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MCGILL UNIVERSITY

**EMOTIONAL RAMIFICATIONS OF ADOPTION REUNION: IS THERE A
PREDICTABLE PATTERN OF RESPONSE?**

A Thesis Submitted to

**The School of Social Work
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For

The Master's Degree in Social Work

By

Sally Toner-MacLean

Montreal, August 2002



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Abstract

This study examines the emotional responses of adoption reunion participants over time by a cross-sectional survey. A questionnaire was modeled after an existing reunion guideline, "Relationship Stages in Reunion". Ontario adoption reunion counselors in the public and private sectors use this guideline. This questionnaire was circulated by a Parent Finder's organization (22 respondents), and a provincial government organization (27 respondents). The hypothesis that there is a predictable pattern of emotional response in reunion was not supported. No significant differences were found between those that experienced reunion via either organization. There were some differences in the demographics. Both groups noted a high level of satisfaction with their reunion. This research would have been better tracked by a longitudinal study.

RESUME

Cette étude traite des réactions émotionnelles de participants adoptés à des retrouvailles de leur milieu biologique sur une période de temps déterminée. Les résultats ont été recueillis par moyen d'un sondage. Le questionnaire utilisé a été élaboré à partir d'un guide pour retrouvaille nommé: "Les Etapes d'une Relation de Retrouvaille." Ce guide est utilisé par les conseillers Ontariens des secteurs publics et privés, spécialisés en retrouvaille de gens adoptés avec leur milieu biologique. Le questionnaire a été circulé par un groupe de Trouveurs de Parents (22 sujets), ainsi qu'un groupe du gouvernement provincial (27 sujets). L'hypothèse qui dit que les réactions émotionnelles d'une retrouvaille sont d'une série prévisible n'a pas été supportée. La recherche n'a pas démontrée de différences significatives parmi ceux qui ont vécus des retrouvailles selon leur groupe d'appartenance. Il y avait des différences démographiques. Les deux groupes ont noté un haut niveau de satisfaction par rapport à leurs retrouvailles. Cette recherche aurait été mieux définie par une étude effectuée sur une période de temps prolongée.

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S. T. M.

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

The focus of this study was to examine the emotional ramifications of adoption reunion...after the initial reunion. Reese (1997) noted that adoption reunion tends to be presented in the media in a highly polarized fashion. One either views a tearful, emotionally charged first contact between birth parent and adoptee on a talk show or “neglectful birth parents” that are not worthy of reunion. These highly charged views do not give true insight as to what is involved in the ongoing reunion process. The impact of reunion is not given much exploration (Andersen, 1989; Fraser, 1997; Moran, 1994). The history of adoption will uncover why adoption and reunion remain in a “secrecy” mode (Carp, 1999).

Definition of Adoption

What is adoption? The spirit and responsibilities of adoption are captured in the following definition by Kenneth Watson (1994):

Adoption is a means of meeting the developmental needs of a child by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibility from birth parents to adoptive parents, recognizing that in the process we have created a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child who is shared by both. This kinship network may also include significant other families, both formal and informal, that have been part of the child's experiences. (p. 11)

This is a progressive definition that the world of adoption is striving to attain. The definition respects the connections of all the members of the adoption triad – adoptee, birth parents and adoptive parents. The definition gives equal weight to all members of

the triad with an emphasis on a life long connection. The formulation of this definition has been a long process that began with the first Ontario Adoption Act enacted in 1921.

History of Adoption

According to McColm (1993) and Wicks (1993) Canada's first children's welfare legislation was passed in 1893 with the Child Protection Act of Ontario. The act did not apply to adoption but to child boarders and apprentices who had emigrated from Britain. Canadian Law did not cover adoption procedures until the early 1920s. Until that time birth parents (mostly young, single mothers) privately arranged their child's placement, with relatives, friends, neighbors or via contact with someone who was aware of a couple wanting to parent a child.

In 1921, Ontario passed its first Adoption Act to protect orphaned and illegitimate children born in World War I. Children born out of wedlock were considered illegitimate and by status were treated as second-class citizens. During this era women and children were legitimized by their relationship to the husband/father. This initial act was followed by further restrictions prohibiting the disclosure of identifying information connected to adoption in 1927. Records were to be sealed and kept in the care of the courts and the Registrar General.

The original purpose of sealing the birth certificate was to protect the child from the stigma of being born out of wedlock as birth certificates were stamped "illegitimate". These certificates were sealed and replaced with certificates identifying the adopted

parents as the parent to the adopted child. Lifton (1988) noted that:

The policy of sealing the records lost its original intention and became a means of protecting the adoptive family from interference by the birth family. Secrecy effectively pitted adoptive mothers against birth mothers and kept adopted children separated from birth families. (p. 24)

Today this is known as a closed adoption. Until the mid-1970s the majority of adoptions were closed and viewed as positive practice.

Melina and Roszia (1993) supplied additional reasons for the perpetuation of secrecy.

Secrecy and confidentiality created a role for social workers and adoption agencies...the gatekeepers of information. Closed adoptions evolved during a social climate where people were moving from their countries of origin and "starting over" in a new country.

The philosophy that one can start over fresh is inherent in closed adoptions...pretend as if the birth and adoption did not happen. This philosophy also evolved during a time when environment was believed to have a stronger influence on the growth of a child than genetics.

In a handout prepared to give insight to previous adoption philosophy authored by The Ontario Provincial Government, Adoption Disclosure Unit (1990) theorized, less was best.

As much as birth parents were kept in the dark, so too were the adoptive parents. They were often told little of the birth family history of the adoptee. It was believed that environmental influence was of prime importance and that the less amount of information known, the greater the bonding would be between child and adoptive parents. It was assumed then that the adoptee would have little interest in his/her heritage. (p. 1)

We have come a long way from the original studies regarding the impact of adoption and the right to search for birth history. It is interesting to note that in a study conducted by Triseliotis (1973) he linked the need for an adoptee's search for birth history to an unsatisfactory relationship with their adoptive family. This finding did not give permission for adoptees to search yet today we know that "search is normal" (Brodzinsky, 1992). Triseliotis, although perpetuating the falsehood that the search for history is based on a negative adoption experience, supported an adoptee's search for information surrounding their birth family and adoption placement.

Kirk (1984), who is considered the father of adoption theory, built on the relevancy of Triseliotis' findings by supporting the need for those in the adoption triad to acknowledge an adoptee's history:

I was once a "rejection-of-difference" parent who could not allow for his child's inborn work to be admitted into the adoptive family world. By admitting our children's genetic and constitutional heritage we admit also their ancestors'. Without doing so we shut off a part of our children's lives, not only against them but also against ourselves. The Shared Fate theory and method is thus a key to bringing our children's world, liabilities as well as assets, into the world of the adoptive family. (p. 184)

Literature on reunion issues is building but there continue to be limited studies on the emotional ramifications of reunion after the initial meeting. There are a limited number of counselors trained in the field of reunion and they are constantly looking for knowledge in this unique area (Baran & Pannor, 1993).

Since the beginning of Canadian adoption legislation it has been estimated that there have been over 200,000 adoptions in Ontario alone.

Current Adoption Statistics

Having reviewed the history of adoption, it is not surprising that Canada and the United States do not keep accurate statistical data in regard to the number of adoptions that are facilitated each year. At the time an adoption is processed in the legal system the following words are uttered by the presiding Judge..."You are now considered the legal parent of the child...go forth...as if born to."(Ontario Government, 2000).

With the philosophy that adoption is a legal transfer of guardianship of a child from one set of parents to another it is easy to see why records are not viewed as important.

Griffin, (1992) wrote about Canada's current collection of adoption data....

Inaccurately recorded data may indicate a common misperception of the past that adoption was the same, "as if born to", or was a non-event which needed neither detailed neither recording nor public mention. ...Adoption was and still is, to a degree, a taboo subject. (Section 18, p. 5)

Stolley (1993) noted the same issue with the collection of statistics in the United States.

According to national estimates, one million children in the United States live with adoptive parents, and from 2% to 4% of American families include an adopted child (p. 26). Kinn (2000) noted that a recent study found that six in ten Americans cite a connection with adoption issues. She also found that statistical data regarding adoptions continue to be nonexistent. It is estimated that there are six million adopted people in America and more than 120,000 children are adopted each year (p. 8).

It should be noted that the number of adoptions annually has decreased. According to limited statistics the number of adoptions peaked in 1969 and domestic adoptions have declined since the 1970s. As noted by Rycus and Hughes (1998) adoption practice changed in the past 25 years due to a number of society changes including; better birth control methods, safer abortions available, social stigma regarding single parenting decreased and social assistance available so that a young parent could choose to parent her child.

This has impacted the adoption world in the last 25 years. It has meant that closed adoptions are no longer the norm. Birth parents are given the option of an adoption with contact with their birth child (an open adoption). With the change in practice came the acknowledgement that closed adoptions evolved at a cost to the participants.

Ramifications of Secrecy

The original sealing of the files was not created in the spirit of secrecy but confidentiality for the adoptees branded as illegitimate. According to Carp (1999), "The distinction between confidentiality and secrecy is crucial to understanding why natural (i.e., birth) parents and adult adoptee's have been refused access to their adoption records" (p. 102).

Confidentiality protects the privacy of individuals, whereas secrecy deprives a person of valuable information about her or himself. The following are recognized in the adoption field as the "Seven Core Issues of Adoption" (Kaplan & Silverstein, 1989; Melina, 1990):

1) Loss:

Kaplan and Silverstein (1989) coined the phrase, "Adoption is created through loss, without loss there is no adoption" (p.1). Loss on its own is not negative; it is part of the human experience that helps us grow, creates character. They further explained that:

Before losses can enrich our lives we must mourn them, and society encourages those involved with adoption to ignore their losses rather than confront them. Adoptive parents are expected to be happy; adoptees are expected to be grateful that they were adopted; and birth parents are expected to forget their loss or are made to feel that they don't deserve to feel their loss. (p.1)

This type of loss would be considered a non-bereavement loss. Doka and Aber (1989) identified adoption as a psychosocial loss - loss that has not been legitimized by society, and is therefore difficult to mourn. All members in the adoption triad feel loss.

Adoptees lose their birthparents; birth parents lose the ability to be parents while adoptive parents lose the child that would have been born to them.

2) Rejection:

Rejection of self and fear of rejection can be a ramification of adoption. Birthparents may reject themselves as irresponsible or unworthy to parent. Adoptees often feel that they were placed for adoption because they were worthless or defective. (To be placed on adoption one must first be rejected by birth family.) While adoptive parents may feel that their bodies betrayed them or that a higher power has rejected them in their inability to parent via birth. In the area of rejection Kaplan and Silverstein (1989) explained:

One-way people deal with loss is to figure out what they did wrong to cause the loss so that they can keep from having other losses. In doing this, people may

conclude they suffered losses because they were unworthy of having whatever was lost. As a result they feel they were rejected. (p. 1)

3) *Guilt and Shame:*

Kaplan and Silverstein (1989) noted that those in the triad might feel guilt and shame.

They defined the concepts as follows:

Shame is a much deeper emotion than guilt because shame has to do with a defect in one's self. Unresolved shame can lead to a sense of being inadequate, unworthy or bad. Guilt is related to misconduct, and while people may regret their behaviour, their actions don't diminish their sense of worth. (p. 2)

Birthparents may feel guilt and shame for placing their child on adoption or not trying harder to parent. Adoptees may feel shame at being different, or feel that they deserve misfortune. While adoptive parents may feel ashamed of their infertility, believing it to be a curse or punishment.

