationery used		11
	association	1	
	employment	2	
	plain	3	
	personal	4	
	if form, code not applicable	9	
10.	To whom letter addressed		12
	Carter	1	
	Harris	2	
	Regional	3	
	Broadhurst	4	
	Other, specify _____	5	
11.	Was letter carbon copied		13
	yes	1	
	no	2	
12.	Date of letter: mo._____ yr____	____	14-17
13.	State of letter writer: _____	____	18-19
14.	Mention of Agency Name		20
	yes	1	
	no	2	
	Specify _____		
15.	Content of letter--position		21
	statement of support	1	
	statement of opposition	2	
16.	Content of letter--analysis		22
	not analyzed - form/modified form	1	
	not analyzed - statement only	2	
	not analyzed - not applicable	3	
	analyzed	4	

Variable No.		Valid Codes	Column No.
WRITER CHARACTERISTICS			
17.	Writer		23
	mother	1	
	father	2	
	both	3	
	adoptee	4	
	adoptee and husband/wife	5	
	other, specify _____	6	
18.	Sex		24
	M	1	
	F	2	
	Both	3	
19.	Affiliation with organization		25
	yes (if mention or on org. stationary)	1	
	no (if not mentioned, code no)	2	
	other, specify _____		
20.	How identify themselves		26
	birth parent (mother/father)	1	
	natural parent (mother/father)	2	
	parent	3	
	adoptive parent	4	
	adoptee	5	
		6	
		7	
		8	
21.	How identify birthparent		27
	birth parent (mother/father)	1	
	natural parent	2	
	biological parent	3	
	parent	4	
	no identification - "she"	5	
		6	
		7	
		8	
	not applicable	9	
	(blank if no mention)		

Variable No.		Valid Codes	Column No.
22.	How identify adoptive parent		28
	adoptive parent	1	
	natural parent	2	
	real parent	3	
	parent	4	
	no identification - "they"	5	
	adoptive family	6	
		7	
		8	
	not applicable	9	
	(blank if no mention)		
23.	How identify child		29
	child	1	
	son/daughter	2	
	adoptee	3	
	no identification - "he/she"	4	
		5	
		6	
		7	
		8	
	not applicable	9	
	(blank if no mention)		
24.	Use of religious terms		30
	yes	1	
	no	2	
AGE			
25.	Current age of letter writer	____	31-32
26.	Age of adoptee	____	33-34
	not applicable if adoptee	9	
27.	Age of birthparent when gave up child	___	35-36
28.	Age when child adopted	____	37-38
	(0 - 1 yr. = 1)	8	
29.	Age child found out adopted	____	39-40

Variable No.		Valid Codes	Column No.
30.	Searching (BP and AA)		41
	yes	1	
	no	2	
	no, not interested	3	
	not yet, but possible	4	
	not applicable	9	
31.	Adoptee has desire to search (AP, BP & AA)		42
	yes	1	
	no	2	
	don't know	8	
	not applicable	9	
SEARCH			
32.	Age when adoptee began search	____	43-44
33.	Age when birth parent began search	____	45-46
34.	Age when search completed for adoptee	____	47-48
	not applicable	9	
35.	Age when search completed for birth parent	____	49-50
	not applicable	9	
36.	Completed search		51
	yes	1	
	no, still searching	2	
	gave up	3	
	death	4	
	know location	5	
	not applicable	9	
37.	Relationship outcome if search completed		52
	positive	1	
	negative	2	
	ambivalent/neutral	3	
	not applicable	9	

Variable No.		Valid Codes	Column No.
38.	Adoptive parents supportive		53
	yes	1	
	no	2	
	don't know	8	
	not applicable	9	
39.	Other family members supportive		54
	yes	1	
	no	2	
FAMILY			
40.	Birthparent give child name?		55
	yes	1	
	no	2	
41.	Able to have children?		56
	yes	1	
	no	2	
	If yes:		57
	adopted	1	
	birth	2	
	both	3	
42.	More than one child adopted?		58
	yes	1	
	no	2	
43.	How refer to child(ren)		59
	daughter	1	
	son	2	
	child/children	3	
	name	4	
	multiple	5	
44.	Other adoptive relationships?		60
	yes	1	
	no	2	

Variable No.	Valid Codes	Column No.
IF MODEL ACT ENACTED WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE		
45. Would have adopted?		61
yes	1	
no	2	
not sure	3	
BP & AA	9	
46. Do same thing?		62
yes	1	
no	2	
not sure	3	
AA	9	
47. Relinquished child?		63
yes	1	
no	2	
not sure	3	
AA & AP	9	
OUTCOMES OF PROPOSED LEGISLATION		64-65
48. Possible outcomes		
more abortions	1	
more mothers keep children	2	
more BPs, therefore more on welfare	3	
on doorstep/intrusion	4	
	5	
	6	
	7	
	8	
	10	
	11	
	12	
	13	
	14	
RELINQUISHMENT CIRCUMSTANCES		
49. Birth parent description of conditions		66
voluntary	1	
not voluntary	2	
not applicable (AA & AP)	9	

Variable No.	Valid Codes	Column No.
50. Description of circumstances	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8	67
TYPE OF THEMES		
51. Justice yes no		68
52. If yes: number		69
53 Identity yes no		70
54. If yes: number		71
55. Best Interests yes no		72
56. If yes: number		73
57. Feelings yes no		74
58. If yes: number		75

Variable No.	Valid Codes	Column No.
59. Family yes no		76
60. If yes: number		77
61. Number of themes mentioned if not analyzed, not applicable	9	78