

Karen March
Carleton University, Canada

Finding My Place: Birth Mothers Manage the Boundary Ambiguity of Adoption Reunion Contact

Abstract This study describes how essentialist notions of motherhood influence adoption reunion outcomes. The data analysis is based primarily on in-depth interviews with 33 reunited birth mothers. Collectively, the birth mothers perceived themselves to be the mothers of a child lost to them through adoption. Reunion contact jeopardized this perception when the mothers met adopted adults who did not accept their mothering overtures. Continued contact meant suppressing their motherhood desires and taking on a reunion role more consistent with their adoption triad position.

Keywords Adoption Reunion; Motherhood; Contact Expectations; Boundary Ambiguity; Adoption Triad Roles

Karen March teaches courses on family, aging, and qualitative research methods at both the graduate and undergraduate level. She has been on the executive board of the Canadian Sociology Association and has held the positions of Associate Dean of Student Affairs for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Carleton, Associate Dean of Student Affairs for Carleton University, and Interim Associate Dean of Student Affairs for the Faculty of Graduate and Studies. Dr. March has been working in the field of adoption research for over fifteen years and concentrates on issues of identity. Her book, *The Stranger Who Bore Me*, examines the search motivations of adopted adults and their perception of contact outcome.

email address: Karen.March@carleton.ca

Adoption separates the biological and social aspects of parenthood. Legislators in North America underscored this separation during the mid-twentieth century by enacting nondisclosure laws that sealed adoption records and kept the identity of adoption triad members—that is, birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children—secret. Secrecy was believed to help adoptive parents and their adopted children form stronger familial bonds. It also allowed the birth mother to avoid the stigma of unmarried motherhood by placing her child for adoption and continuing on with her life “as if” she had never been pregnant (Fischer 2002). However, from a desire for more genetic and genealogical background information, noticeable numbers of adopted adults have disobeyed the laws of

nondisclosure and have searched for and contacted their birth mothers. These actions have created an unforeseen social event known as “adoption reunion.”

In this article, I explore reunited birth mothers’ perceptions of their adoption reunion outcomes. The 33 birth mothers I interviewed drew upon essentialist images of motherhood in their discussions of adoption reunion contact. The women had bonded with their placed child through the process of pregnancy and childbirth and had perceived the reunion contact as a means of regaining their lost motherhood. The futility of this goal became apparent to them when they met an adopted adult with an adoptive identity and an adoptive family history rather than the birth child they had placed years before. This objective reality cast doubt over their sense of self as a mother and uncertainty over how they should behave in their reunion relationship. To preserve contact, the majority suppressed their motherhood desires and emphasized their adoption triad position as a birth mother who offered biological continuity. The data analysis sections describe this process of change under the headings: (1) waiting to be found, (2) contact expectations, (3) contact relationships, and (4) finding spaces for motherhood.

Maternal Instinct, Caretaking, and Primacy of the Blood Bond

In her seminal book on the cultural contradictions of motherhood, Hays (1996:156) notes the overriding belief in Western culture that “women’s mothering abilities are somehow natural, essential, or inevita-

ble.” This belief promotes the idea that all women possess a maternal instinct that stimulates their desire for a child and enables them to respond appropriately to all children. A corollary to essentialist notions of motherhood is the idea that caregiving acts demonstrate maternal instinct. This focus on the association between caregiving and maternal instinct creates a situation whereby a woman’s inability to respond appropriately to a child’s needs is seen as “unnatural” (Hays 1996). Motherhood deficiencies become personal deficiencies because no woman would fail in mothering unless her maternal instinct was flawed in some way (Bock 2000; Cox 2012). The distinctions created among women by characteristics such as social class, race/ethnicity, religion, or age are ignored and each woman becomes individually responsible for both her motherhood accomplishments and her motherhood failures (Jackson and Mannix 2004; Kilty and Dej 2012).

The biological mother is thought to be unrivalled in her possession of maternal instinct because she is connected to her child through conception, pregnancy, and childbirth (Pertman 2006). Specifically, the natural process of nurturing a child through her body is believed to create a mutual and everlasting mother-child bond. This view is sustained by traditional conceptualizations of North American kinship as based on blood or biological relationships among individuals (Uhrlaub and McCaslin 2012). Thus, for example, in a community attitudes study towards adoption in Canada, March and Miall (2006) found strong support for a biological mother keeping and raising her child and portrayals of the biological mother-child bond as sacrosanct. Despite these images, public perceptions of a biological mother’s right to keep her child rested

upon her ability to care appropriately for that child and/or upon her perceived capacity to raise the child into successful adulthood. An inability to fulfill her caretaking role undermines a woman's motherhood claims and erodes her identity as a "good" mother (Jackson and Mannix 2004; Cox 2012; Kilty and Dej 2012).

