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Searching for Birth Parents: Motive and Experiences of a Selected Sample of Adult Adoptees

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SEARCHING FOR BIRTH PARENTS:
MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF A SELECTED SAMPLE OF
ADULT ADOPTEES

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of Counseling
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by
Susan A. Jacoby
November, 1993

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SEARCHING FOR BIRTH PARENTS:
MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF A SELECTED SAMPLE OF
ADULT ADOPTEES

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of
Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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ABSTRACT

This study documented the experiences adoptees encounter while searching for their birth parents, and how they were effected by searching. The study also assessed the adoptees support for reviewing laws governing adoption records. Twenty-six adult adoptees were interviewed, their responses recorded and analyzed.

Adoptees reported learning of their adoption at an early age. Overall adoptees did not have negative feelings about being adopted and reported positive relationships with their adoptive parents. Adoptees reported a variety of reasons for searching for their birth parents and experienced a number of difficulties while searching. Some of the difficulties were: long distances, legal boundaries, and lack of knowledge about how to search. Despite the many difficulties, adoptees saw searching as a positive experience. Adoptees recommend that other adoptees who are considering a search have a strong personal support system throughout the search.

Although the adoptees in this study indicated the laws on adoption records need to be changed, a review of literature does not support a change. The available research indicated that a very small portion of the adopted population searches for their birth parents. However, the accuracy of the research may be questioned because it is difficult to accurately determine the number of adoptees who choose to search for their birth parents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM

Introduction and Background

There is a great deal of misunderstanding in our society regarding adoption. The general public does not know what it is like to be adopted. The general public does not know what it is like to grow up not knowing your birth parents. Most people do not understand the difficulties adoptees have with identity formation or the difficulties adoptees encounter when searching for information about their ancestry.

The media usually portrays the fairy tale reunion stories of adoption. Adoptees are reunited with birth parents and offered a warm welcome into the birth parent's lives. This portrayal of adoption reunions adds to the misunderstanding in our society regarding adoption. There is a need for increased knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding adoption. The public can benefit from a knowledge and understanding of the impact of adoption on birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees.

The first law governing adoption in the United States was enacted in 1851 in Massachusetts (Rosenberg, 1988; National Committee for Adoption, 1989). This law initiated changes in the adoption process by requiring: written consent of the birth parents, joint petition of both adoptive parents, a decree of adoption by a judge, and legal and complete severance between the child and the birth

parents. It was not until 1917 that Minnesota passed the first law providing for the protection of the confidentiality of those involved in the adoption process. The Minnesota law called for the sealing of original birth certificates and the issuance of new birth certificates with the names of the adoptive parents replacing the names of the birth parents.

Laws governing adoption are created independently within states (Mayo, 1986; National Committee For Adoption, 1977; Rosenberg, 1988). States have various legal roles and requirements for courts, adoption agencies, and vital statistics bureau. There is a lack of federal regulation of adoption policies as well as of laws regarding sealed records being available to adoptees (National Committee For Adoption, 1988). The majority of states do not permit access to adoption records without a court order showing "good cause" (Anderson, 1977; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978).

Some states provide non-identifying information to adoptees at 18 or 21 years. Non-identifying information excludes the names of birth parents. A few states provide identifying information to adoptees, if birth parents have filed a consent with the court. Twenty-one states have set up "mutual consent registries" which require the adoption agency or court to facilitate a meeting when the adoptee and birth parents are registered. "Search and consent laws" have been passed in nine states. Search and consent laws require the adoptee to request the state social services agency or a licensed adoption agency to locate the

birth parents, and if they are found to seek consent for releasing identifying information to the adoptee. Information is not released without consent of the birth parents (National Committee For Adoption, 1989; Rosenberg, 1988).

Statement of the Problem

Adoptees experience different emotions about their ancestry compared to people who grow up knowing their birth family. Researchers (Anderson, 1989; Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Lifton, 1988; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Silverman, Campbell, Patti, & Style, 1988; Triseliotis, 1973;) on adoption issues agree that some adoptees harbor several unanswered questions regarding their adoption. Adoptees may wonder what their original name was, if there are any hereditary illnesses in their family and why they were given up for adoption. Adoptees may think about their birth parents and wonder if their parents ever think about them. Adoptees may also be interested in knowing if they have any siblings. Adoptees have many unanswered questions and little information with which to answer these questions.

For adoptees and nonadoptees alike, an understanding of the self is one of the primary tasks of psychological development (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1975). It is difficult for adoptees to develop an understanding of the self because their background information is not available to them (Burke, 1975). Sealing adoption records is promoted by social service agencies on the premise that it provides safeguards against unwanted intrusion by the

triad members, and that contacts between them could prove disruptive in their lives. Triad refers to the three parties involved in adoption: birth parents, child, and adoptive parents. Advocates of open adoption records feel that secrecy does not serve the interests of the triad members; instead, it promotes fears and misconceptions about the members motives (Sachdev, 1992).

The activist adoptees' movement and the resultant wide publicity by the mass media on adoptees' right to know their origins have encouraged many adult adoptees to seek information about or a reunion with their birth parents (Gonyo & Watson, 1988; Sorosky et al., 1975). Many agencies have changed their policies regarding the opening of adoption records and are assisting in searches and participating in reunion programs between adult adoptees and birth parents (Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988). While some agencies have changed their policies, others hold fast to policies of closed records. Due to the lack of consistency in adoption laws, some agency workers interpret the law to be more strict than it actually is (Gonyo & Watson, 1988). This results in adoptees encountering several difficulties in an attempt to gain a better understanding of themselves.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gather practical information on how adoptees' are effected by searching for their birth parents. Gonyo and Watson (1988) support the practical value of additional information on adoption in the following statement:

Those who are committed to adoption and its improvement must listen to what those who have experienced adoption have to say, examine current adoption theory and practice in the light of those experiences, and be willing to experiment with new ways to meet the needs of all members of the adoption triangle. (p. 22)

The study was also intended to assess adoptees' support to review laws governing adoption records.

Delimitations

The present study was limited to adoptee members of the Adoption Triad Midwest. It was limited to adoptees ranging in age from 22 to 77 years. All subjects were volunteers.

Limitations

The sample is self selected and represents only those adoptees in a search support group. Results should not be generalized to searching adoptees who are not members of a support group or to non-searching adoptees.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Overview

The review of related literature is organized into four parts. Part one looks at current issues in adoption. Part two includes a discussion of reasons adoptees search, the type of information they seek, and some reasons adoptees do not search. Part three looks at the results of searches, and part four is the conclusions drawn from the literature reviewed.