4) *Grief:*

Adoption is viewed as a win-win situation. Birthparents can go on as if nothing happened, a child gets a home, and adoptive parents with fertility issues are able to parent. With this philosophy it is easy to see that all members of the triad are not encouraged or validated to grieve their losses. Kaplan and Silverstein (1989) identified this, "There are no rituals to bury unborn children, roles, dreams and disconnected families" (p.3).

As noted by Kubler-Ross (1969) there are five predictable stages of grief - denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Birth parents who feel they must keep their

child's placement a secret may stay in the denial phase of grief for a long time. Adoptees may have difficulty dealing with grief because they are not encouraged to mourn their loss and/or don't identify it as a loss. According to Brodzinsky, Schechter and Henig (1992):

When adoption arises as a salient issue in a person's inner life, the most pervasive feeling is an overwhelming sense of loss. The loss inherent in adoption is unlike other losses we have come to expect in a lifetime such as death and divorce. Adoption loss is more pervasive, less socially recognized, and more profound. (p. 9)

5) Identity Issues:

The issue of how adoption affects identity formation of the adoptee is key in adoption literature and research. Sandmaier (1988) said that:

Among other factors, identity is shaped by one's personal history. When one wonders: "Who am I?" an important part of the answer is rooted in the family one was born into and who they are: Irish or Hispanic, tall or short, middle-class or poor, temperamental or serene. Most people take that knowledge for granted, adoptees cannot. Most adoptees are missing critical pieces of family information and need to fill in the empty spaces to feel whole, regardless of their ties to their adoptive families. (p.16)

Birth parents also deal with identity issues, as they are a birth parent yet they are not in a parenting role. Adoptive parents struggle with their identity, as they are not, in a critical sense, passing on their history via procreation. They may not have the sense of being tied to future generations. Speirs and Duder (1997) noted that reunion is:

More than an intellectual activity, searching also is a momentous emotional experience for both adopted adults and birth relatives. It can bring a fuller understanding and a reconciliation of integral components that shape one's life narrative. (p. 5)

6) *Intimacy:*

Kaplan and Silverstein (1989) noted that people who are confused about their identity may have difficulty getting close to anyone. People who have had significant losses in their lives may fear getting close to others because of the risk of experiencing loss again (p.3).

Birth parents may connect the loss of their child with the sexual encounter and fear intimacy because it leads to loss. Adoptees may fear intimacy because they may be afraid of inadvertently being attracted to a birth relative. They also may experience difficulty with closeness as a result of their early experiences with bonding, attachment and rejection.

Adoptive parents who adopt older children may have difficulty with developing a close, intimate parental connection due to the loss of the early years and connection. They also may avoid closeness with their child because they fear rejection or loss.

7) *Control:*

All those involved in the adoption experience have been forced to relinquish control to other powers (usually a bureaucracy). Kaplan and Silverstein (1989) noted, "Adoption is viewed as a second choice. There has been a crisis whose resolution is adoption" (p. 4).

Birth parents may emerge from the adoption placement process feeling victimized and powerless (especially in the closed adoption process). Adoptive parents have learned to be helpless and responsive to the demands of the adoption system.

Adoptive children lose control by the very nature of adoption; they are moved to reside in a family that is not of their origin, based upon the issues inherent in their birth parents' and adoptive parents' lives.

As research continues, and those in the adoption world continue to lobby, awareness continues to grow regarding the consequences of secrecy for those touched by reunion. This has impacted on adoption placement practice (building in openness and understanding of birth family history). It has also impacted on advocating for change in our current legislation.

Individual provinces oversee adoption legislation. The most progressive province in Canada regarding adoption reunion legislation is British Columbia (Harris, 1996). They currently have a system where birth parents and adoptees are allowed access to birth certificates (and amended birth certificates) after the adoptee's 18th birthday. They have an active registry whereby searches are conducted for both birth relatives and adoptees. Ontario has had some changes in regard to legislation of the adoption disclosure act but these changes continue to be restrictive and slow in coming (Ensminger, 1992).

Current Adoption Disclosure Legislation in Ontario

On July 1, 1987, the Ontario provincial government passed the Adoption Disclosure Statute Law Amendment Act, permitting adult adoptees (those 18 years of age and over) and their biological relatives to place their names on an Adoption Disclosure Registry (Ontario Government, 1986). Ontario has a semi-passive registry. This means that adoptees are able to request a search for birth relatives (if they are not registered). Birth relatives cannot make this request; they have to wait until the adoptee registers.

If an adult adoptee and his/his relative are matched on the Register, both parties must participate in mandatory counseling in order for the process of disclosure to continue. Gladstone and Westhues (1992) noted the importance of counselors in relation to pre-reunion counseling. Unfortunately, what was not foreseen was that mandatory counseling took the control of the reunion process away from the individuals involved in reunion. With this realization came a change in practice that took place approximately seven years ago; the counseling-by-mail process.

Today the practice is to mail a reunion notice along with a package of information (articles and information pieces that strive to encompass the enormity of reunion issues). This package is sent to the adoptee and birth relative. Face to face, or counseling via telephone, are offered, but if the individual in reunion does not want to access that option the information package is considered sufficient to proceed. Included in the information package is a fact sheet titled, Relationship Stages After Reunion (Appendix A).

Counselors in the field use this fact sheet as a counseling tool. It outlines concrete stages of emotional response that a reunited individual may experience during the reunion process. The guideline does not outline specific timeframes for each stage but it does allude to a pattern of emotional response in reunion.

The format and content of Appendix A compares to the stages of loss outlined by Kubler-Ross (1969). As previously noted, adoption is built on loss. Her stages of loss are still used today as a guideline in the grief process. Wasow (1984) pointed out that these stages have never been tested for validity. The question of their relevance has not truly been questioned, as there is a basic common sense to their approach. This too can be said of the relevancy of the current guidelines outlined in, Relationship Stages After Reunion. These stages appear to have common sense relevance, but have never been tested for significance in the post-reunion experience. The guidelines have evolved from the practice knowledge of social workers in the field.

The possibility of a predictable emotional response pattern is suggested by, Relationship Stages After Reunion, but there are those in the reunion field who question a predictable pattern. Sachdev (1992) noted in his synopsis:

Reunited relationships, just as all other relationships, are varied in nature and intensity and go through high and low points. Their progression does not follow a fixed pattern; some relationships make a slow beginning and gradually evolve into a positive and strong liaison; others make a strong debut but taper off only to reappear with renewed vigor. One thing is certain; both the adoptee and the biological mother go through a period of adjustment and accommodation. (p. 66)

Current Reunion Sources

In Ontario two sources, the public and/or the private sector, facilitate the majority of adoption reunions. The public source is Government mandated via The Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS). The public departments are staffed by social workers at either the Adoption Disclosure Registry (ADR) located in Toronto or situated at the Children's Aid Society (CAS) that facilitated the original adoption. Volunteers, who are connected to adoption either as a birthparent, adoptee or adoptive parent, staff the private organization, Parent Finders (PF). There has been controversy over the years regarding the relevancy and effectiveness of either group (Mathes, 2000). Valley, Bass and Speirs (1999) noted, in an evaluative study of an adoption reunion support group, that professional social workers were not initially well received by the members. This was attributed to the birth relative's previous experience with the adoption system during placement of their birth child (p. 373).

Through a literature review it was determined that questionnaire requesting information specific to emotional reaction during adoption reunion had not been formulated. The majority of literature in the field of adoption disclosure and reunion focused on the effects of closed adoption (Andersen, 1989; Mathes, 2000; Moren, 1994), the search process and the need for change in the adoption system (Lipton, 1987; McColm, 1993). Researchers such as Sachdev (1992) and Model (1997) identified that it is only recently that professionals have directed their attention to the phenomenon of search and reunion.

Focus of the Questionnaire

Authors who have referred to a pattern of emotional response after the first reunion included McColm (1993), Lifton (1988), Fraser (1997), Rosenberg and Groze (1997), Model (1997), Gediman and Brown (1997), and Mathes (1998). These authors commented on possible emotional response patterns, based on their personal experience, work experience, and interviews conducted in a qualitative manner. The studies gave limited information in relation to what pattern actually occurred.

Three sources that were more specific in regard to an emotional pattern include; Adoption Community Outreach Project (1997), Adoption Disclosure Unit (1990), and Moran (1994). The information in these sources was more detailed, with stages outlined and specifics as to characteristics included in the stages. The three sources had similar content but were unique in format. The information was gathered via the authors' work experience, personal experience, literature review and qualitative research.

The fact sheet utilized in the counseling process, Relationship Stages After Reunion, contains clearly outlined stages that identify what emotions could be experienced at what stage. A drawback of this model is that, although it contains clearly identified stages and emotions, it does not give clear time lines (duration) of said emotions. This model has been legitimized as a tool in reunion as it is used in the following ways:

- 1) MCSS and CAS Adoption Disclosure Social workers in Ontario mail this handout to individuals involved in an adoption reunion. This document is recommended as a guide to those in reunion and a resource for counselors in the reunion process.
- 2) It was one of the few documents that gave clear, detailed information regarding the reunion experience in terms of a progression of feelings over time to this life altering experience. Unfortunately the time frames and progression are alluded to but not specified. This is a similar model to the grieving process outlined by Kubler-Ross (1969).
- 3) These stages have also been noted in the booklet compiled by the Adoption Council Outreach Project (Spring, 1997).

Why Explore The Post-Reunion Experience?

Moran (1994) is a counselor who experienced a reunion with a birth sister and her birth mother. One reunion would be viewed as positive and lasting while the reunion with her birth mother was fraught with half-truths and unknowns. Moran profiled her reunion experience, and said that:

As a counselor, I am aware that more and more adoptees continue to search for and find biological parents. It will be imperative that counselors become sensitive to the adoptees' particular emotional state after reunion. (p. 259)

Andersen (1989) and Mathes (2000) highlighted the need for reunion to become a whole person. Modell (1997) explored the taboo of reunion in our society. She did extensive qualitative research and noted that there is next to no information on what happens after

reunion. She questioned whether the secrecy is to continue to represent the needs of the adoptive parents (the façade of creating a family, as if begotten) and not the needs of the birth parents or adoptee, and added that:

An evident taboo surrounds reunions between birth parents and adoptees. The event itself may be exciting but the consequences are not. A focus on the excitement, then, serves as a distraction for the real problem these meetings pose; are they the beginning of a parent-child relationship and what does that do to adoption as Americans have practiced and understood the institution for half a century. If the initial reunion leads to further contact, the event challenges our notions of adoption, parenthood, and kinship. (p. 48)

The need to research and continue to explore the area of reunion is crucial for those that are entering these uncharted waters. Fraser (1997) noted that:

Knowledge about the potential consequences of engaging in a reunion relationship ought to be available to all adoptees and birth parents to help them navigate the stages of reunion. (p.77)

Moran (1994) supported this philosophy, saying that:

Knowledge of these emotions will not prevent them, but I hope knowing they exist will lessen the fear inherent in not knowing or understanding what one is feeling. (p. 257)

Andersen (1989), a psychiatrist who works with adoption issues, used his clinical experience to attempt to formulate how search might contribute to a more cohesive identity, or how it might help the adoptee complete his or her experiential puzzle. He viewed the reunion as an opportunity to grow. He noted that adoption is built on trauma - to address the trauma issues we must view it as such:

Treatment consists of acknowledging and responding to the trauma, and attempting to change the experience from one that was passively endured to one that is actively mastered. (p. 629)

In 1997 Feast and Howe noted that:

We still know very little about what happens in the months and years after reunion. If post-adoption counselors are to offer a service that continues to grow in accuracy and sensitivity, our understanding of relationships and identity in the lives of all those involved in the adoption circle will need to stretch well beyond the time of first contact. (p. 15)

This present study was conducted with this focus - the need to explore the ramifications of reunion and build on existing knowledge. Given ongoing societal issues, reunion and its emotional ramifications will not be an issue that will soon go away. Counselors in the field of reunion need to continue to build on their knowledge base and adjust counseling services accordingly.