The biological mother's placement of a child for adoption challenges the caretaking rules upon which the essentialism of motherhood and maternal instinct rest. This threat is minimized by the adoptive mother's willingness to perform the caretaking role and raise the child as if he/she were her own. However, in giving permanent caretaking to a woman who is not the child's biological mother, adoption eliminates the permeable boundary between nature and nurture and partitions these mothering components off as discrete entities (Fontenot 2007; Cox 2012; Livingston 2012). Nondisclosure solidifies this partitioning process further with the implementation of a closed record system whereby biological and adoptive families are kept separate. In removing the secrecy of adoption, reunion reveals the identity of adoption triad members and draws the complexity of the biological and social components of motherhood into sharper focus. This article examines how birth mothers manage these motherhood ideals as part of their reunion contact with an adult biological child they had placed for adoption as an infant.

Birth Mothers, Openness, and the Social Paradox of Adoption

Limited research exists in the adoption literature on the birth mother's triad position in the adoption

process (Brodzinsky and Livingston Smith 2014). Most of the focus has been on the adoptive mother, her sense of entitlement to her adoptive child and her perceptions of how others view her motherhood (Fontenot 2007). Studies that do consider the birth mother tend to concentrate on the psychological impact of placing a child for adoption and the life circumstances that influence her post-placement adjustment (Brodzinsky and Livingston Smith 2014). That body of literature highlights the feelings of shame, guilt, anger, and anxiety experienced as a result of her decision to place her baby and the prevailing sense of grief produced from losing a child to adoption (March 2014).

The implementation of open adoption contracts has led some researchers to examine the association between birth mother adjustment and openness in adoption arrangements (Fravel, McRoy, and Grotevant 2000; Henny et al. 2007; Ge et al. 2008; Brodzinsky and Livingston Smith 2014). Much of this research emphasizes the birth mother's tenuous position in the adoptive family context, where it is the adoptive mother who holds the status of mother and performs the mother role (Gustafson 2005; Seigel 2006; Livingstone 2012). For example, Sieger (2012:42) found birth mothers involved in open adoptions feel like they exist on the border of "being neither a mother nor a (non) mother." Their experience of biological motherhood produces emotional and behavioral expectations that are difficult for them to fulfill when the adoptive mother serves as "mother" in the child's everyday life. Adoptive parents also tend to control contact arrangements, thereby influencing the parameters of the birth mother-child relationship. In con-

sequence, the birth mothers in Sieger's study expressed considerable uncertainty over their role in the adopted child's life and were hesitant to present self-as-mother in ways other than biological.

Fravel and colleagues (2000:425) believe the birth mother's sense of uncertainty stems from "boundary ambiguity," that is, "a condition that exists when an individual's physical and psychological presence in the family are incongruent, thereby increasing the likelihood that the family members may have difficulty determining whether that person is inside or outside of the family." These researchers conducted research with 163 birth mothers involved in a variety of adoption contracts, including confidential, on-going mediated, time-limited mediated, and fully disclosed adoption contract arrangements. They found that the more open the contract, the stronger the birth mother's expression of uncertainty over her role in the adopted child's life and her confusion over her status as a mother. To alleviate the stress produced by boundary ambiguity, Fravel and colleagues (2000) recommend counseling potential birth mothers on their role expectations before adoption placement occurs and advising them after adoption so they may experience positive interactions when presenting their motherhood status to others.

These two studies are important because they highlight the complexity of maintaining reunion contact in a culture where the social institution of motherhood commingles caretaking with maternal instinct, and the primacy of the blood bond and biological kinship predominate in family formation. Specifically, in relinquishing the caretak-

ing component of their motherhood through adoption, birth mothers possess few options other than biology as a basis for articulating the maternal instinct needed to affirm the self as a "good" mother (Livingstone 2012). Moreover, openness may acknowledge the birth mother's adoption triad position; however, it also entails public identification of self as a "bad" mother, that is, as a woman who has "chosen" to abdicate her motherhood responsibilities by giving her child away (Gustafson 2005). This process creates a sense of ambivalence over the birth mother's motherhood rights and uncertainty over what role she should play in the adopted child's life (Seigel 2006; Sieger 2012). The data analysis sections explore how similar themes of biological essentialism, motherhood ambivalence, and boundary ambiguity influenced the reunion outcome of the 33 birth mothers interviewed in this study.

Methodology

I base the data analysis primarily on the interview accounts of 33 reunited birth mothers who resided in Ontario, Canada. Those interviews emerged as part of a larger study on the birth mother's perception of her pregnancy, adoption placement, and post-placement experiences; her sense of self as a birth mother; her desire for contact; and her assessment of the contact outcome. The study is grounded in the belief that individuals construct or build their own social reality from the tools provided by the social world in which they conduct their everyday lives. To acquire a stronger understanding of those social processes, I engaged in three years of participant observation with a self-help

search and reunion organization; attended a reunited birth mother and adopted adult support group for three months; participated in two weekend therapy retreats with reunited adopted adults and birth mothers; and conducted open-ended interviews with 33 reunited birth mothers. The insights I gained over 15 years conducting research on the topic of adoption informed those understandings, as did my review of “academic” and “anecdotal” adoption literature and media presentations such as movies and television interviews. This triangulation process supports my confidence in the data and analysis presented in this article.