Current Issues In Adoption

Adoption is a big business and like any other business the more it has grown, the more options people have to consider when deciding to adopt or to place a child for adoption. In traditional or closed adoptions the adoptive parents do not meet or see pictures of the birth parents (Theroux, 1986). The adoptive parents may be supplied with a brief personal history of the child's family, but the child's history officially begins on the day the adoption is finalized (Kantrowitz & Williams, 1986).

Traditional adoption hearings are held in closed court. Once the adoption is completed, all the papers and the original birth certificate are sealed. A new birth certificate is issued in the new name of the child and the names of the adoptive parents replace those of the birth parents (Anderson, 1977; Dukette, 1984). The relationship between

the birth parents and the adoptee is severed to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the triad members.

Several reasons have been given for the importance of confidentiality in adoption. One reason is that confidentiality and the amending of the birth certificate protects the adoptee from being stamped illegitimate (Lifton, 1988; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978) and ensures equal status in society. Confidentiality provides the adoptive family with privacy and protection from outside interference to help it function as an autonomous social unit. Confidentiality is said to provide a sense of security for the adoptive parents who fear the adoptee will abandon them for the birth parents. Continued confidentiality also promises the birth parents the anonymity required to place the child up for adoption in the first place (Burke, 1975).

Open adoptions are an alternative, they are a growing option for people interested in adopting a child (Helwig & Ruthven, 1990; Kantrowitz & Williams, 1986; Mayo, 1986). Open adoption provides for communication between birth parents and adoptive parents prior to the adoption and the possibility of continuing contact. Contact between the adoptee and the birth parents range from regular visits to a single letter written at the time of the adoption (Helwig & Ruthven, 1990).

Advocates of open adoption maintain that it eases the pain of the birth mother in relinquishing her child. Open adoption provides the adoptive parents more information about their child's background.

Advocates also point out that open adoption eliminates long and difficult searches for birth parents (Kantrowitz & Williams, 1986). Adoptees have a constitutionally based civil right (Burke, 1975) to information about their origins and open adoption would make this information available. Advocates for traditional adoption say that providing any information beyond essential medical history is dangerous (Kantrowitz & Williams, 1986).

Another type of adoption is independent or third party adoption. Independent adoptions are arranged by birth parents and adoptive parents through an intermediary (Mayo, 1986), such as a doctor, lawyer or a private agency. Independent adoptions are illegal in some states. "All adoptions, open and closed, independently and agency arranged must be formalized in a court of law" (p. 92).

Searchers

As an adoptee and a psychiatrist, Anderson (1988) does not understand why anyone would ask an adoptee, "Why are you searching for your biological parents?" He feels a more appropriate question would be: "Why are you interested in your mother, your father, your history, or yourself?" Regardless of the absurdity of such a question, it is asked repeatedly. Several studies (Anderson, 1989; Gonyo & Watson, 1988; Helwig & Ruthven, 1990; Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988) found that the most common reason adoptees gave for searching was to obtain medical information. Additional studies (Sachdev, 1992; Thompson, 1979) listed desire for

medical information as one of many motives for searching, although not the most common motive. Anderson (1988) states that adoptees give the medical information reason not necessarily because it is true, but because it is the most socially acceptable. Searching for medical information is less likely to elicit a negative reaction from others about adoptees disloyalty to their adoptive parents.

The decision to search may be prompted by illness (Geissinger, 1984; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Thompson, 1979), marriage (Burke, 1975; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1975; Thompson, 1979; Triseliotis, 1973), the birth of a child (Geissinger, 1984; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Sorosky et al., 1975; Thompson, 1979), or because the adoptee is encouraged to search by a "significant other" (Kowal & Schilling, 1975). Another commonly reported reason adoptees gave for searching was to gain a better understanding of themselves (Anderson, 1989; Gonyo & Watson, 1988; Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Sachdev, 1992; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). Sachdev described adoptees as living with a void in their lives and feeling that they are never whole. Adoptees search in an attempt to fill in the missing pieces of their lives. Adoptees hope that by discovering personality traits, hobbies, interests, and backgrounds of their birth parents (Kowal & Schilling, 1985), they will gain a sense of belonging and a better understanding of themselves.

In a study looking at adoption through the eyes of 100 adult adoptees Kowal and Schilling (1985) found that a few of the subjects

wanted a chance to reassure their birth mother that she had made the right decision. Other reasons for searching include adoptees wanting to see who they look like (Silverman et al., 1988). Anderson (1989) reported similar findings in his study on the nature of adoptee searches. Anderson stated that adoptees want not only to know who they look like, but to have the opportunity for the first time in their lives to touch someone to whom they are related by blood. It has also been reported that some adoptees want to know the reason for their surrender (Anderson, 1989; Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Silverman et al., 1988; Triseliotis, 1973).

Most adoptees are in their mid thirties when they begin a search (Day, 1979; Gonyo & Watson, 1988; Triseliotis, 1984). Several studies (Gonyo & Watson, 1988; Lifton, 1988; Sachdev, 1992; Silverman et al., 1981; Simpson, Timm, & McCubbin, 1981; Triseliotis, 1973) have found that the majority of searchers are women. Women are more likely to search because their concern about family lineage and hereditary diseases is heightened after marriage and pregnancy (Sachdev, 1992). Lifton (1988) believes that women search more often than men because women are more in touch with their feelings, and men are taught to suppress their feelings. Although fewer men search, Sachdev (1992) found that men and women did not differ in their desire to know and their reasons for searching. Men also presented their "need to know in more intense, emotional tones and

were more committed to searching than were females" (Kowal & Schilling, 1985, p. 360).

Non-Searchers

Although research shows that a number of adoptees have questions about their origins, and their birth parents, not all adoptees seek answers to these questions. Gonyo and Watson (1988) discussed three reasons why some adoptees choose not to search. First, adoptees are hesitant to intrude on the life of their birth parents. Adoptees fear that their birth parents may have kept the adoption a secret and that contacting them may interfere with their lives. Second, adoptees fear that the search will be unsuccessful. Many adoptees see their adoption as a rejection by their birth parents and fear another rejection (Hoffman-Riem, 1989/1990). Third, adoptees are afraid of hurting their adoptive parents. Adoptees may feel guilty for even thinking of searching. Associated with the feelings of guilt, adoptees also fear being seen as disloyal by the adoptive family.

Additional reasons for choosing not to search include: fear of what they will find, fear of their own lives changing, fear of losing what identity they have, and fearing they may be responsible for an aging parent (Lifton, 1988). In their study comparing searching and non-searching adult adoptees Aumend and Barrett (1984) found several differences between the two groups. Non-searchers had more positive self concepts and more positive attitudes toward adoptive parents. Non-searchers learned of adoption at an earlier age than searchers.