Summary

This study was designed to explore the patterns of reunion response. The existing guideline used in the adoption reunion counseling process, Relationship Stages After Reunion, was used as a model to create a questionnaire. The emphasis in this study was on the following areas:

- Changes over time.
- Differences between sources (Parent Finders or MCSS).
- Differences in reunion experience based on demographics
- The overall satisfaction of individuals involved in reunion.

METHOD

Design

This was a small cross-sectional survey of two groups of individuals involved in the adoption reunion process, Adoptees and Birth Relatives. The objective of this study was to document the emotional changes experienced in reunion over time. The ideal design would have been a longitudinal study, but due to time constraints and logistics a cross-sectional sample was used.

The two samples that received the questionnaire were individuals that had their reunion facilitated by a private support group, Parent Finders, and those that had their reunion facilitated by a social worker connected with the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Ontario.

Sample

The sample included adult birth relatives and adult adoptees (18+) years of age that had been involved in an adoption reunion. Birth relatives included birth mothers, birth fathers and adult birth siblings who experienced a relative placed on adoption.

The questionnaires were circulated to two separate groups. Those that had their reunion facilitated by:

- The private system, Parent Finders. The counselors with this organization are usually volunteers whose life has been touched by adoption. They are not usually trained social workers.
- The public system, social workers connected with the Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS). The MCSS counselors are usually trained social workers that are paid for their services by the government. Those individuals that had their reunion facilitated by a social worker from a Children's Aid Society or from the Adoption Disclosure Unit from Toronto were noted as one group. Individuals from either provincial organization have similar guidelines that are utilized in the adoption counseling process.

To obtain the sample from the Ministry of Community and Social Services a file review of past reunions in one Children's Aid Society in Ontario was conducted. Any individual (adoptee or birth relative) that experienced a reunion in the past 10 years via the Society was sent a questionnaire. To maintain anonymity, the self-addressed return envelopes did not contain any identification. The first batch of questionnaires was sent in the summer of 2000. To encourage additional responses, a second batch was sent to the same sample group in December 2000.

To obtain a sample from the Parent Finders group, permission first had to be given by the acting officer of the Brockville branch. Once the executive members reviewed the content of the questionnaire, and felt comfortable with the premise of the study, they agreed to participate in circulating the questionnaire. Complete sets of the questionnaires were given to the Parent Finders group. To maintain confidentiality they addressed the envelopes and sent the questionnaires to individuals that in the past 10 years had experienced a reunion through their organization. The first batch of questionnaires was sent in the summer of 2000 while a follow-up batch was sent in December 2000. These questionnaires included a cover letter authored by Parent Finders, endorsing the study and encouraging participation.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire designed for this study was modeled on the emotional stages identified in Relationship Stages in Reunion, a handout utilized by the Adoption Reunion Registry in the counseling process (Appendix A).

The five-page questionnaire (Appendix B) was organized in two parts:

Part 1: Present Emotional Situation

- This included 16 statements reflecting key words and concepts modeled on the counseling tool, Relationship Stages After Reunion.

The questionnaire requested that the respondent indicate their current emotional situation regarding their reunion as they completed the first half of the questionnaire. The statements reflected the key words or concepts identified as emotional stages outlined in the MCSS handout (Appendix A). For each statement there were five possible responses: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree or Don't Know. The statements were in random order, so that the respondents would have the opportunity to complete the questionnaire without being influenced by the flow of the statements.

The stages, and corresponding statements in the questionnaire, are as follows:

Stage 1 - Honeymoon stage: Statements a, f, k, and n. A sample statement was: "You feel a sense of euphoria or joy." Stage 1 statements contained mostly positive feelings, except for statement n, "You are unsure how to proceed." It was thought that reversing this statement to positively correlate with the other statements would be appropriate, as this was a negative statement amongst positive statements. However, this was not done, as it was judged best to keep the model intact.

Stage 2 - Time Out: Statements b, g, l, o and p. A sample statement for this stage is, "You requested time to process the reunion."

Stage 3 - Show down: Statements c and h. A sample statement is "You have a need to clarify your relationship status with your birth relative."

Stage 4 – Disengagement: Statements d, I and m. A sample statement is "You no longer have contact."

Stage 5 – Solidifying: Statements e and j. A sample statement is "You have a sense of stability in this relationship."

It should be noted that Stage 5, like Stage 1, tended to represent positive emotions (euphoria, resolution of roles, etc.) Stages 2, 3 and 4 tended to represent negative emotions like anger, frustration, sadness, loss etc.

Part 2: Personal Information about the Respondents

The second section of the questionnaire contained four types of questions:

- 1) Demographics; year of birth, gender, etc.
- 2) Respondents' own adoption history: year of reunion, pre-reunion counseling, etc.
- 3) Overall satisfaction with their reunion.
- 4) An open-ended question where the respondents were invited to share any information they wished in regard to their reunion experiences.

Prior to sending out the questionnaires, the set-up and wording of the questions were reviewed by four individuals that were connected with adoption reunion. These individuals were helpful in identifying possible issues with the wording, flow and clarity of the questionnaire.

Administering the Questionnaire

Data were collected by means of a mailed questionnaire, to adult adoptees and to birth relatives. Adoptees and relatives who completed the questionnaires were not necessarily related to each other. Identifying information was not requested, so it was not possible to connect the reunions (i.e., a birth mother's response with her own birth daughter's).

A stamped, self-addressed envelope and a covering letter were included with the questionnaire. In August, 2000 the MCSS social worker forwarded 45 letters to the relevant population identified via Adoption Reunion files while Parent Finders sent out 43 questionnaires to their identified population. Parent Finders did not have access to MCSS mailing list and vice versa. The return envelopes for both groups were identical, therefore there was no way to trace the source of the sender.

To increase response rate a second mailing was sent out in December 2000. In the December mailing the MCSS social worker sent an additional 7 questionnaires (new sources) while Parent Finders remained consistent with 43. A total of 95 questionnaires were distributed.

Data Problems

- 1) A number of the respondents indicated that they had had reunions with more than one individual. This was especially true with adoptees that were united with birth parent and birth siblings during the same reunion. These individuals indicated their reunion, but only responded once to their current emotional experience. For the sake of clarity

it was decided that the main reunion would be identified in the data, as it would be the one with the most emotional impact. For example, if a respondent indicated that they had been reunited with a birth mother and two siblings the birth mother would be identified as the contact.

- 2) One respondent completed two separate questionnaires. This was a birth mother who had relinquished two sons to adoption at two separate times. Her birth sons had been placed in two separate homes. She had her reunions with them during the same year but on two separate occasions (the first was a summer reunion while the second was a fall reunion). She had different feelings about the emotional impact of her reunions, as they were both proceeding at a different level of contact and comfort level. Since both experiences were completely different and relevant they were kept as separate cases in the data.
- 3) Another issue that became apparent during data input was that there wasn't a question that captured the respondent's connection to either the MCSS group or the Parent Finders Group. This information was to be captured by Question 2 (m), "Who arranged your counseling? Parent Finders, Adoption Disclosure Registry, Children's Aid or Other." This question was included for two reasons; by completing this question the respondent is then indicating how they came to have the questionnaire - via Parent Finders or MCSS - and the second reason was that the question also indicated who gave counseling to the respondent. Unfortunately the question was not as clear as hoped. Individuals from the MCSS stream may have received

counseling by mail. This issue had the potential to cause havoc in the study, as one of the research questions was a comparison of the results from two separate groups in regard to reunion experience and possible counseling issues. To clarify this problem the questionnaires were reviewed and identified as Parent Finders or MCSS questionnaires. This was possible by reviewing the content in the questionnaire, not via one question alone. The majority of respondents gave information in the open-ended section that indicated which group they were affiliated with.

- 4) Another anomaly was that a small number did not have a connection with the MCSS or Parent Finders at the time of the reunion. They had contact in a later stage in their reunion; usually for support in regard to reunion issues. Again, via a questionnaire review this small group was identified; and assigned status depending upon who forwarded them the questionnaire, MCSS or Parent Finders.

The open-ended question was a challenge to interpret and input as data for analysis. For the sake of clarity key themes were identified relating to the Relationship Stages After Reunion (Appendix A). Comments were interpreted by looking for key words and themes that could be connected to one of the stages after reunion.

Analysis

A major task, once the questionnaires were received, was to organize the questionnaire responses into a data set that was workable. The data were input into a SPSS for Windows (1998) program. A score was calculated for each stage by averaging the scores

of the statements for that stage. To make this possible, responses to Part 1 were recoded from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 – Strongly Agree, with Don't Know given the midline value of 3.

Statistical Operations

The first operation performed was running frequencies on the data as a whole, looking for anomalies in regard to numbers assigned to represent responses.

The focus of this study was to explore patterns or theoretical stages of reunion overtime from two response groups. The emphasis of this study was on the following areas:

Changes Over Time

The main focus of this study was to explore whether there are predictable emotional stages over the duration of a reunion. Statistical operations that were undertaken:

- Correlations between the scores for the five stages and duration of the reunion in years.
- Since the model had not dictated a timeframe, duration in years was recoded into three categories: 0 to 1 year, 2 to 3 years and 4 years or more. Oneway analysis of variance was used to examine the differences, in scores for the five stages, between these three duration categories.

Differences Between Sources

- T-tests were performed to compare the average scores for the five stages for the MCSS and Parent Finders samples.

Exploring Differences and Similarities based on Demographics

- T-tests were performed to compare the average scores for the five stages for male and female respondents, and for adoptees and birth relatives.

Overall Satisfaction

- The last three questions in Part 2 of the questionnaire were examined.
- The scores for positively-worded stages (1 and 5) were compared with the scores of negatively-worded stages (2, 3 and 4).

FINDINGS

For the purposes of this study 95 questionnaires were circulated to two separate groups of respondents (52 questionnaires to the MCSS group and 43 questionnaires to the Parent Finders group). Forty-nine questionnaires, were returned for a 51.6 % response rate.

Description of Sample: Demographics

Table 1 shows a description of the sample. This table indicates that the majority of respondents to the questionnaire were female. Most of the reunions were between adoptee and birth mother. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39 years, with the second largest group between the ages of 40 and 49 years. How these numbers relate to role in reunion is shown in Table 2.

Areas that spoke of the respondent's life stability were responses reviewing relationship status, level of education and nature of employment. In all these areas the respondents scored on the higher end of life stability.