I used a semi-structured interview questionnaire that consisted of a combination of open and closed questions. The questionnaire was designed to address major themes found in the adoption literature, media material, and my field observation notes. A semi-structured interview questionnaire provided the flexibility needed to explore issues of consequence for the birth mothers from their own perspectives, at the same time as it offered a format for thematic discussion. All participants in the research project were guaranteed confidentiality, and, as such, the names appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

I employed a variety of sampling techniques to access a representative interview sample. Five (15%) of the birth mothers were self-help search organization members, 15 (46%) responded to advertisements, 8 (24%) were referred to me by others, and 5 (15%) self-identified after learning about my research project. Notably, the reunion accounts offered by my participants match the birth mother

accounts found in the reunion literature, media presentations, and my own field observations quite closely.

The interviewed birth mothers represent the assortment of pregnancy and reunion experiences encountered by women who placed children for adoption under nondisclosure laws. Two (6%) of the women placed in 1945, 7 (21%) placed in the 1950s, 18 (55%) in the 1960s, 5 (15%) in the 1970s, and 1 (3%) in the 1980s. At the time of first contact, their ages ranged from 27 to 75, with a modal age of 44; however, at the time of the interviews, the women’s ages ranged from 33 to 80, with a modal age of 51. Thus, contact relationships spanned 1 to 12 years with a modal length of 5 years, and most birth mothers were long past the honeymoon stage in their reunion relationship. Almost half (16 or 48%) had been involved in contact relationships of between 6 to 12 years. All of the women are Caucasian; it should be noted that this is typical of Canadian adoptions during this time period. Twenty-five (75%) had placed daughters and 8 (25%) had placed sons; the child’s gender did not appear to affect a woman’s perception of contact or the contact relationship formed.

I used the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to analyze the interview data. First, I read each interview separately and categorized each into consistent thematic patterns, such as any regularly recurring words, phrases, or simple sentences (Charmaz 2006). Then, I analyzed across the interviews to see if particular topics arose for a specific birth mother and whether consistent overriding themes emerged for the

birth mothers as a group. Next, I examined each question separately to see if individual questions elicited particular patterns or themes. Finally, I reread the interviews, made notes on the margins about significant remarks or observations, and documented the reappearance of words or phrases both within and across the interview transcripts. Those notations indicate that the interviewed birth mothers had entered the reunions with the belief that they were their placed child’s mother; however, they soon recognized that they could not express this identity in their contact relationship. Continued contact meant adjusting their motherhood expectations and finding alternate ways of expressing a sense of intimacy with an adopted adult who had adoptive parents and an adoptive family history of his/her own.

Waiting to Be Found

Only three (9%) of the birth mothers had searched actively for their placed child. The remainder waited to be found. Searches are difficult for birth mothers who place under nondisclosure because they are given no adoptive family name and possess little information on the adopted child’s life circumstances. As such, Rebecca remarked,

I had nothing to go on, but I still did it. I searched because I could never forget ... this son of mine ... who belonged to someone else. The law may say that he wasn’t mine, but in my heart and soul, I could never forget him. I guess I never accepted I had to give him up. So, I began searching. I couldn’t figure out it was impossible. I didn’t have a name. No information on his family ... things like that. I didn’t even know

for sure he had been adopted. I thought he had, but they never told me. So, I registered on every list. Sent letters to every agency I could think of. When he contacted me ... it was like a miracle.

The reunion research literature indicates that most birth mothers do not search because they believe they relinquished their motherhood rights at the time of adoption and should not disrupt the adopted person and his/her life (Triseliotis, Feast, and Kyle 2005). However, most birth mothers also expect their placed child to return to them at some point, if only to obtain background information (Howe and Feast 2001; Fischer 2002). In fact, as Stoneman, Thompson, and Webber (1980:41) observed in a study of 227 birth mothers who approached the Toronto Children’s Aid Society in Canada for updated adoption information, “the concept that their child might not feel the need to do so is usually rejected summarily.” Recent improvements in access to adoption records and increased media attention on search and reunion have strengthened this expectation (Pertman 2006).