While growing up non-searchers also felt more positive about being adopted than searchers. Other studies (Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Simpson et al., 1981; Thompson, 1979) found that adoptees do not search because of poor relationships with their adoptive parents and that most searchers have a good relationship with their adoptive parents.

Results of Searches

Sachdev (1992) studied the search process and experience of 124 adoptees, he found 93.9% had "no regrets" about their reunion with their birth mothers, and 86.9% were "very pleased to moderately pleased". The most common feeling was a sense of relief that the search was completed. The frequency of post reunion meetings was also reported: 50% saw each other regularly, 20% saw each other occasionally, and 17% terminated after the first meeting. "Almost all the subjects (93.3%) had the unique opportunity...to share physical resemblances and interests with someone related by blood" (p. 64). This resulted in the adoptees gaining a better understanding of themselves.

Several studies (Depp, 1982; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Sachdev, 1992; Thompson, 1979) found that adoptees' relationships with their adoptive parents were largely unaffected or improved following the reunion. Some adoptees feel closer to their adoptive parents after the reunion (Lifton, 1988), and report a deeper sense of love and appreciation for them (Sorosky et al., 1975). From a total of

155 adoptees in two studies (Rosenzweig- Smith, 1988; Sachdev, 1992), six reported a deterioration in the relationship with their adoptive parents. Adoptees were surprised by the support of their adoptive parents.

According to Silverman (et al., 1988) most birth parents were reasonably accepting about being contacted by their relinquished birth child (Thompson, 1979). A study of 124 reunions (Sachdev, 1992) reported 76.4% of birth mothers contacted by adoptees reacted with enthusiasm, less than 10% reacted as cold or indifferent due to fear of husbands reaction, and 15.1% initially reacted with denial but did agree to meet after a while. Birth mothers who were excited about the reunions encouraged the adoptee to meet with siblings and other family members. Adoptees who reported reunions with half-siblings, reported a joyful and rewarding experience (Lifton, 1988). These reunions often resulted in lasting relationships and more intense ties. Adoptees were closer in age to their half-siblings and experienced more common interests. The relationships between adoptees and their half-siblings were also strengthened by the fact that the half-siblings were not a part of their relinquishment (Sachdev, 1992).

Gonyo and Watson (1988) reported that most adoptees felt the searches and reunions were healing experiences. They also reported that less than 2% of adoptees felt sorry they had searched. Some adoptees found unpleasant things but said that knowing the truth was better than living with their fantasies. Sachdev (1992) reported that out

of 124 adoptees, only four did not experience personal gain from their reunions. Adoptees also reported satisfaction from disappointing reunions (Thompson, 1979).

Conclusion

The literature demonstrated that many adoptees do have questions about their origins. Adoptees seek information about their medical background, what their birth parents look like, why they were placed for adoption, any siblings they may have, and other information to answer their questions. Through successful searches adoptees are able to develop a better understanding of themselves.

Previous research provides a number of reasons adoptees choose to search for their birth parents, but it lacks any discussion of the difficulties adoptees encounter while searching. The present study will add to previous research with an examination of difficulties encountered while searching and adoptees views of laws governing adoption records.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Description of Research Approach

This exploratory study was designed to examine four major areas.

1. Age of adoptees at revelation of adoption, feelings about being adopted, and relationship with adoptive parents.
2. Reasons for searching and difficulties encountered while searching.
3. Adoptees perceptions of the results of their searches.
4. Adoptees recommendations on laws concerning adoption records.

A questionnaire was administered to 26 adoptees to collect qualitative data.

Subjects

Potential subjects were contacted with the help of the Adoption Triad Midwest. Adoption Triad Midwest is a non-profit organization which is dedicated to providing search assistance, emotional support, and education to its members and the community on the subject of adoption searches. Membership is open to adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents. Members of Adoption Triad Midwest were first informed of the study through the Adoption Triad Midwest monthly newsletter.

A letter explaining the details of the research was prepared by the researcher and mailed by the president of the Adoption Triad Midwest to current group members. The president addressed and mailed the letters to ensure the confidentiality of the group members. Letters were mailed to a total of 50 members. Each letter contained a postage paid card addressed to the researcher for the individuals to indicate whether or not they would like to participate. Volunteers were also instructed to write their name, address, and telephone number on the card. A follow up letter was prepared by the researcher and mailed by the president of the Adoption Triad Midwest to 26 members who had not responded after six weeks. Eight cards were received after the mailing of the follow up letter.

A total of 32 cards were received. Six volunteers did not participate in the study for the following reasons: three were not eligible because they were birth parents, one had moved and could not be contacted, one's phone had been disconnected, and one was no longer interested after being contacted. The 26 adoptees who participated in the study consisted of 22 women and 4 men. The age range of the subjects was between 22 and 77 years with a mean age of 43 years.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire consisting of 25 items was designed by the researcher. A pilot study was completed to refine the questionnaire. The pilot questionnaire was given to 10 adults, 6 of whom were

adoptees, to test for readability and clarity of the items. Modifications were made in response to the pilot study. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher.

Procedure

An interview was scheduled with each of the volunteer subjects. Interviews were conducted at a location selected by the subject. The interviews were conducted in person whenever possible. Four interviews were conducted via the telephone. The interviews were between half an hour and one and a half hours in length. All interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate recording of responses.

To safeguard the subjects' confidentiality, all subjects were assigned a number. The number was placed on the questionnaire and the tape; no identifying information was recorded or reported in the results. Subjects were instructed to take as much time as necessary to answer each question. Subjects were also instructed to answer the questions honestly and not to answer in ways they thought would be agreeable to the researcher.

Data Analysis

The researcher examined the responses of the interviews and synthesized the data into like type responses. Responses were reported as grouped data in an attempt to illustrate the nature and degree of the existing conditions.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

A total of 26 adoptees were interviewed. Eighty-five percent were women (22) the remaining 15% were men (4). The group ranged in age from 22-77 years with a mean age of 43 years. Seventy-seven percent of the adoptees were informed of their adoption by one or both of their parents. Three adoptees were told by someone other than their parents. One adoptee became aware of her adoption when she "overheard an angry conversation between her parents." One adoptee said she "just knew when listening to a radio show about a boy who was adopted."

Sixty-nine percent of adoptees knew they were adopted by the age of 5 years. Of these adoptees, six said they had "always known", that it was simply a part of their history. The remaining adoptees knew of their adoption by the age of 10 years, except for one adoptee who was unaware that she was adopted until the age of 60 years.