Both groups, those respondents that experienced reunion via MCSS and those that had their reunion facilitated by Parent Finders, were well represented in the data. Duration of reunion was another area of interest; the MCSS group had a large number of respondents in the early stage of reunion (6 months to 1 year), while for the Parent Finders group the highest response was in the 2 to 3 year range.

Table 1. Summary of the Characteristics of the Two Respondent Groups

Variable	Total Sample (N = 49)		MCSS (N = 27)		Parent Finders (N = 22)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender						
Female	37	75.5	20	74.1	17	77.3
Male	12	24.5	7	25.9	5	22.7
Title in Adoption Reunion						
Adoptee	30	61.2	18	66.7	12	54.5
Birth Parent	11	22.4	3	11.1	8	36.4
Birth Sibling	8	16.3	6	22.2	2	9.1
Who Respondent Reunited With						
Daughter	2	4.1	1	3.7	1	4.5
Son	9	18.4	2	7.4	7	31.8
Mother	18	36.7	11	40.7	7	31.8
Father	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0
Sister	14	28.6	9	33.3	5	22.7
Brother	5	10.2	3	11.1	2	9.1
Age at Time of Completing Questionnaire						
20 years to 29	4	8.2	3	11.1	1	4.5
30 to 39	21	42.9	12	44.4	9	40.9
40 to 49	12	24.4	7	25.9	5	22.7
50 to 59	11	22.4	4	14.8	7	31.8
60 +	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0
Number of Years in Reunion						
0 - 1	16	32.6	11	40.7	5	22.7
1+ to 2	7	14.3	4	14.8	3	13.6
2+ to 3	11	22.4	5	18.5	6	27.3
3+ to 4	3	6.1	1	3.7	2	9.1
4+ to 5	4	8.2	2	7.4	2	9.1
5+ to 9	4	8.2	1	3.7	3	13.6
10+ (max. 13 yrs.)	4	8.2	3	11.1	1	4.5
Marital Status						
Married or Common Law	37	75.5	18	66.7	19	86.4
Single	7	14.3	5	18.5	2	9.1
Divorced	4	8.2	3	11.1	1	4.5
Widowed	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0

Table 1 – continued

Variable	Total Sample (N = 49)		MCSS (N = 27)		Parent Finders (N = 22)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Number of Biological Children Born to Respondent						
One	16	32.7	11	40.7	5	22.7
Two	13	26.5	7	25.9	6	27.3
Three	5	10.2	2	7.4	3	13.6
Four	5	10.2	0	0	5	22.7
Five	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0
Missing	9	18.4	6	22.2	3	13.6
Number of Children placed on adoption via Respondent						
One	10	20.4	3	11.1	7	31.8
Two	2	4.1	0	0	2	9.0
Missing	37	75.5	24	88.9	13	59.0
Income of Respondents						
Less than 20,000	7	14.3	3	11.1	4	18.2
20,000 to 29,000	3	6.1	1	3.7	2	9.1
30,000 to 39,000	7	14.3	6	22.2	1	4.5
40,000 to 49,000	7	14.3	3	11.1	4	18.2
50,000 to 59,000	5	10.2	3	11.1	2	9.1
60,000 to 69,000	4	8.2	2	7.4	2	9.1
70,000 and above	10	20.4	5	18.5	5	22.7
Missing	6	12.2	4	14.8	2	9.1
Education						
Elementary	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
Secondary	20	40.8	10	37.0	10	45.5
College	19	38.8	12	44.4	7	31.8
University	4	8.2	2	7.4	2	9.1
Graduate Degree	4	8.2	3	11.1	1	4.5
Missing	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
Are You Now Employed?						
No	12	24.5	6	22.2	6	27.3
Full-Time	25	51.0	17	63.0	8	36.4
Part-Time	11	22.4	4	14.8	7	31.8
Missing	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
Nature of Employment						
Clerical	2	4.1	2	7.4	0	0
Labourer	5	10.2	3	11.1	2	9.1
Civil Service	10	20.4	3	11.1	7	31.8
Professional	18	36.7	12	44.4	6	27.3
House Person	7	14.3	5	18.5	2	9.1
Student	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
Retired	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0
Other	2	4.1	0	0	2	9.1
Missing	3	6.1	1	3.7	2	9.1

Table 1 – continued

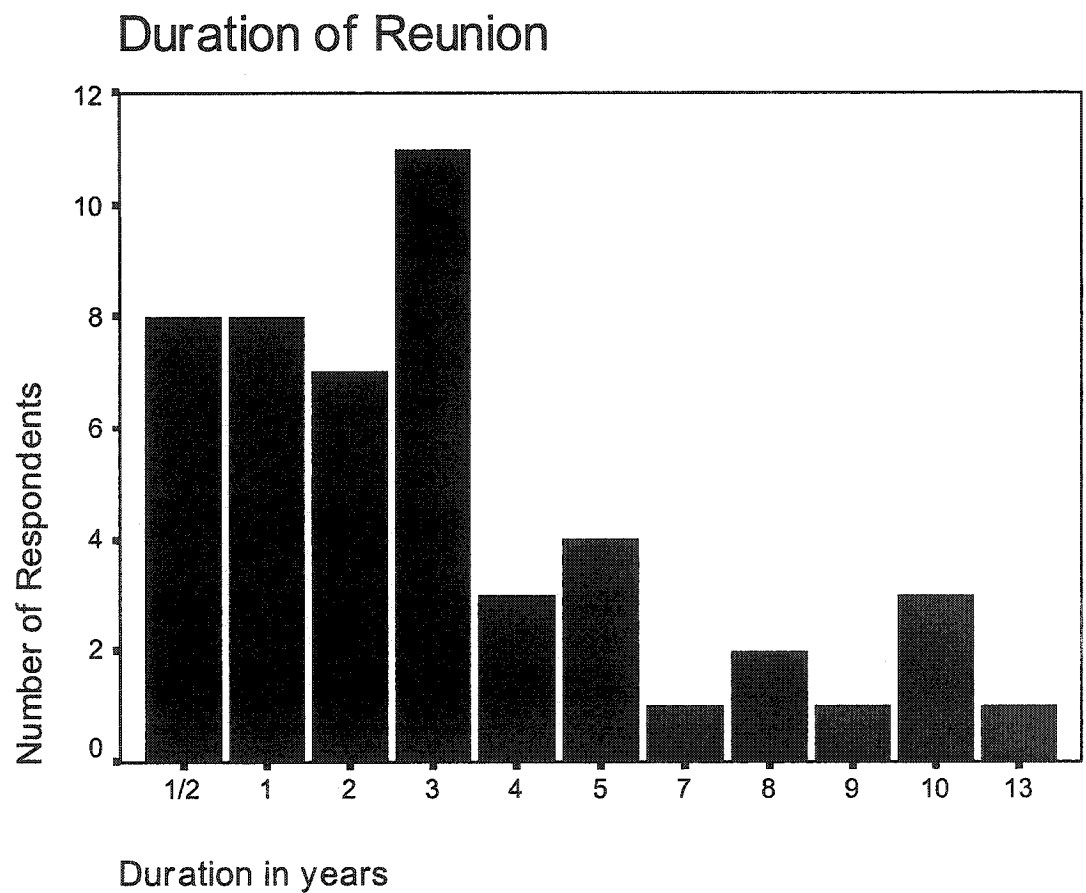
Variable	Total Sample (N = 49)		MCSS (N = 27)		Parent Finders (N = 22)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Did You Have Pre-Reunion Counseling?						
Yes	19	38.8	12	44.4	7	31.8
No	30	61.2	15	55.5	15	68.2
Who Facilitated Your Pre-Reunion Counseling?						
Govt.(ADR/CAS)	11	22.4	11	40.7	0	0
Parent Finders	7	14.3	0	0	7	31.8
Other	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0
Missing	30	61.2	15	55.5	15	68.2
Was the Pre-Reunion Counseling Helpful?						
Yes	18	36.7	11	40.7	7	31.8
No	2	4.1	1	3.7	1	4.5
Missing	29	59.2	15	55.5	14	63.6
Did you have Post-Reunion Counseling?						
Yes	16	32.7	5	18.5	11	50.0
No	32	65.3	22	81.5	10	45.5
Missing	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
Who Arranged Your Post Reunion Counseling?						
Govt. (ADR/ CAS)	6	12.2	4	14.8	2	9.1
Parent	7	14.3	0	0	7	31.8
Other	4	8.2	2	7.4	2	9.1
Missing	32	65.3	21	77.8	11	50.0
Did You Find Post-Reunion Counseling Helpful?						
Yes	16	32.7	5	18.5	11	50.0
No	1	2.0	1	3.7	0	0
Missing	32	65.3	21	77.8	11	50.0
Are You Pleased With Your Reunion Experience?						
Yes	41	83.7	24	88.9	17	77.3
No	7	14.3	3	11.1	4	18.2
Missing	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
Do You Continue to Have Contact With Your Birth Relative?						
Yes	43	87.8	24	88.9	19	86.4
No	5	10.2	3	11.1	2	9.1
Missing	1	2.0	0	0	1	4.5
If Just Beginning, Would you Proceed with Your Reunion?						
Yes	44	89.8	25	92.6	19	86.4
No	2	4.1	0	0	2	9.1
Missing	3	6.1	2	7.4	1	4.5

Table 2. Age by Role in Reunion

Age Group (years)	Adoptee (N = 30)		Birth Relative (N = 19)	
	N	%	N	%
22 to 29	3	10.0	1	5.3
30 to 39	16	53.3	5	26.3
40 to 49	5	16.7	7	36.8
50 to 59	6	20.0	5	26.3
Over 60	0	0	1	5.3

One of the main areas of interest was emotional response to reunion over time. For this to be explored, the respondents had to be at various stages in the reunion process. As shown in Figure 1, the duration of reunion was quite varied, from 1 to 13 years.

Figure 1.



Changes Over Time

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the average emotional scores by duration of reunion.

It is interesting to note that the highest levels of agreement are reported for the positively worded stages, Stage 1 and 5, rather than for the negatively worded theoretical stages, 2, 3 and 4. Analysis of variance showed that, for none of the theoretical stages, were there any significant differences in agreement scores between the duration categories.

Table 3. Emotional Scores by Duration of Reunion

Theoretical Stages	Duration			Total N = 49 %
	0 to 1 year N = 16 %	2 to 3 years N = 18 %	4 years + N = 15 %	
Stage 1 Honeymoon	3.45	3.11	3.07	3.20
Stage 2 Time Out	2.62	2.31	2.01	2.32
Stage 3 Show Down	2.75	2.61	2.73	2.69
Stage 4 Disengagement	1.73	2.43	1.84	2.02
Stage 5 Solidifying	3.66	3.50	3.83	3.66

Figure 2.