The majority of interviewed birth mothers held similar perceptions. Close to half (14 or 42%) of the sample had registered with an adoption reunion agency before contact “just in case she might come, I wanted her to know I was waiting.” These women said they never would have searched actively because “I had given up my rights,” “I had taken an oath never to contact,” and “I had no right to interfere.” Beth exemplified this view in her observation that,

I guess you could call it a passive search. I made it easier for him to find me because I registered, but I didn’t

do an active search. I felt that it was up to him whether he wanted to find me as much as I wanted to find him. It was his choice. If he felt the need to find me, I would make it as simple as possible, but it wasn't my business to look for him because I had placed him. I think I registered because there was a part of me missing. There always would be. It's not something you forget. I thought about him every day of my life. He was a part of me. But, I couldn't disrupt his life. It would not be fair for me to come and interrupt his life if he didn't want me.

The remainder (15 or 46%) had neither searched nor registered. Many responded similar to Margie when she said,

I always hoped. I never looked for her, but I never would have because I signed the papers saying I wouldn't. I was always a person who held her word and I would not break the contract. I always thought of her and wanted to meet her ... my little girl ... I hoped she would want to find me and I waited. I did not have the right to disrupt her life. It was not my right to do this.

Stoneman and colleagues (1980:5) believe the birth mother's desire for future contact is influenced by the existence of a "motherhood fantasy which is generally accepted by society that some magical bond exists between biological mother and child that no amount of time or separation can eclipse." The repetition of such phrases as "I could never forget," "there was a part of me missing," "my little girl," and "my lost child" in the interview transcripts indicates that the birth mothers had formed an attachment to their placed child through preg-

nancy and birth—an attachment that had not disappeared over the years since the adoption placement. Framed within this essentialist view of their motherhood as an everlasting bonding process, they had believed their birth child would want to seek them out. As Laura claimed,

I always knew it would happen ... I guess that's how I survived it. I truly believed at some point she would contact me. So, when she was 16, I put my name in the Registry. But, I would not go out of my way to find her. I felt I'd given up my rights as her mother [*voice cracks*] ... but if she wanted to see me, and my name was there for her, she would know I would welcome her contact.

The act of "waiting to be found" is significant because it exposes the motherhood contradictions experienced by birth mothers under nondisclosure. The women in my study convey essentialist notions of motherhood through their description of an attachment to their birth child that had lasted over the years since their adoption placement. They also demonstrate awareness that adoption placement calls their motherhood claims into question. Specifically, statements such as "it was not my right to do this," "I had signed the paper," and "I had promised never to contact him" indicate a recognition of their position as mothers who have no legal status. From this perspective, the decision not to search represents the act of a "good" person who follows the rules and laws set before her.

More importantly, the decision "not to disrupt" their placed child's life offers an image of self as a "good" mother—a mother who places her child's

needs and desires above her own. This image counterbalances public perceptions of birth mothers as "bad" mothers who "give away" their children because they are "self-centered" and "do not care" about them (March and Miall 2006). The significance of counterbalancing these motherhood images is considered more fully in the next section through an examination of contact expectations.

Contact Expectations

The interviewed birth mothers were asked the question, "Can you describe what happened when you were contacted?" Many replied, "I can't remember much because ... I was too overwhelmed with emotion" or "I was too overjoyed," "too excited," "too shocked," or "too relieved." For example, Edith replied, "When he contacted me, I was in emotional limbo. I can't even tell you how I responded or what I expected. I was just glad to know he was okay and had been okay. That's the most I remember." These types of responses confirm other research findings where birth mothers report emotional relief from contact and learning the details of their placed child's life (Howe and Feast 2001; Fischer 2002; Triseliotis et al. 2005).

Most also discussed their need to prepare for anger, resentment, or rejection. For instance, Krystal observed, "I didn't know what to expect. I was scared because I didn't know if she would want anything from a mother who had given her up." Comparably, Grace remarked, "I had hoped she was happy. But, I also thought she might be mad at me. 'Why did you give me up?' Things like that. I prepared myself to answer those questions." As Pam noted,

Getting the letter from the agency that she wanted to meet me was overwhelming. I was nervous. Thinking ... this is it. Once I open that letter, everything changes. I had to be prepared. I imagined I could find anything. Someone really rebellious and resentful or angry. It could be anybody and she was going to be accepted into my life. Because I wasn't going to lose her again.

Statements such as the ones made by Krystal and Grace indicate that the participants' fear of potential anger and resentment stems from the "bad" mother images attached to their adoptive placement. Despite such fears, the birth mothers decided to accept contact and prepare for whatever consequences might befall them. Beth summarized this stance when she said,

I didn't go into the reunion with expectations. When he contacted me, I knew nothing at all. But, there was a part of me missing. It's not something you forget. I thought about him every day of my life. He was a part of me. So, I prepared for the best and the worst. Because as far as I'm concerned, and I believed this right from the very beginning, that I was his mother. But, I also knew I wasn't exactly his mother. His parents, his mother and his father, are the people who raised him. But, I gave him birth and I am his mother, too. I have something to offer him from that. And, I needed to fill the void. We both did.