The adoptees reported experiencing a number of feelings after becoming aware they were adopted. Two or more adoptees reported the following: sadness; worried or scared; shock at the revelation; resentment toward birth parents for relinquishing, and adoptive parents for not telling sooner; and "never bothered". Not remembering any specific feelings after being told was reported with the highest frequency, by 11 adoptees. Other feelings which were reported, but

only at single frequencies, were as follows: cool, special, anger, curious, hurt, disbelief, confusion, and acceptance.

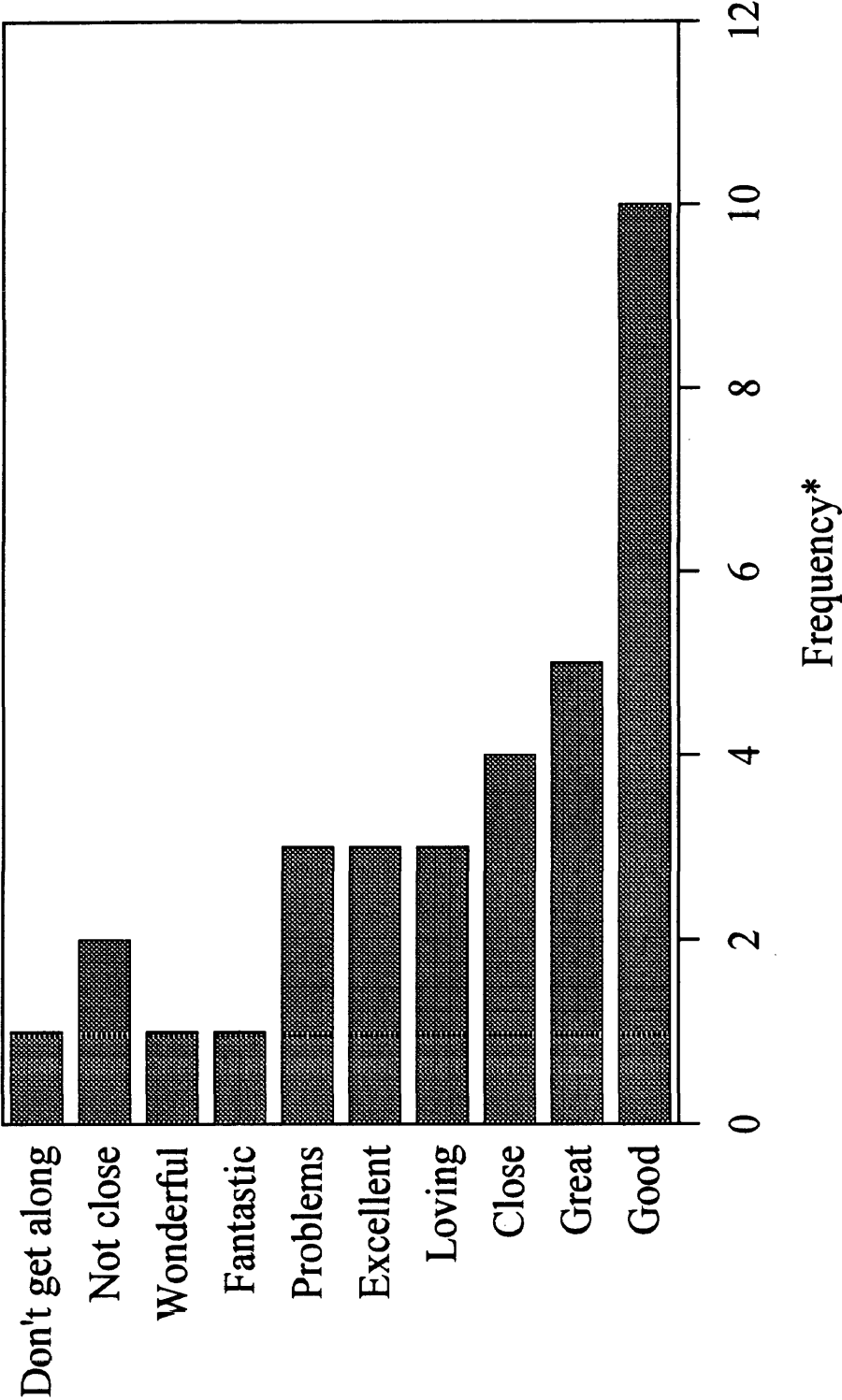
Adoptees also reported various feelings about being adopted as they were growing up. Fifty-seven percent reported positive feelings about being adopted as they were growing up. Positive feelings reported by adoptees included: special, wanted, chosen, fine, proud, and great. Seven adoptees (27%) reported they "didn't think about it" or "never had a problem with it". Three adoptees (11%) reported feeling "different", and one adoptee reported being "teased by other children".

When asked to describe their relationship with their adoptive parents, the overwhelming majority described positive relationships (see figure 1). One adoptee described her adoptive parents as her "best friends". Three adoptees reported problems in the relationship with their adoptive parents and two reported they were not close. Only one adoptee reported that she did not get along with her adoptive parents. Twenty-seven percent of the adoptees were the only child in the family. The remaining 73%, reported they were treated the same as their brothers and sisters regardless of whether the siblings were adopted or the natural children of the adoptive parents.