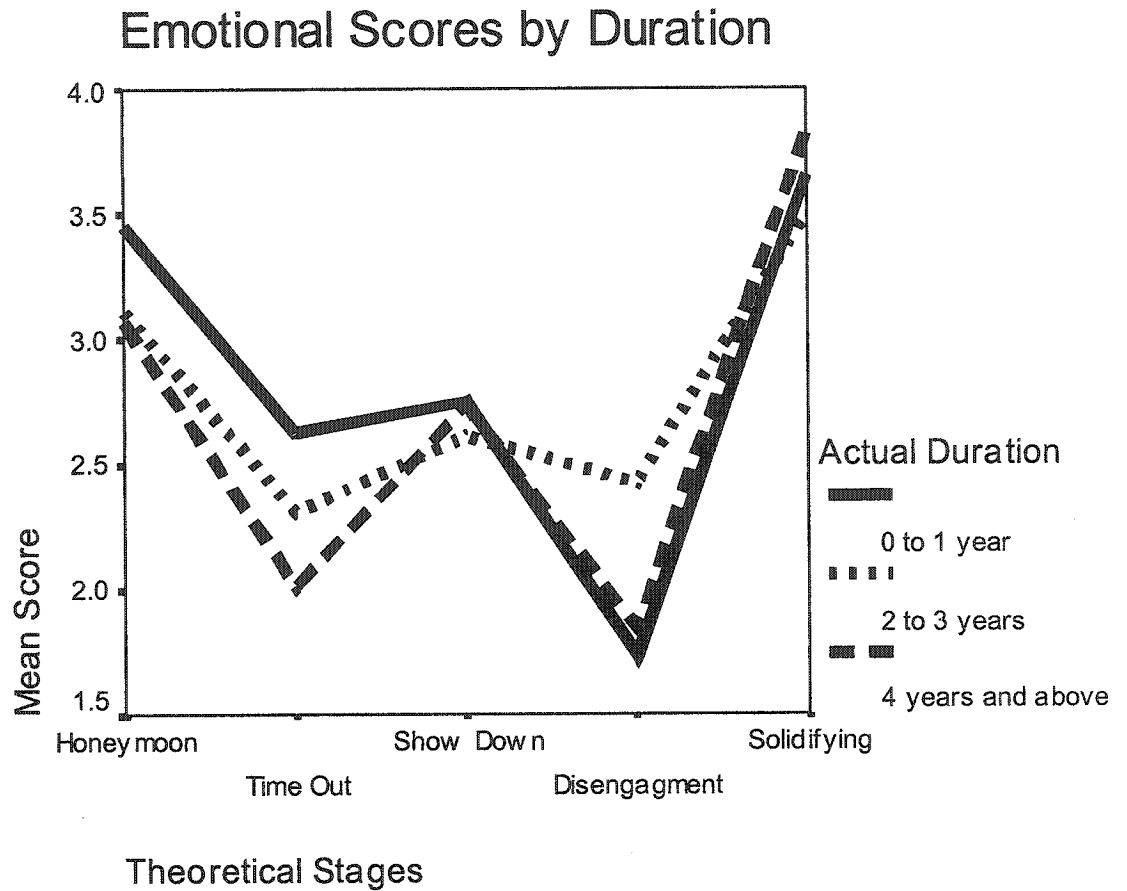


Table 4 shows correlations between duration in years and emotional scores. Here, Stage 2 score was correlated significantly with duration. The negative sign indicates that the level of agreement with this group of statements tended to decrease over time. None of the other four scores were significantly correlated with duration.

Table 4: Emotional Scores with Duration

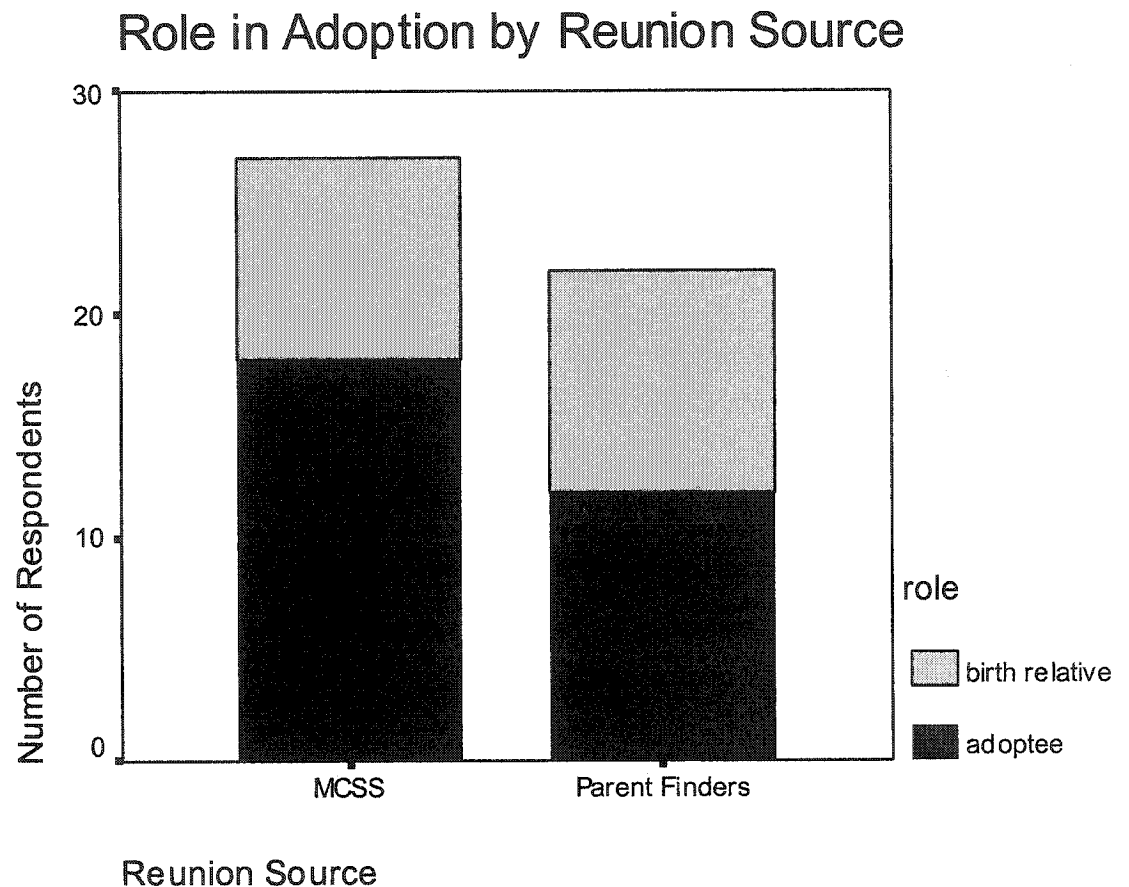
Stage	Correlation Coefficient
Stage 1: Honeymoon	-.242
Stage 2: Time out	-.294*
Stage 3: Show down	-.069
Stage 4: Disengagement	-.055
Stage 5: Solidifying	.088

*p < .05

Differences Between Sources

Figure 3 shows the number of birth relatives and adoptees by reunion source, Parent Finders or Ministry of Community and Social Services, and Figure 4 shows mean emotional scores by source.

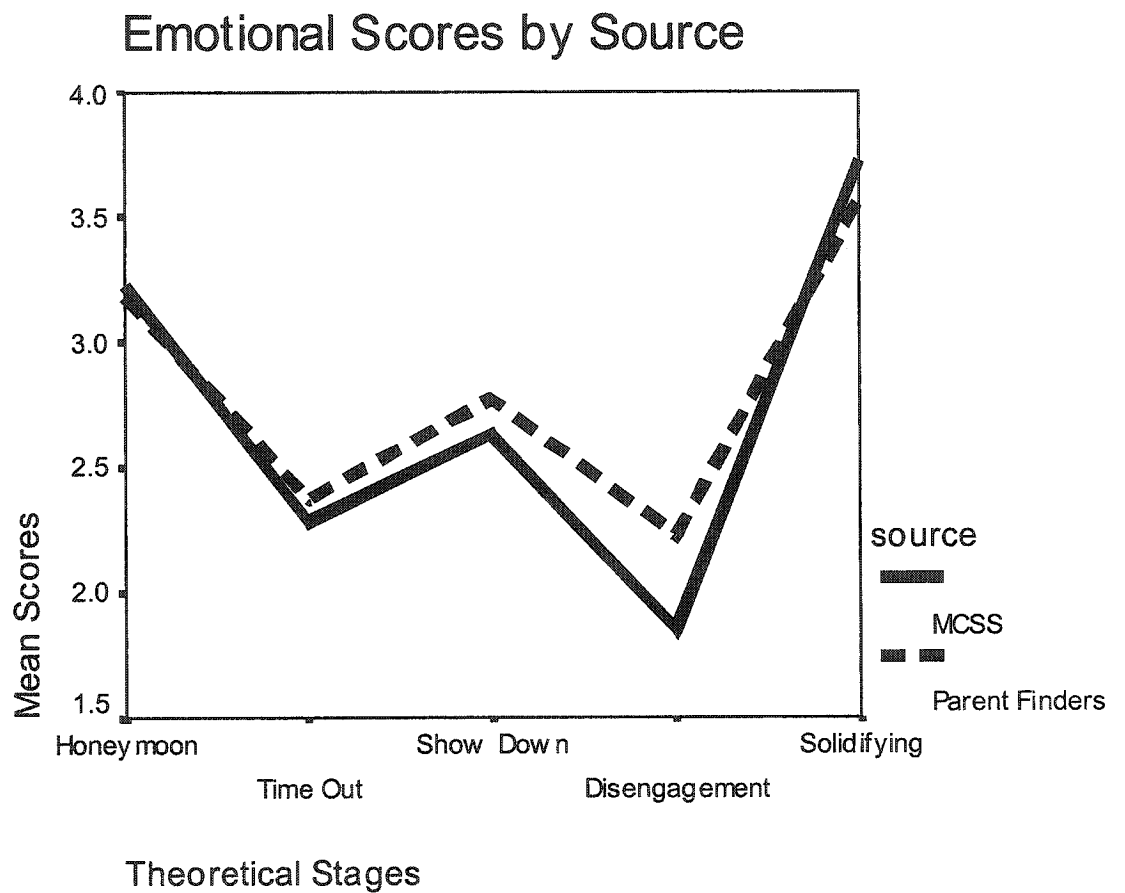
Figure 3:



Though the proportion of birth relatives was somewhat higher in the Parent Finders sample than in the MCSS sample (45.5% and 33.3% respectively) this difference was not significant.

T-tests showed that there were no significant differences in emotional scores between the MCSS and PF groups. In fact, as Figure 4 shows, there was very little difference at all between the scores for the two groups.