Statements such as the one made by Beth suggest birth mothers expect to reinstate their biological mother-child bonds through reunion. This expectation became more obvious in the interview data when the birth mothers described their first face-to-face meeting and the "shock" of seeing a mature

adult. The majority used words such as “weird,” “strange,” “odd,” or “unsettled” in their accounts. These words were followed by phrases such as “he was all grown up,” “she had become an adult,” or “she wasn’t a little girl anymore.” For example, although she and her placed daughter had exchanged pictures and letters before their first face-to-face meeting, Sharon remarked,

It was shocking to meet her. It was difficult after all those years and thinking of her as a baby. And, here she was all grown up. With a husband ... I now had grandchildren ... but, she had the same big brown eyes and dark hair. She is my child, but she was all grown up.

Many birth mothers overcame their sense of “meeting a stranger” by focusing on the physical and emotional similarities that existed between themselves, the adopted adult, and/or their other children. For example, Lauren’s birth daughter had been adopted by a family who spoke another language and they struggled to communicate with each other. Yet, she replied,

I couldn’t ask for more really. What amazed me just in the first few days that she came ... I couldn’t believe how much this person was like me. Here she had been raised in a different environment and a different language and culture and we are so much alike, including our gestures, the way we talked and walked, and her mannerisms. It blew me away. Here is your daughter. It was undeniable. How much we looked alike ... and emotionally and physically we are so much alike. We aren’t carbon copies, but I was just blown away by how much was there. It made it a lot easier.

A minority of birth mothers were unable to identify such physical and/or emotional similarities in the adopted adult and reported much more difficulty in overcoming their sense of meeting a stranger. Notably, these women were more likely to emphasize mother-child bonding as a basis for their continued contact. For example, Tina noted, “There was no spark like I imagined. I sort of half thought she’d be another me and she certainly wasn’t that ... she was basically a stranger. But, she was still mine and I wanted to see her again.” In a similar fashion, Alanna said,

It didn’t matter because I wasn’t prepared to walk away. She was mine and I didn’t want to go through the agony of letting her go again [*voice cracks*]. I thought, if she walks away, I will understand. But, I was sort of hoping that she wouldn’t [*laughs*]. But, I just felt that I don’t want to hurt that much again. And, that was the biggest fear I had, is that she is going to come into our lives and this time choose to walk away.

Face-to-face meetings emphasized the passage of time since the adoptive placement. The birth mothers began to realize they had carried a latent expectation of “getting my baby back” that could not be fulfilled through reunion contact. Specifically, the physical presence of a mature adult underscored an unexpected sense of disconnection between birth mother and placed child that jeopardized the birth mother’s belief in the essentialism of motherhood and the process of biological mother-child bonding. Continued contact meant managing this sense of disconnection. To quote Susan:

I had to realize she’s an adult now. That took me awhile. Meeting her ... it was strange. At first I still

thought of her as a little girl. I had to get over that feeling when I saw her. It was really hard to relate to her as a woman because I had always thought of her as being little. Never grown up. And, that was hard. Here she was 20 ... she wasn’t a little girl anymore. I realized I wasn’t going to get my baby back. I had to get over that feeling and it took time.

As described in the next section under the heading of “Contact Relationships,” this sense of disconnect created uncertainty over the birth mother’s ability to express her motherhood and a sense of powerlessness over her contact relationship.

Contact Relationships

As a sample, the birth mothers exhibited a variety of long-term contact outcomes. All of the women were asked the open-ended question, “How would you describe your contact relationship?” Five (15%) replied “disconnected,” approximately one-third (9 or 27%) said “sporadic,” more than half (17 or 52%) reported a “friendship,” and 2 (6%) claimed “mother-child.” A birth mother’s description of her contact relationship was associated more with her perception of her motherhood than the length of time since initial contact had occurred. For example, Jan, who had been contacted three years previous to her interview, observed,

I would say our relationship is disconnected. After I talked to her, I cried and cried. She was nice on the phone. She asked me questions. She asked to meet. But, it’s cold. It’s really difficult ... To be called “mom” ... it hurts that she can’t do that. I asked her to do it and she said she had enough mothers already. I wish

we could be closer. Like a mother and daughter. I thought “I’ve got my baby back,” but I didn’t. Too much time has passed. I lost her then. She’s not really my baby. I am still here, if she wants, but we haven’t had contact in over a year.

By contrast, Sharon, who had been reunited for two years before her interview, claimed “sporadic contact” because,

I hold back. I don’t want to interfere with her life. Or, take away from her mother. I would like to be a friend. And, if she ever needs me, I am here. That’s the way that I want her to feel. But, I have no rights to her. To disrupt her life. Not after giving her up already. But, I gave her birth. And, either way, she’s still mine. No matter how you look at it or who raised her, she’s still mine ... so when she wants to get in touch, I agree.