Information

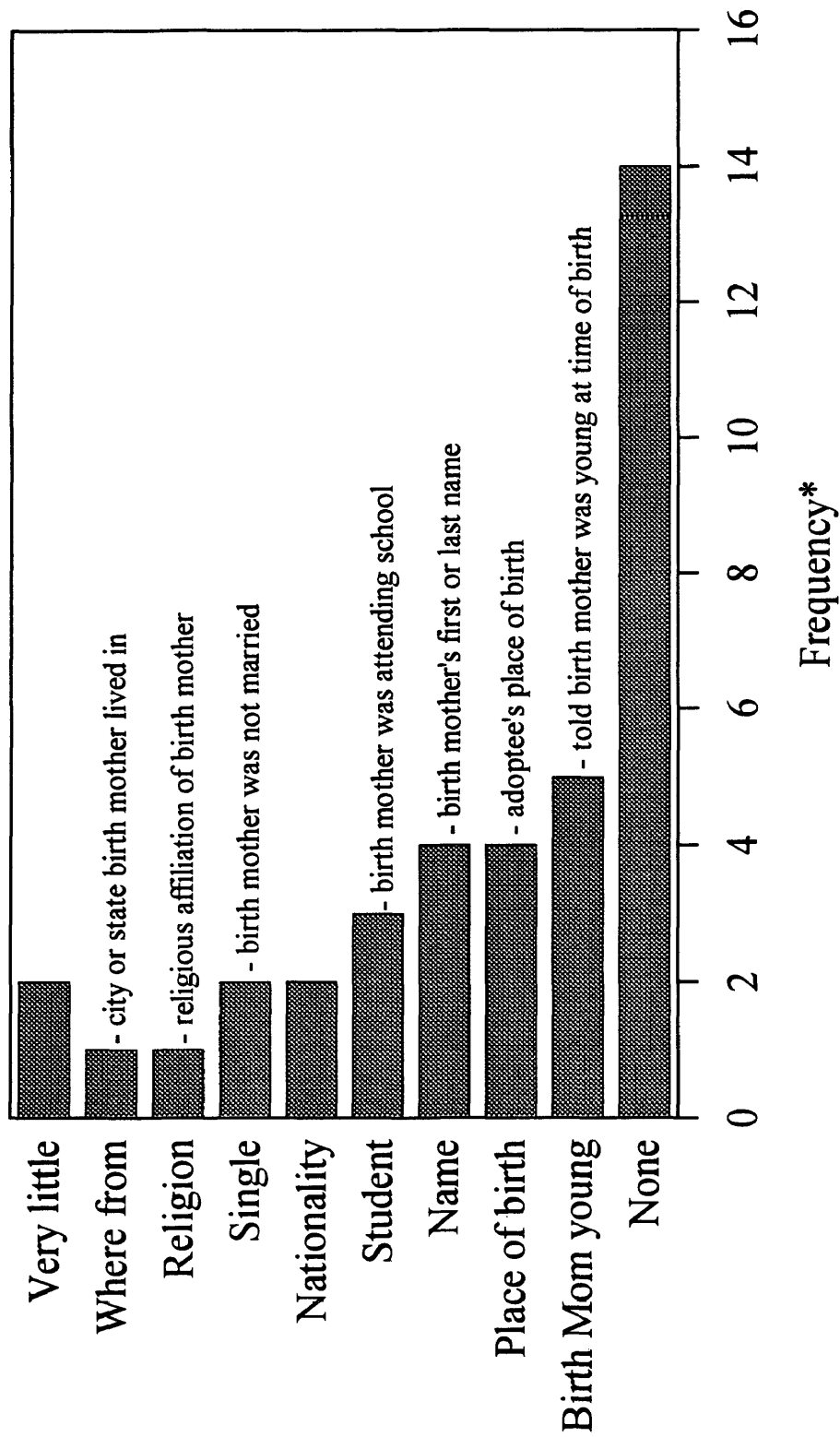
The highest number of adoptees, 14 (54%), reported having no information about their birth parents while they were growing up (see figure 2). One adoptee who had a complete history including her birth

(Fig. 1) Adoptees's Relationship with Adoptive Parents



* Frequency exceeds 26 because some adoptees gave more than 1 response

(Fig. 2) Information Adoptees had about Birth Parents while Growing Up



* Frequency exceeds 26 because some adoptees gave more than 1 response

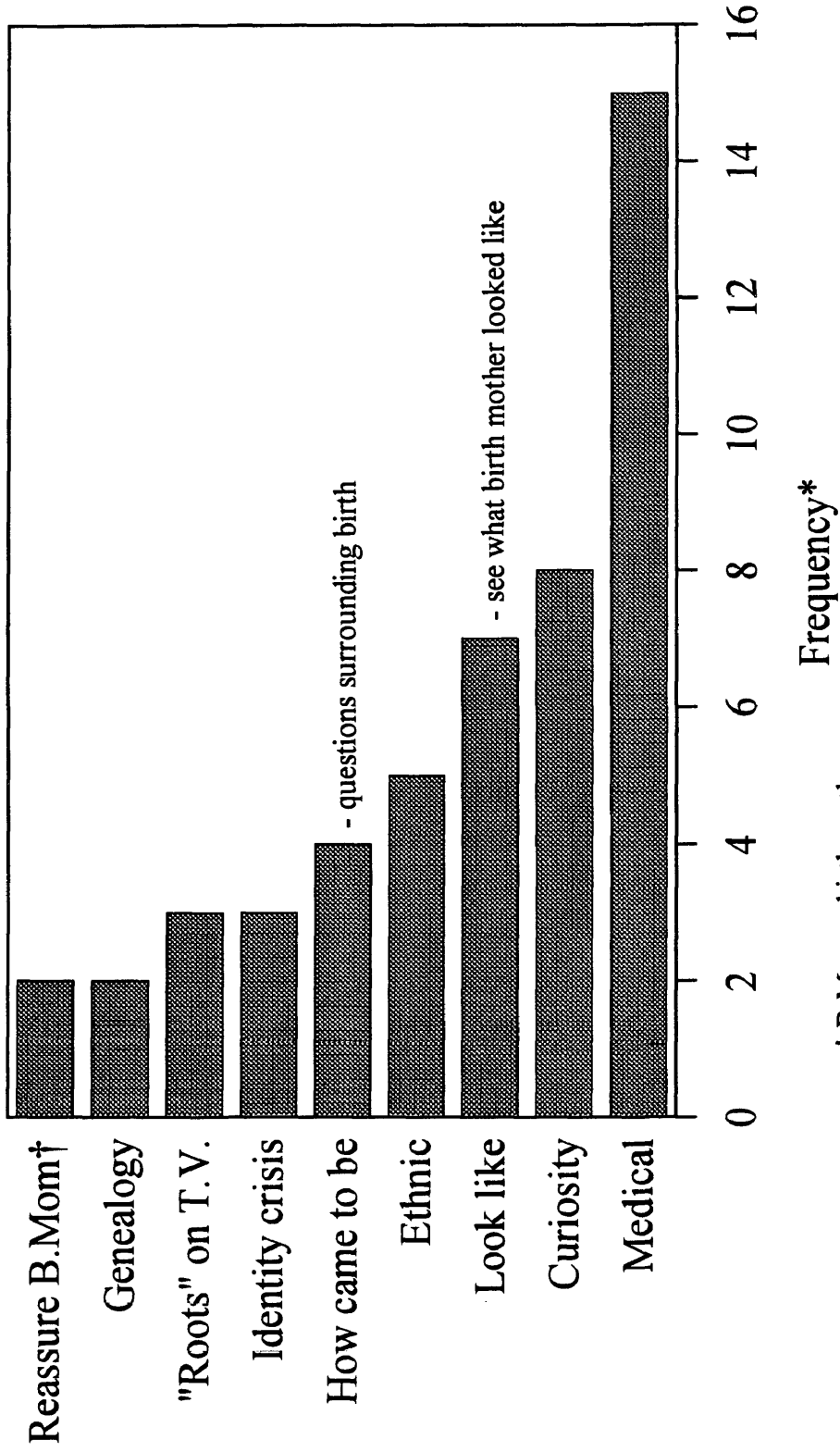
parents names, interests, and family tree but not including a medical history said, " a picture included would have been nice". In response to whether they had enough information or if they had other questions they wanted answered 22 adoptees (85%) reported they had "other questions" or "a lot more questions", and three adoptees (11%) reported not having any questions. One adoptee reported having other questions but not while growing up.