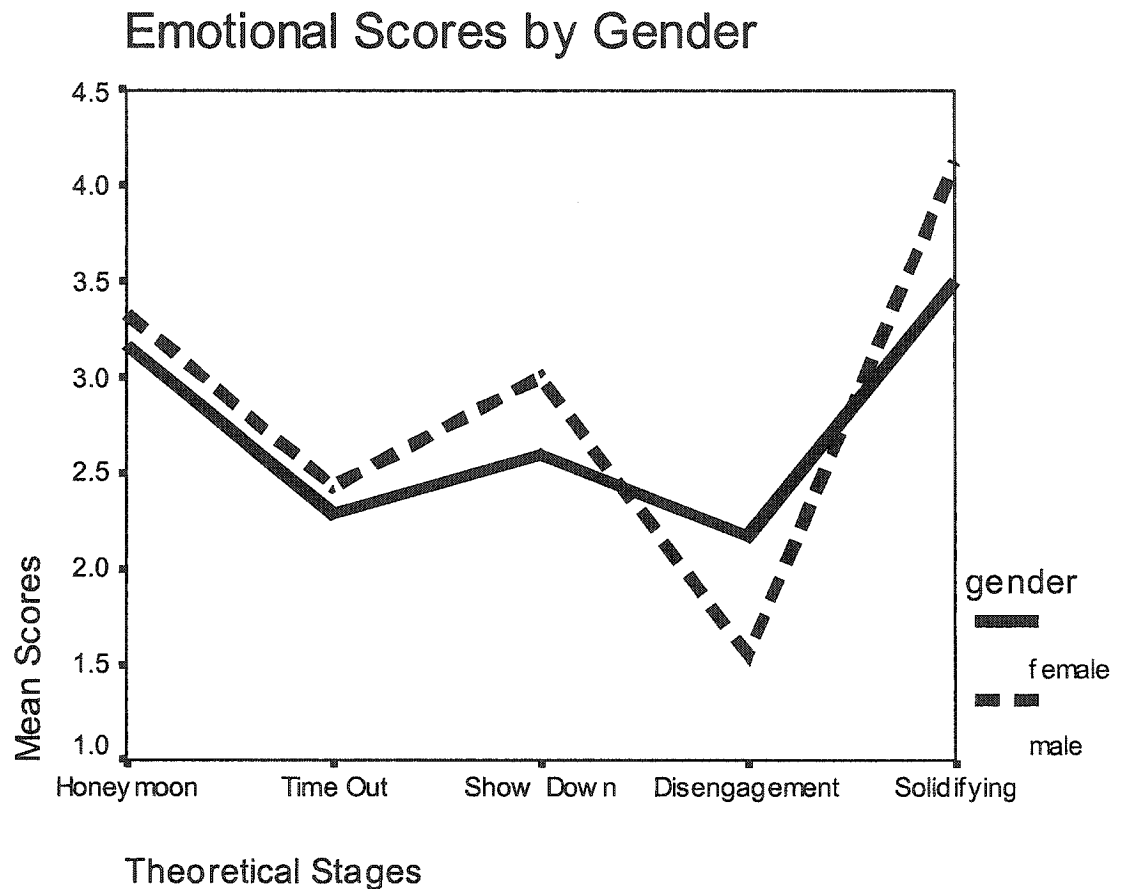
Figure 4.



Demographic Variables:

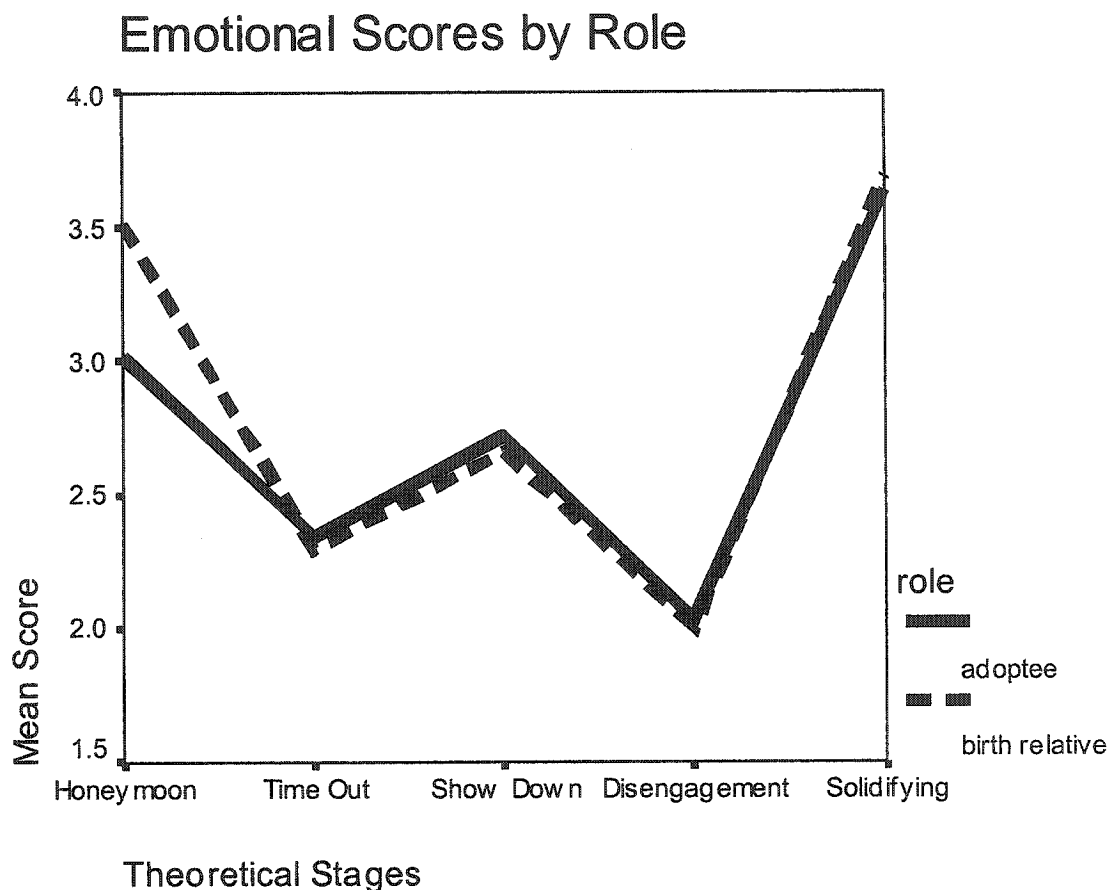
Figure 5 shows mean emotional scores by gender. T-tests found no significant difference between scores for males and females for any theoretical stage.

Figure 5.



Two variables where statistical significance was found were role in reunion and education level. Figure 6 shows a graph of emotional scores by role. The two lines are almost identical, except for Stage 1, where the mean score for birth relatives (3.51) is significantly higher than the mean score for adoptees (3.02), $t(47) = 2.58, p < .05$.

Figure 6.



The mean score for Stage 1 was also significantly correlated with education level, $r = -.354, p < .05$. The negative sign indicates that respondents with less education tended to have higher agreement scores.

There was also a significant correlation between the duration of the reunion and the education level of the respondent, $r = .344, p < .05$. Here the correlation was positive, as the education level of the respondents increased, so did the duration of the reunion.

Overall Satisfaction with Reunion

The majority of those in the reunion process, either from the Parent Finders or the MCSS stream were pleased with their reunion. The three questions that captured level of satisfaction were questions:

2r) "Overall are you pleased with your reunion experience?"

2s) "Do you continue to have contact with your birth relative?" and

2t) "If you were just beginning your reunion, would you proceed?"

Responses to these questions are reported in Table 1. The relationships between mean emotional scores and the response to these three questions are shown in Figure 7, 8 and 9 respectively.

Figure 7.

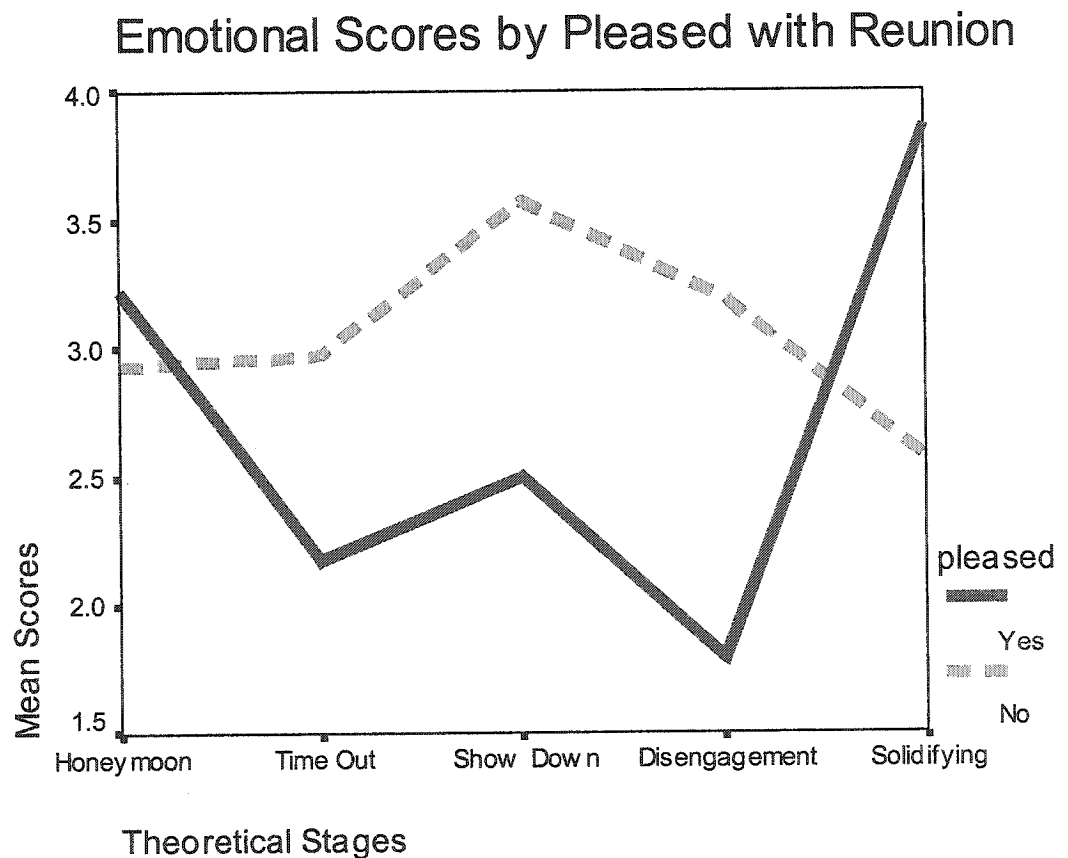


Figure 8.