The majority referred to their contact relationship as a “friendship.” This group noted, “motherhood makes it more than a friendship, but I’ll answer friendship because there is no other word available.” Most also discussed the lack of existing guidelines for formulating, assessing, or labeling their contact relationship. Similar to the reports of parents in same-sex marriages (Hertz 2006), the birth mothers described themselves as “working in the dark” because they possessed no rules for how they should behave as a mother. Specifically, the birth mother possesses no guidelines for how she should interact with an adult child she had placed for adoption as an infant. Cynthia, who had been reunited for five years before her interview, spoke of this dilemma in her observation:

It's a scenario where you don't know what to say or what to do. What's right. What's not. You can't communicate at a friend's level because you're afraid to. Or, at a family level. Where with friends you might say things. Here, you are diplomatic. Like with a mother-daughter you don't have to be so diplomatic. You can say what you feel. As a parent, you can take it step by step. But, there's a tension. You can feel it. When she talks to me, I feel she is guarded with what she's saying. She measures everything she says. And, I'm very careful what I say so I won't offend her. So, you do get that distance. That's why I say there will never be that closeness of mother-daughter. I settle for friends, but it's not close like friends either.

The distinctive responses of the two (6%) birth mothers who replied "mother-child" highlight the difficulties inherent in assessing one's contact relationship. Liz, who had been reunited for three years before her interview, drew upon both her biological connection and her position as the "only mother" when she said,

I see it as a mother-son relationship. It was like that from the very beginning. We were so close we could fill in each other's sentences. But, I think it is easier because his mom passed away when he was young—in his teens—so there wasn't any conflict. That he had another mom in his life that he was loyal to before we met ... but she was gone, so he could see me in his mind as his mom now.

Comparably, Susan emphasized the passage of time and shared experiences when she remarked, "I feel we are like mother and daughter. It's been

12 years, and over that time we've been through so much together. It's made us closer ... her marriage ... her children. Like I feel we are bonded through those experiences."

To summarize, the birth mothers modified their contact behavior to accommodate what they perceived to be the adopted adult's contact needs. Similar to "waiting to be found," this accommodation process supported the images of self-sacrifice demanded of "good" motherhood. The women were grateful for contact, however fearful of losing it. They expressed reservations over the parameters of their contact relationship and did not confront unexplained behavior from the adopted adult such as cancelled meetings, long periods of silence, or contact withdrawal. For example, Pam noted,

When we first met, she called me "mom." Now she calls me by my first name. I didn't expect the mom part. Because I didn't think I had the right to be mom. But, why she went from one extreme to the other, I don't know. We talk about everything. I think I want to talk to her about that, but I'm not sure. I think she is resentful because I gave her up. She gets moody towards me sometimes. The resentment thing I mentioned is just a mild undertone that I tend to feel. It isn't obvious. But, I don't want to push it. I don't want to ask. In case she backs off more.

Although a lack of contact guidelines contributed to this sense of uncertainty, the majority also stressed concern over their motherhood position vis-à-vis the position held by adoptive mother in the adopted adult's life. The next section describes

how the birth mother's recognition of the adoptive mother's position influenced the expression of her own motherhood.

Finding Spaces for Motherhood

Sieger (2012) notes the difficulty birth mothers experience in open adoption arrangements in finding "spaces for motherhood," particularly when the adoptive mother serves as the "everyday mother." The significance of this situation for reunion contact became apparent in the interview data when the birth mothers were asked the open-ended question, "What role do you think you play in your placed child's life?" It was also in this response that the concept of experiencing a partition between social and biological mothering and the idea of traversing a fine line in expressing their motherhood became most emphatic. Over one-third (13 or 40%) of the birth mothers replied "I don't know" and over one-third (12 or 38%) replied "it's different." The remainder answered either "nothing" (5 or 16%) or "mother-child" (2 or 6%) to this question. Significantly, all of the women contrasted their contact role to the role performed by the adoptive mother. To quote Sharon:

I don't know. We have never really talked about it. And, I hold back. I don't want to interfere with her life. Or, take away from her mother. I would like to be a friend. And, if she ever needs me, I am here. That's the way that I want her to feel. But, if she said she didn't want to see me anymore, I would accept it. Because I have no rights to her. To disrupt her life. Not after giving her up already. But, I gave her birth. And, either way, she's still mine. No matter how you look at

it or who raised her, she's still mine ... Yet, I feel that she has a right to her adoptive parents and they to her. Like, they are her parents, too. I wasn't around her in that part of her life ... chicken pox, measles, going to school ... And, they have a right to her just as much as I do.

In a similar fashion, Jennifer remarked,

I would say it's different. I gave birth to her and she will always be mine in that way. But, that's her mother and her father. Like, that's where she has been her whole life. Like, I was just sort of an accident. You know, I just gave birth to her. But, she is her mother because she raised her from the time she was a few weeks old. Like, it's something I will always regret doing ... giving her up. It's nothing I'm happy about. But, it happened. What can I say? She's got a family and it's not you. Like they loved her and she grew up with them. So, if you can settle for friends, then you are okay.