When asked if they were interested in finding information on the birth mother, father, or both, 65% reported an interest in both. The remaining 35% were only interested in information on the birth mother. Two adoptees who reported an interest in the birth mother and father reported a stronger interest in information on the birth mother.

Age and Motives

The age for deciding to search for birth parents ranged from 15-60 years with a median age of 29 years. The greatest number of adoptees decided to search between the ages of 21 and 25 years. When asked about their reasons for deciding to search, adoptees reported desire for medical information as a major source of motivation. Other commonly reported motives included: their desire to satisfy their own "curiosity", to see what they look like, and information on their ethnic background. These motives along with others mentioned are presented in figure 3. Adoptees reported an average of 2 sources of motivation. Other motivators which were

(Fig. 3) Motives for Searching



† B.Mom = birth mother

* Frequency exceeds 26 because some adoptees gave more than 1 response

reported, but only by one adoptee include the following: wanted to know the reason for being placed for adoption; interested in knowing if she had any siblings; described the search as an obsession; curiosity about whether her birth parents were looking for her; motivated to search as the result of an argument.

Nine adoptees (35%) reported that the actual start of their search was prompted by a significant life event such as birth, death, or marriage. One adoptee reported a "brush with death" which prompted the start of her search. Other life events adoptees reported as prompting the search included a change in jobs, moving out of parents house, and divorce. One adoptee reported that her search was prompted by her return to work and the fact that she "had money to spend".

Support

Thirteen adoptees (50%) reported that their adoptive parents knew about their desire to search. One adoptee responded, "not at first, but guilt made me tell them". Nine adoptees (35%) reported that their adoptive parents were deceased. Only three adoptees (11%) had chosen not to tell their adoptive parents, and one adoptee responded "not yet". Of the 13 adoptees whose adoptive parents knew about the search, nine were supportive throughout the search, and three were not supportive. One adoptee reported that her father "does not like it but understands". Another adoptee described his parents as "not supportive, but not discouraging".

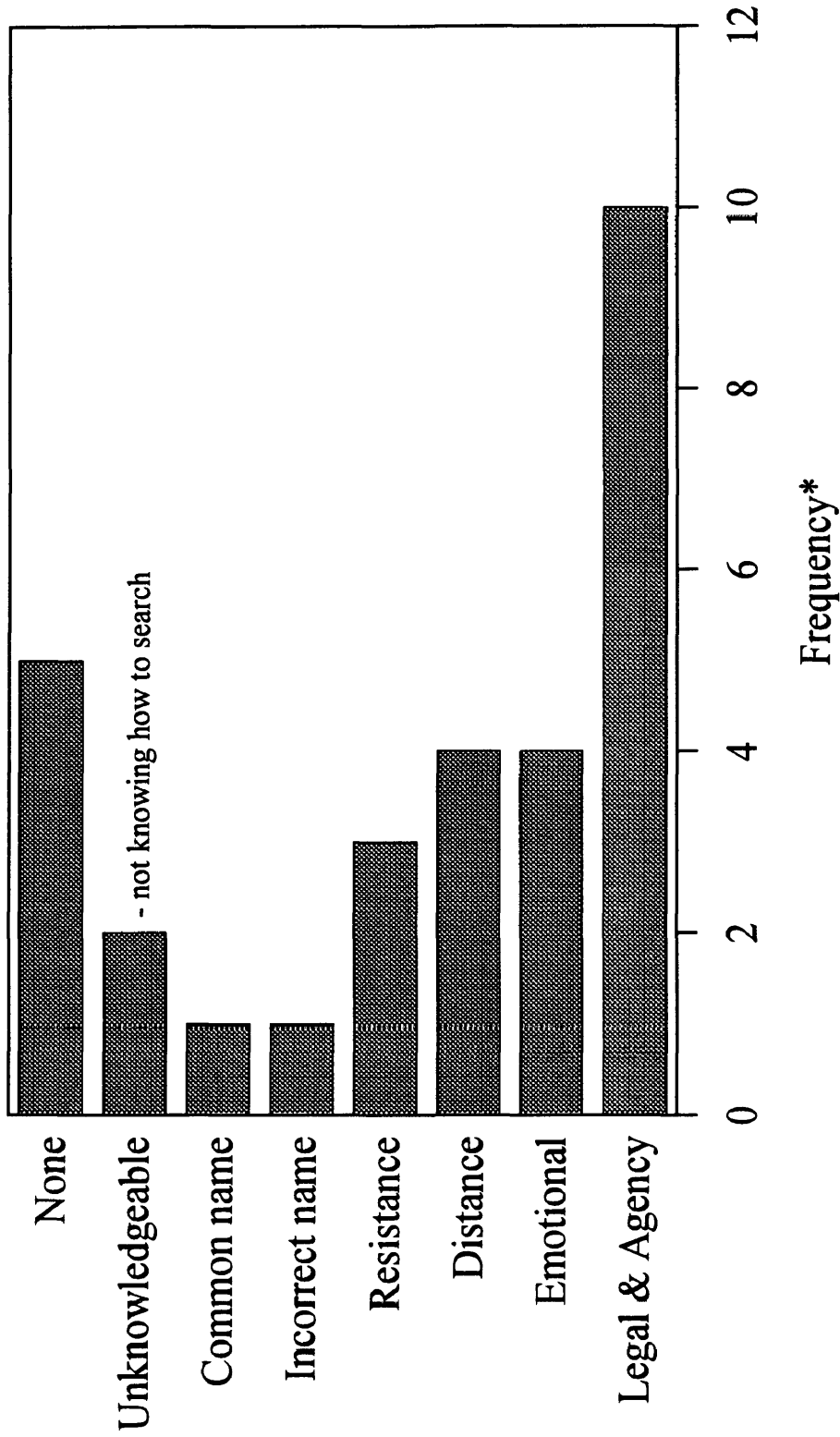
Eighty-one percent of adoptees reported that other family members knew about their desire to search. Sixty-seven percent of the family members were supportive throughout the search. Twenty adoptees (77%) reported that friends knew about the search and all but one were supportive.