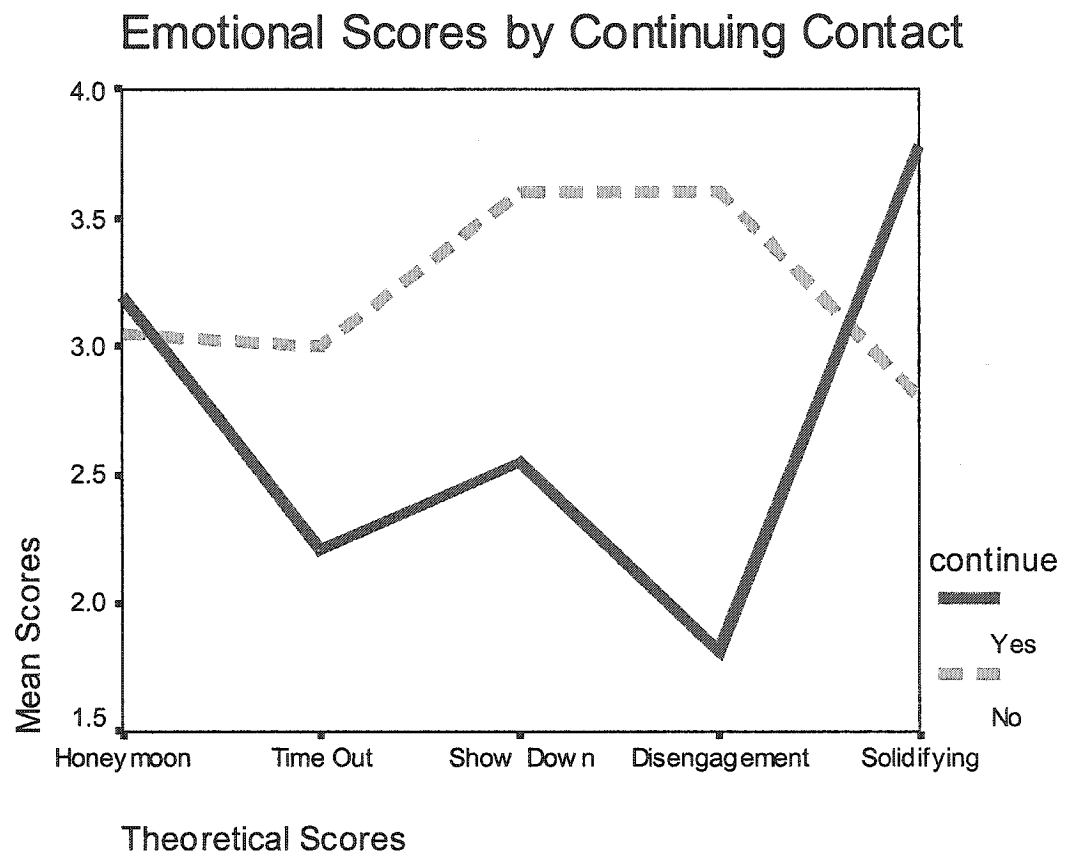
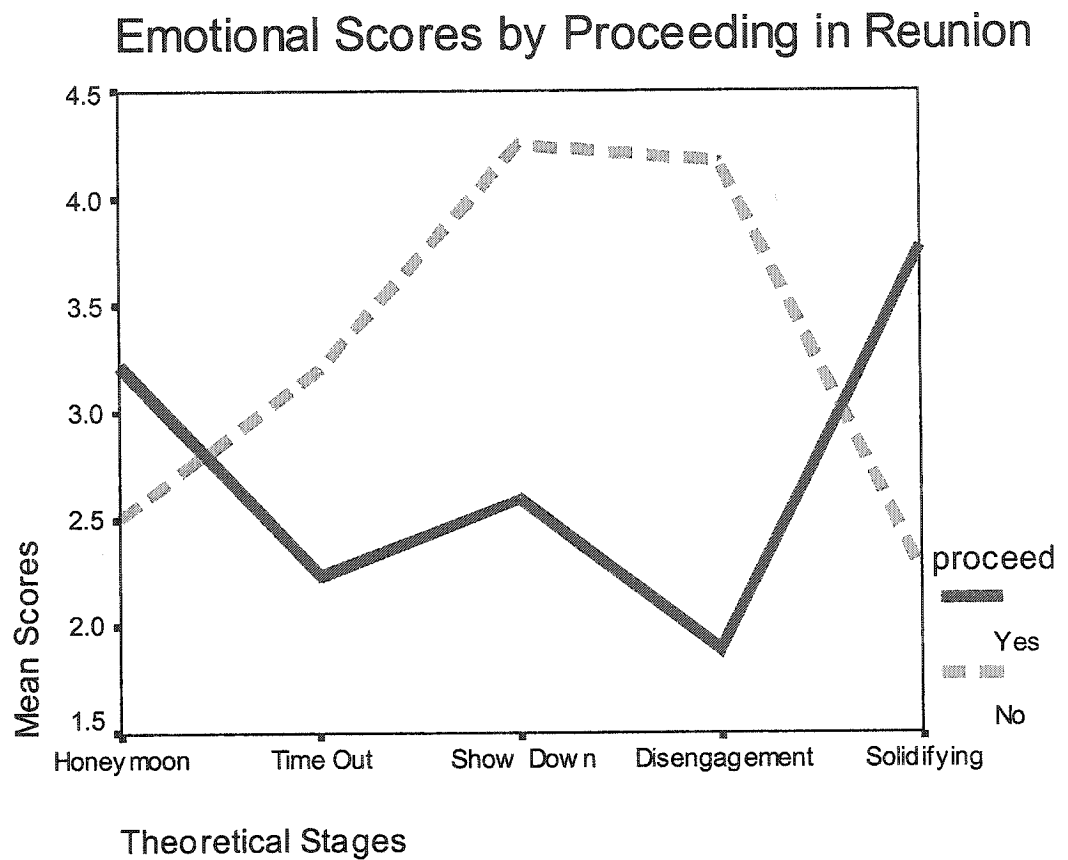


Figure 9.



As all three graphs show, the mean scores for the positive stages (stage 1 and stage 5) were higher for those who answered yes, and the scores for the negative stages (stages 2, 3 and 4) were lower for those who answered yes. This pattern was most marked for the third question, "If you were just beginning you reunion, would you proceed?" That is, the three satisfaction questions tend to support the mean emotional scores.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

Changes over time

- The main focus of this study was to test the hypothesis that there is a predictable emotional response pattern over time in the reunion process. The only statistically significant finding here was a negative correlation between the emotions experienced in Stage 2 (Time Out Stage) and duration. The Stage 2 score represented generally negative emotions, and this score tended to be lower for subjects with a longer duration of reunion.
- There was no other evidence of a predictable emotional response pattern over time. The findings of this study, therefore, did not support the hypothesis.

Differences between the Two Sources

- There were no significant differences in demographic variables between the Parent Finders and MCSS respondents.
- The Parent Finders sample has a somewhat higher proportion of birth mother respondents than the MCSS sample but this difference was not statistically significant.

Demographics

- There were no significant differences between the scores for male and female respondents for any of the five stages.
- Stage 1 is considered the honeymoon stage of reunion, a euphoric experience. For stage 1, the mean emotional score for birth relatives was significantly higher than the score for adoptees.
- There was a significant correlation between education and stage 1 score; the least educated respondents reflected the most positive stage 1 experience (Honeymoon Stage).
- There was a significant positive correlation between the duration of the reunion and the education level of the respondent. The respondents with the highest level of education had the longest duration of reunion.

Overall Satisfaction

- The emotional impact of the post reunion experience appeared to be positive for both Parent Finders and the MCSS respondents. This was shown both in the pattern of emotional scores (highest for the positively-worded stages 1 and 5; lowest for the negatively-worded stages 2, 3 and 4) and in the responses to the last three satisfaction questions in the questionnaire.

Limitations

There were a number of problems identified with the study sample (representativeness) and the tool utilized, (questionnaire format).

- This was a cross sectional study. This type of survey was used due to time limitations and expense. In hindsight, when considering the research question, (emotional response over time), a longitudinal approach would have been the more accurate approach. The respondents were requested to respond to “feeling” questions considering their current status in the reunion process. The questionnaire was modeled after the counseling guideline Relationship Stages After Reunion. As previously noted, this guideline is utilized in the counseling process in both the private and public sector. The guideline gives specific stages and emotions but it does not give specific timeframes. For the purposes of the study, duration categories were determined by a commonsense approach - 0 to 1 year (Honeymoon stage), 2 to 3 years (Time out, Show Down and Disengagement stages) and 4 years and above (Resolution stage). Yet we are aware that people are unique and how they proceed through the stages would also reflect this uniqueness. A longitudinal study would more accurately document the possible emotional patterns of reunion and duration of these theoretical stages.

- Although the majority of participants who responded to questions answered most of the questions, not all of the questions were completed. In hindsight some of the questions (especially around the counseling issue) caused confusion, hence the response in that area is suspect. The question then becomes whether the non-responses reflect approval or disapproval of the question, or an inability to understand the question. In this regard, personal interviews, as well as mailed questionnaires, may be useful to gather data. Gathering data via personal interview might permit greater exploration of respondents' sensitivities on certain issues and might reduce the percentage of non-responses to particular questions.
- A number of questionnaires were not returned. This raises the question whether respondents differed from non-respondents in some important ways. One possibility is that those who returned the questionnaires were more extreme in regard to their response, either positive or negatively in regard to their reunion response. Another possibility is that the educational status of the respondent made it easier for them to understand and complete the questionnaires. Again, gathering data via a personal interview may resolve this problem.
- Because of the many ways in which reunions are arranged, and because of the secrecy that traditionally surrounds adoption records, it is not possible to systematically sample adoptees or birth relatives to identify a representative sample.

- Common findings in treatment outcome studies (Pacheco & Eme, 1993) are that subjects lost to follow-up appear to have less positive outcomes (Gottman & Markman, 1978). The results presented should therefore be interpreted as probably being biased toward an overly positive outcome experience.
- It also must be considered that almost two-thirds of the reunions reported in this study took place on the initiative of the adoptee, or with the adoptee and the birth relative in agreement - not usually the birth relative initiating the reunion (current construction of our system). It is possible that the response of the adoptee would be less positive if the biological relative initiated the reunion, as it would be less under the adoptee's control (Silverman, 1988). There is evidence of greater negativity in the reunions of adoptees that were not in control of the initiation of the reunion (Sachdev, 1992).
- A bias is that approximately half of the respondents in this study are members of a support group (Parent Finders) who have a strong advocacy position regarding the benefits of reunion (skewing the positive reaction in reaction to the group influence).
- A possible further source of bias in this study is that the respondents were attained via two specific sources, one Children's Aid Society and one Parent Finder's group. The majority of respondents had the same counselors throughout the reunion process. This would skew the representativeness of reunions as a whole

and their emotional experience in the reaction process. This issue would be negated if a larger population group, capturing a number of public and private organizations, could be researched.

Implications for Research

The sample in this study was fairly typical in terms of gender; three quarters of the respondents were female. This skew towards women is typical of the population involved in adoption reunions, (Feast & Howe, 1997; Sachdev, 1992). In past studies the general agreement is that more women than men search (a ratio of at least 2:1). The question remains whether similar findings would be gathered from a larger sample of male adoptees and male birth relatives. Future studies should try, through stratified sampling, to include a larger representation of males.

The main focus of this study was to test the hypothesis that there is a predictable emotional response pattern over time in the reunion process. The only significant relationship with duration and reunion was a negative correlation with stage 2 scores. This stage is characterized by negative emotions. Adoptees and Birth Relatives in this stage are confused, angry, frustrated, pulling back and possibly seeking outside support. It could be hypothesized that the reason why this pattern was identified is that these extreme, negative emotions cannot be held over a long period of time; resolution can be attained either via emotionally moving on or cutting off from the source of distress. How these emotions are experienced and processed may be part of ongoing research of emotions experienced in the reunion process.

The crux of this study was to determine whether there is a pattern of emotional response in the reunion process. Other than the Stage 2 correlation this hypothesis was not supported by the data. This does not negate the relevancy of the tool that was tested. It is noted in the handout describing, Relationship Stages After Reunion that not every individual will go through every stage; the stages may not be sequential and they may be repeated. The stages are considered to be common to the post reunion period and normal consequences of reunion.

The respondents who completed the questionnaires did not question that they experienced the emotions outlined. The question then becomes whether there is a predictable pattern or time frame in which these emotions are processed. According to the data this pattern did not emerge...but the emotions remain relevant and powerful in the reunion process. The emotional impact of reunion continues to be relatively unexplored. Future research in the area of reunion should include the emotions experienced during the reunion experience, searching for commonalities and possible patterns to guide those on the reunion path. A longitudinal cohort study might be used to more effectively examine the progression through stages.

Given the emotional impact of the reunion experience a qualitative approach may be the better approach to explore this field. This concept may be better captured via a combination of quantitative and qualitative research. The questionnaire can be used as

the foundation for the interview while the interview process can capture the uniqueness of the reunion process.