Comparably Susan, who claimed a "mother-child" relationship, noted,

Over the years, she is coming closer to me. But, it scares you because sometimes I wonder if I am taking away from her mother. So, I try to ask her a lot about her mother and how she is. But, it's hard because I think of her as my daughter. But, then, birth parents have to realize that you gave up that child. Because those people parented the child and there is nothing that anybody can do that can take that away. Like we are bonded and I feel that I am her mother, but I wouldn't ever be able to take away from her mother the fact that she is her child, too.

The interviewed birth mothers created opportunities for expression of their motherhood when they broke the rules of nondisclosure and accepted reunion contact. They pursued that expression by announcing their adoption triad position publicly and integrating the adopted adult as a full member of their family. Their ability to take on a mother role was constrained, however, by their recognition of the adoptive mother as caregiver. Specifically, in comparing self as a mother who had “given away my child” to an adoptive mother who “had raised and loved her child from infancy,” the women perceived their motherhood to be limited. They gave primacy to the process of caretaking over biological bonding and deferred rights to the motherhood role to the adoptive mother.

Assigning the motherhood role to the adoptive mother meant the women had to create spaces for their own motherhood. They did so mainly through expressions of their pregnancy/birth experiences and biological mother-child bonding. In this way, the women reaffirmed their adoption triad position as a “birth mother” who had given up her motherhood rights and possessed no entitlement to a contact relationship other than the one decided upon by the adopted adult. As discussed in more detail below, most of the women found acceptance of the social designation of birth mother offered them spaces for positive expression of their motherhood in a way that strengthened and stabilized their reunion contact. Notably, 3 (9%) of the women had disconnected from contact because they “felt like such a phony in pretending not to be her mother.” Five (15% of the sample) said it had taken time for them to become comfortable

with this social designation. Similar to Grace, they noted,

I didn't like the term birth mother. Like, she would introduce me as: “This is my birth mother, Grace.” I didn't like the term. It sounded odd ... Detached. Yet, how is she to refer to me? That's what I am. I got used to it. And, I'm very glad to be open about it. To be part of her life. To be included.

The majority accepted it with equanimity and attended adoptive family events such as graduations, christenings, and weddings where they were identified socially as “X's birth mother.” Pam explained this perspective more fully as follows,

Role? It's different. She's my daughter. My family is complete now. But, for me, it's not exactly a parental role. She sees us as family. That's how I think of us and our relationship. But, she has another family, too. Like, we were invited to her wedding. We had a separate family table. We weren't really a part of it, but I didn't expect to be. They are her parents and her family after all. But, we were introduced to people as her birth family. And, we had pictures taken also. I was okay with it. I gave her up and I gave up the right to be treated as her mother. It was not my place. I was just glad to be there. To share that part of her life with her. I had missed a lot already.

Pam's description of her reunion contact role reveals her understanding of her social position within an adoption process that partitions the biological and caregiving components of motherhood. It also reveals the impact of nondisclosure in solidifying that position. Comparatively, adoption

reunion created a situation whereby the boundary between biological and social motherhood became more permeable and more easily traversed. Specifically, reunion contact enabled Pam to find spaces for positive expression of her motherhood through attendance at adoptive family events and an ability to integrate the adopted adult as a member of her own family. In this way, Pam was able to express continued love and care for her child despite her decision to place her child for adoption.

Ultimately, the sample was grateful for contact; however, they saw their motherhood status as precarious because they had given it up previously and believed it could be easily questioned, assaulted, or renounced by others, particularly by the adopted adult. To gain positional role-strength, the birth mothers drew upon pregnancy, birth, and mother-child bonding as an explanation for contact and as a means of avoiding potential disconnection. Given the adoptive mother's primary role as caretaker, they focused on the essentialism of motherhood and “natural love” in their creation of a space for motherhood in the adopted adult's life. Margie exemplified this understanding when she remarked,

I know I am her mother, but I am not her mother. I take what she gives me. I realize I am maybe third or fourth in line. She has her mother, her mother-in-law, and then perhaps me. I am in a hierarchy and must accept it. But, I take what I can. I am lucky to have anything. She is my daughter, but she has no memory of me. I must get used to that. We are two adults getting to know each other. A mother knows her child from the beginning. But, there is so much of her that

I am learning about. It is a difficult relationship. She is my little girl, but she is not a little girl anymore. I must get used to that. I can almost read her mind [*laughs*]. It is easy for that. But, I do not want to intrude. I realize I wanted to be her mother. I know now I cannot be ... But, I'm just happy to know her.

As Margie notes, the boundary between social and biological motherhood may have become more permeable; but, adoption reunion could not eliminate the years of non-contact created by nondisclosure. In consequence, the birth mothers experienced a sense of uncertainty over their right to contact and hesitancy in expressing their own contact needs.