Difficulties

Seventy-seven percent of the adoptees (77%) reported experiencing one or more difficulties while searching. Adoptees reported a variety of difficulties which included legal difficulties or difficulties with the agency and emotional difficulties. Figure 4 shows the frequency of these and other difficulties. The five adoptees (19%) who reported experiencing no difficulties either had the names of their birth parents prior to the search or their entire search was done by an agency. When asked if money was a factor in their search 14 adoptees (54 %) responded that money did effect their search and 12 (46%) responded that it did not. Money was a factor in the search in relation to the expenses of searching, not due to a lack of funds.

Adoptees reported that they often had to "pay to get information". One adoptee reported paying \$150 to find out her birth name through what she expected to be illegal channels. Other adoptees reported agency fees ranging from \$75 dollars "to get two pieces of paper" to \$250 dollars "to start the identifying search". Additional expenses included traveling expenses, paying for documents such as birth certificates and records, attorney fees, and phone bills.

(Fig. 4) Difficulties Encountered while Searching



* Frequency exceeds 26 because some adoptees gave more than 1 response

Adoptees who did not consider money a factor in their search reported they lived where they needed to be, did things when they were in the area, or had "very few expenses". One adoptee reported that the "agency charges nothing" to do the search.

The Truth or Not

When asked if they told the truth or "something else" when they spoke to people throughout their search, the majority of adoptees (54%) said they "told them something else". Nine adoptees (35%) said they told the truth and one adoptee reported "a little of both". Another five adoptees (19%) said this question was not applicable because they only spoke to agency personnel. One adoptee said that people were "definitely" more helpful if they were not told the truth. Instead of telling people they were looking for their birth mother, adoptees would say they were working on a family tree, class reunion, or that they were old friends with the birth mother. Adoptees reported they lied as a means of protecting the birth mother. Adoptees who told the truth "always told the truth" and "were very truthful with people". One adoptee said he had "no trouble with the truth...wouldn't hesitate to lie, but didn't need to."

Outcome of Searches

An equal number of adoptees (10) reported that they would like to have or have had a reunion with their birth parents. Five adoptees reported that their birth parents were deceased, and one adoptee was only seeking additional information. The five adoptees whose birth

parents were deceased reported meeting half-siblings and other relatives.

Sixty-nine percent of adoptees reported their searches were successful. Eight percent reported their searches were not successful, and 23% reported "not yet". One adoptee reported her search was unsuccessful because her birth mother had been dead since she was 2 years-old. Another adoptee reported her search was not successful as far as tracing people, but support groups and information she had gained from searching had been successful. The overall feeling of success with a search was described by one adoptee as follows: "success is the truth, achieving a personal relationship is a bonus."

Adoptees expressed a general sense of satisfaction with the amount of information they had acquired. The satisfaction is exemplified in the following comments:

Surprised I've gotten as much as I do. I started just looking for medical information, but the more I found out the more I wanted to know.

Tremendous amount. Very satisfied. Very pleased.

Found out more than I ever thought. Pleased, satisfied with the amount of information.

Adoptees reported experiencing a variety of feelings after their reunions. Some of the post reunion feelings included: excited, happy, nervous, relieved, and scared. Five adoptees (19%) commented on what it was like to "finally see somebody who looked like me." One

adoptee reported feeling exhausted after the very emotional meeting. One adoptee said the following about his reunion with his birth mother: "I was satisfied with who she was, but disappointed that emotionally she was not as prepared as I was for a reunion."

When asked if they would "do it all again" with all the knowledge they have about searching, 100% of the adoptees responded in the affirmative. Three adoptees (11%) said they would start their searches earlier in life. Another adoptee said, "I would not do it any differently, never do it while my adoptive parents were alive."

Adoption Laws

One question asked adoptees their views on laws that would make adoption records available to adoptees and or birth parents. In regards to records being available to adoptees, they felt the laws should be changed, "loosened up". One adoptee was in favor of opening records "if people would always be wise." She suggested using an intermediary to make the contacts between the triad members. The general feeling of the adoptees about their records is illustrated in the following comment:

Records should be available. It's my life and I've got some agency telling me that I can't have information about my background.

All adoptees felt records should be available to adoptees. The importance of medical records being available was stressed by some adoptees and some felt records should only be available after the

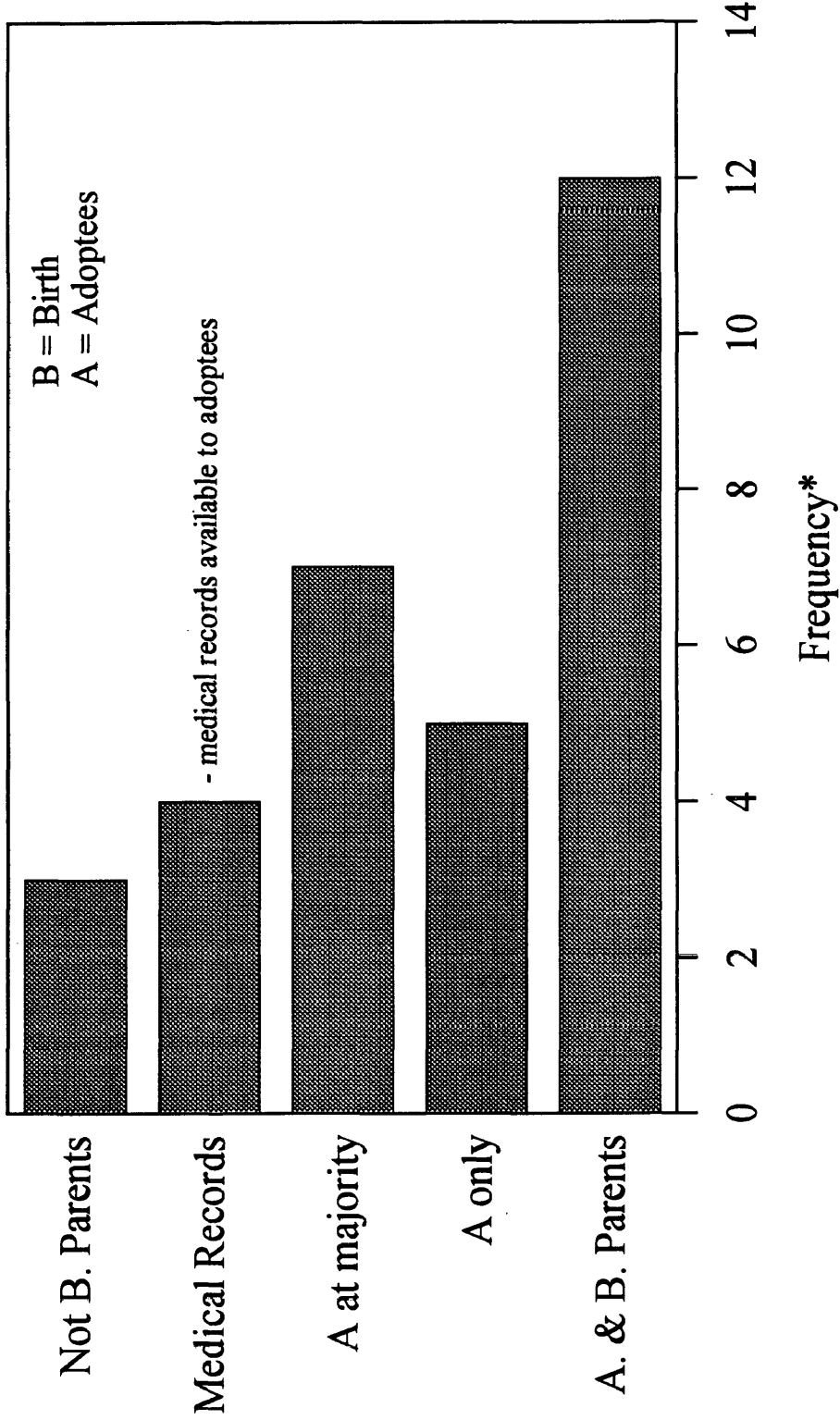
adoptee reached a certain age. Twelve of the 26 adoptees were in favor of records being available to birth parents, and 3 adoptees specifically stated that records "should not be available to birth parents." Figure 5 summarizes adoptees views on the availability of records.