Implications for Practice

In past studies it has been identified that, among other factors, age of the respondents impacts on readiness for reunion (Gediman & Brown, 1991). Expectations for reunion for an adoptee in their early twenties may be different as the adoptee is developmentally in the process of making career and commitment life style choices. A reunion with an older adoptee is usually a reunion between two individuals that are already established in their life choices.

Another impact on the reunion process can be the age and sex of the birth relative; the older the birth mother the more likely she is dealing with the stigma of staunch moral standards and condemnation that was prevalent in the 50s and 60s in regard to single birth mothers. Birth fathers were not usually encouraged to participate in adoption planning for their children, so they may come into the reunion with guilt surrounding their lack of participation in regard to the birth mother. A birth sibling may come into the reunion with less emotional issues, as they were not involved in the original decision to place the adoptee on adoption. All of these factors may have an impact on the reunion process.

Statistical data garnered from this study support current adoption reunion literature. The majority of the respondents had a status in life that would support readiness for reunion;

over half of the adoptees were in the 30 – 39 year age bracket, while almost two-thirds of the birth relatives were in their forties. Given the ages of the respondents, it is not surprising that the majority reported attributes that indicate a solid support system. Three quarters of the respondents were married or in common-law relationships, and had a solid education and financial means.

Given the factors for a successful adoption (age and life stability) it is not surprising that data gained from this study regarding satisfaction with the reunion overwhelmingly concurs with previous findings. Similar positive findings to the reunion connection were noted by studies conducted by Sachdev (1991), Pacheco and Eme (1993), and Slaytor (1996).

The findings and previous literature in this field continue to support that counselors doing reunion work must be aware of the adoptees' or birth relatives' life situation in regard to preparedness for reunion. This includes age, sex and life status. Ongoing counseling and the level of support should be geared accordingly.

Another consideration that may impact on social work practice is the relationship noted between role in adoption and Stage 1 emotional score. Stage 1 is considered the honeymoon stage of reunion, a euphoric experience; the data showed that birth relatives experienced Stage 1 as being especially positive. As previously noted, role in the reunion process can impact on how the reunion is perceived. A similar relationship is hinted at by Brown and Gediman (1991), "reunion catapults a birthmother into experiencing the

loss piece – the unresolved grief and mourning from the past – at the same time that it brings great joy” (p. 65). They noted that in the honeymoon stage of reunion birth mothers might romanticize the possibilities of relationship or act out of guilt and attempt to “make up” to their children for the earlier perceived abandonment (p. 124). This may bring about the euphoric and joyful reaction that was identified in this study. An implication for practice is recognizing the possible power imbalance of the birth relative and adoptee beginning the reunion experience and gearing counseling accordingly.

An interesting demographic finding was the education connection. The less educated respondents tended to have a higher stage 1 scores and also to report the shortest reunion duration. This would impact on how counselors engage and support those in the reunion process. If it is known that those with a lower education enter reunion with a more positive outlook; counseling could be geared at checking expectations and giving more support at the front end. If education is a key in duration of reunion, giving extra support in the area of knowledge building of what is involved in the reunion process may be a factor in longevity. These possible connections need to be further explored in a study that has a more representative sample of those involved in the reunion process.

Conclusion

This study began with the goal of identifying or disproving the existence of a pattern of emotional response in adoption reunion over time. In this aim a current counseling tool, Relationship Stages After Reunion was used as a model to create a questionnaire. The statistical findings did not support nor disprove this hypothesis. In the end this study added and/or supported existing information about the post reunion experience. This study also provided some recommendations concerning further research that may be attempted with the aim of understanding the reunion process.

What is known is that the reunion process is complex. As previously noted, from the mid 1970s and on, open adoptions have become more prevalent. This was seen as the possible remedy to the ramifications of a closed adoption (Modell, 1997). Why continue research into the area of reunion when open adoptions will negate this phenomenon?

Unfortunately, given the contentious nature of the Child Welfare System, there will always be a percentage of closed adoptions. Another issue that is becoming more prevalent is the implications of access to donor fathers in donor inseminations and to biological mothers in contractual pregnancies. Speirs and Duder (1997) suggested that this new area would require legislation, regulation, proper record keeping and counselors trained in this new but certainly connected field.

This study proceeded with this focus in mind...the need to continue to explore the ramifications of reunion and build on existing knowledge. Given ongoing societal issues, reunion and its emotional ramifications will not be an issue that will soon go away. Counselors in the field of reunion need to continue to build on their knowledge base and adjust counseling services accordingly.

APPENDIX A

RELATIONSHIP STAGES AFTER REUNION

Not every individual goes through every stage; stages may not be sequential and may be repeated. The stages are common to the post-reunion period and are normal consequences of reunion.

STAGE ONE - HONEYMOON

- Characterized by euphoria, joy and a sense of being on top of the world.
- Effort made by parties to find similar and common interests.
- Much time spent together in an effort to catch up on each other's life - with exchange of pictures, letters and gifts. Preoccupation with other party.
- Minor negotiations about relationship - i.e. what to call birth relative.
- Some uncertainty about place or role in each other's life, frequency of contact, how to introduce each other to friends and family members.

STAGE TWO - TIME OUT

- One party may pull back to evaluate and process events - honeymoon is over.
- Other party may feel confused when this occurs. Birth relative may feel hurt, angry, frustrated and frightened if adoptee pulls back and adoptee may feel rejected by birth relative if he/she pulls back.
- Problems in the relationship may develop here due to lack of understanding of the process - society has few role models for this experience.
- Parties may need help to resolve situation.

STAGE THREE - SHOW DOWN

- Confrontation of parties to address status of relationship and its future development.
- If birth relative initiates confrontation he/she may fear loss of adoptee. The bond is fragile and the biological tie is not enough to ensure the outcome.
- If adoptee confronts birth relative he/she may fear being rejected by birth relative.

STAGE FOUR - DISENGAGEMENT

- Characterized by adoptee or birth relative really pulling away from each other - not just pulling back.
- Can be extremely painful for either party with feelings of anger, loss and rejection.
- Can occur if expectations are too rigid and differences between parties are too great.

STAGE FIVE - SOLIDIFYING

- Characterized by earnest negotiations between parties - roles, differences, issues continue to be worked out, but the relationship is more solid and settled because agreement has been reached in many areas.
- Renegotiations occur as life changes and growth takes place and new relationship roles emerge.

APPENDIX B

FEELINGS EXPERIENCED AFTER AN ADOPTION REUNION

I am inviting you to participate in a study that will look at the feelings that you experienced as an individual who has had an adoption reunion. I am an Adoption Disclosure Worker connected to Family and Children's Services of Brockville, Leeds and Grenville. I am also a McGill University Student working on my thesis in the School of Social Work.

With the information that I gather via the enclosed questionnaire I hope to learn more about the feelings individuals experience after an adoption reunion. My aim is to use this information for future counseling work with those in a reunion. You were selected to participate in this study because you are an adoptee or birth relative that has experienced an adoption reunion.

Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. When reviewing the questionnaire, please note that I do not require any identifying information but do ask for general personal information.

I am asking that you complete this 10-minute questionnaire and mail it back to me with the enclosed, stamped envelope. You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your completing and returning the questionnaire will be taken as evidence of your willingness to participate and your consent to have the information used for purposes of this study.

If you would like a summary of my results or have any questions, please give me a call. You can reach me at Family and Children's Services, 1-800-481-7834. I am at extension 330.

Thank you for your Consideration,

Sally Toner-MacLean
Adoption Disclosure Worker

POST ADOPTION REUNION QUESTIONNAIRE

If you are completing this questionnaire it is because you are either an adult adoptee (18+ years) or a birth relative (birth mother, birth father, birth sister or birth brother) that have been involved in an adoption reunion.

Current literature suggests that those in the reunion process experience a number of feelings. Not every individual experiences the same feelings as it may depend upon where they are in the reunion process.

I am asking that you complete this questionnaire thinking about **your current feelings** in relation to your reunion. The aim of this study is to determine if there is in fact a pattern that adoptees/ birth relative's experience in the reunion process.

1) INSTRUCTIONS:

Beside each of the statements below, please indicate whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, or Don't Know.

Please check the one best answer for you.

Remember that there are no right or wrong answers.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
a) You feel a sense of euphoria or joy.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
b) You are feeling confused.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
c) You have a need to clarify your relationship status with your birth relative.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
d) You no longer have contact.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
e) You have an understanding of how you will proceed with the relationship.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
f) You feel a connection with this person.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
g) You requested time to process your reunion.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
h) You are afraid that you will lose contact with this newly found relative.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
i) You are feeling hurt.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

APPENDIX B continued

Beside each statement below, please indicate whether you Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree or Don't Know. Please check the **one** best answer.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
j) You have a sense of stability in this relationship.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
k) You are preoccupied with thinking about your reunion.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
l) You feel rejected	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
m) You are angry	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
n) You are unsure how to proceed	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
o) You feel frightened.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]
p) You feel overwhelmed.	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]

2) PERSONAL INFORMATION:

It would help me to know something about you. Please answer the following questions remembering that all the information will remain **confidential**.

Please check or supply the one best answer.

a) Gender: Female []
 Male []

b) Year of Birth: _____

c) Title in Adoption Reunion: Adoptee []
 Birth Parent []
 Birth Sibling []

d) What birth relative where you reunited with? : daughter []
 son []
 mother []
 father []
 sister []
 brother []

AMERICAN SOCIETY OF HUMAN GENETICS
 11 Dupont Circle, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036
 Telephone: (202) 638-2600
 Fax: (202) 638-2601
 E-mail: ashg@ashg.org
 Web: www.ashg.org

f) Marital status:

Married or Common law	[]
Single	[]
Divorced	[]
Widowed	[]

1. Number born to you _____
 2. Number relinquished to adoption _____
 3. Number raised by you _____
 4. Number you adopted _____ fostered _____ step parented _____

Less than \$20,000.00	[]
\$20,000. - \$29,999.00	[]
\$30,000. - \$39,999.00	[]
\$40,000. - \$49,999.00	[]
\$50,000. - \$59,999.00	[]
\$60,000. - \$69,999.00	[]
\$70,000. & above	[]

j) Are you now employed?

No ☐

Full time ☐

Part time ☐

Clerical	[]
Labourer	[]
Service	[]
Professional	[]
House person	[]
Student	[]
Retired	[]

Other: _____

APPENDIX B continued

l) Did you have pre reunion counseling before you had your reunion? Yes ☐
No ☐

m) If yes, who arranged your counseling Adoption Disclosure Registry ☐
Children's Aid Worker ☐
Parent Finder's Worker ☐
Other _____
Please specify

n) Did you find this counseling helpful? Yes ☐ No ☐

o) Did you have counseling after your reunion? Yes ☐ No ☐

p) If yes, who arranged your counseling Adoption Disclosure Registry ☐
Children's Aid Worker ☐
Parent Finder's Worker ☐
Other _____
Please specify

q) Did you find this counseling helpful? Yes ☐ No ☐

r) Overall are you pleased with your reunion experience? Yes ☐ No ☐

s) Do you continue to have contact with your birth relative Yes ☐ No ☐

t) If you were just beginning your reunion, would you proceed? Yes ☐ No ☐

u) Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your reunion experience?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

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