Conclusion

Livingstone (2012) claims that adoption creates a social paradox for birth mothers who live within a culture where biological ties predominate and maternal instinct is assessed through caretaking. Specifically, in relinquishing their caretaking role to the adoptive mother, birth mothers must promote biology over caretaking if they are to gain motherhood status. However, relinquishment of their caretaking role contradicts the maternal instinct upon which essentialist images of motherhood rely and undermines their motherhood claims accordingly. Moreover, birth motherhood does not fit the normative family model; as such, they are marginalized in the adoption triad and remain outside of the adoptive family. This paradox makes birth mothers subject to a sense of boundary ambiguity that is expressed as confusion over how they should behave towards their placed child and uncertainty over their entitlement to contact.

Nondisclosure laws mask the paradox of adoption by severing all biological family ties and keeping the identity of adoption triad members confidential. Under nondisclosure, however, birth mothers are also able to maintain a dream of “getting my baby back” that blocks their ability to address the complete meaning of adoptive placement for their motherhood. In consequence, the birth mothers in my study did not experience the full implications of the paradox of adoption until they met their placed child as an adopted adult, found that the “baby left behind” no longer existed, and realized that contact continuation meant forming a relationship with a “virtual stranger.”

The accounts presented in this article appear to fit Livingstone’s model. The interviewed birth mothers referred to the essentialism of natural motherhood as a means of emphasizing their status as mothers who had desired and wanted to maintain contact with their placed children. Terms and phrases such as “bonded,” “I gave her birth,” “a part of me was missing,” “my little girl,” “my child,” “my baby,” and “still mine” appeared frequently in the interview accounts and in response to a wide variety of questions in a number of topic areas. It is significant to note that the women knew their placement decision cast doubt on their motherhood claims. This knowledge was apparent in their hesitancy to search and in their frequent references to such ideas as “I have no rights because I placed,” “I don’t want to interfere or intrude,” “I don’t want to disrupt her life,” and “I feel so lucky he wanted to meet me.” The reunited birth mothers I met engaged in an adoption discourse of “contradiction” that sustained their sense of boundary ambiguity in reunion contact.

The interviewed birth mothers are active agents, however the reunion scenarios reported in this article indicate a more complex model of adoption and birth mother-adoptive family contact than Livingstone describes. For example, the majority drew upon the normative expectations of friendship to ensure continued interaction with the adopted adult and to create positive spaces for performing motherhood. Many also took on the social designation of “birth mother” and attended adoptive family functions that allowed them to share intimate family moments and significant life-change events such as graduations, weddings, and the birth of grandchildren. A small number became close friends with the adoptive parents. Recognizing that caretaking takes many forms and can occur throughout a person’s life, the women availed themselves of many opportunities to traverse the permeable boundary existing between nature and nurture in a way that allowed them to express their motherhood.

The residual effects of nondisclosure also cannot remain unnoticed in the formation of birth mother-adopted adult relationships. The interviewed birth mothers had lost contact with their placed child previously and possessed an overwhelming fear of losing contact again. In consequence, rather than making their own contact expectations clear to the adopted adult, they tried to follow his or her lead. Notably, the lack of social rules or guidelines existing for birth mother-adopted adult contact contributed to their sense of uncertainty over establishing an appropriate contact role. Noting the strangeness between them and observing the adopted adult did not want “another” mother, the majority waited for the adopted person to initiate visits, tried not to

interfere in the adopted person’s life, deferred to the adopted adult’s contact behavior, accepted being referred to by their first name, and took on the social designation of “birth mother.” Often, these types of actions placed them on the margins of the adopted adult’s life and gave them a sense of powerlessness over how their contact relationship unfolded.

Part of the process of finding spaces for motherhood involved identifying their position within the adoptive family. The majority of the interviewed birth mothers met the adoptive parents, and a significant number interacted with them at social functions important to the adopted adult. Such events required public acknowledgment of both the adoptive mother as the primary parent and their own secondary status as “birth” mother. Most accepted this social designation because the limitations of their biological mother-child bonds had been made apparent to them during their first face-to-face contact meeting when they recognized that “their baby” no longer existed. Acceptance of the social designation of birth

mother affirmed essentialist messages; however, in a way that marginalized them further as mothers who offered only biological continuity.

In this study, I did not attempt to assess the perspectives of others towards birth mothers, and focused on the birth mother’s experience with reunion contact. My sample’s conceptualization of their biological mother-child tie as an everlasting bond of natural love indicates that essentialist images of motherhood prevail. Their perception of the adoptive mother’s position as the primary mother also reveals support for the idea that caretaking acts demonstrate the maternal instinct imperative for everyday mother-child bonding. They realized that their inability to engage in such activities had placed their motherhood into question and positioned them on the periphery of their placed child’s life. They accepted this position because after years of nondisclosure, they found being placed on the border of motherhood was better than being no mother at all.

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