When asked why they thought more states had not passed laws making records available the most commonly reported reason (30%) was the high number of adoptive parents and birth parents who are "senators, legislatures, judges, lobbyists, and lawyers." "Fear" and "privacy" were reported by 19% of adoptees. One adoptee described fear as follows: "Fear of their imagination. Fear of the unknown, what may happen, what could happen." Other reasons adoptees reported included ignorance and lack of understanding; "unless you are an adoptee you do not know what it is like to not know who you are and what happened."

Advice For Others

One question examined what advice the adoptee would have for other adoptees who are considering a search. Ten adoptees (38%) stressed the importance of emotional support in the form of a support group, or "someone that can help and be supportive". Twenty-seven percent of the adoptees advice was "do it" and 11% said they would "encourage" other adoptees. Several adoptees would caution others to "have an open mind" and to "be aware there is a 50-50 chance"

(Fig. 5) Should Records be Available to Adoptees and/or Birth Parents?



* Frequency exceeds 26 because some adoptees gave more than 1 response

that they may find what they want and they may not. One adoptee summed up the emotional involvement and the risk with the following advice: "If you are willing to pay the consequences, start the journey of self discovery."

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

The small size of the self identified sample in this study prevents generalization to broader populations of adult adoptees. However, exploratory studies play an important role in providing direction for future studies that may produce more easily generalized results.

This study conflicts with previous research on some issues and supports it on others. The motives for searching - medical information, curiosity, physical resemblances, ethnic background, and others - were similar with motives found in previous studies. The majority of adoptees learned of their adoptions at an early age and reported positive feelings about being adopted as they were growing up. Adoptees did not search because of poor relationships with adoptive parents.

Secrecy in adoption has been promoted by social agencies and law makers on the premise that it serves the best interest of the triad members, including the adoptee. The present study provides evidence to the contrary. It shows that searching is a positive experience for adoptees. Regardless of whether or not they considered their search "successful", 100% of the adoptees said they would "do it all again".

For the adoptee, adoption issues do not remain sealed along with the legal papers. They are a part of the life experiences that shape adoptees into the persons that they become, and it is better to accept

and deal with these issues than to ignore or suppress them (Anderson, 1989). Previous studies (Burke, 1975; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky et al., 1975) have underscored the "futility of imposing secrecy in adoption" (p. 66) and the present study supports this by the positive outcome of searches and adoptees views on the laws which effect them.

However, the information presented in The Adoption Factbook (National Committee For Adoption, 1989) does not support a change in the laws governing adoption records. According to The Adoption Factbook, "It is a fact that very few adopted persons search for their biological parents" (p. 109). The following was given to support the statement. Alabama is an open records state and "in 1987, only 52 ✕ people requested their original birth certificate, even though it is readily available at a very nominal charge" (p.108). It was also reported that out of 14,000 adoptions at the Edna Gladney Home of Fort Worth, ✕ Texas, less than one percent initiated any attempt to locate or identify their birth parents.

The "fact" that very few adoptees search for their birth parents may be questioned. Adoptees may search on their own and choose not to contact the agency. Adoptees may not search through the court system. It is difficult to accurately determine the number of adoptees in the world and just as difficult to determine the number of adoptees who choose to search for their birth parents. It is clear that while all adoptees do not choose to search, a number of them do. In spite of emotional difficulties, lack of support, legal boundaries, and countless

other difficulties, many adoptees are searching for and finding their birth parents.

The adoption statute was designed to serve the best interests of the adoptee. However the best interests are not served by denying adoptees access to information concerning their origins. Full development may be impossible if adoptees are permanently deprived of information about their origins (Burke, 1975). Secrecy in adoption protects the adoptive family from interference during the formative years, but it is difficult to see how an adoption statute designed to serve the best interest of the adopted child can also automatically serve the best interest of the adoptee as an adult (Anderson, 1977).

The freedom of information act states that citizens have a right to request files kept on them by government agencies, consumers have a right to inspect their credit reports and students have a right to access their university files. Adoptees do not have the same legal right to access information about their origins and attempting to do so is under penalty of law in some states (Lifton, 1988). Perhaps more adoptees do not search because the existing laws have convinced them that they do not have a right to know their origins. If laws were more accepting of the right of adoptees to have this information, maybe more adoptees would choose to search. It seems that until there is an increased understanding of the issues surrounding adoption that the number of adoptees who search will remain small and the laws concerning adoption records will remain unchanged.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to add to previous research with an examination of difficulties encountered while searching and adoptees views of laws governing adoption records. The study also provided practical information on how adoptees' are effected by searching for their birth parents. Twenty-six adult adoptees were interviewed and their responses analyzed.

Responses indicate that the adoptees learned of their adoption at an early age, did not have negative feelings about being adopted as they were growing up, and had positive relationships with their adoptive parents. Adoptees reported searching for a variety of reasons including: opportunity to reassure birth mother that she made the right decision, genealogy or ethnic background, identity crisis, curiosity, to see what the birth mother looked like, and desire for medical information. Some adoptees experienced a number of difficulties while searching. Difficulties encountered while searching included the following: legal boundaries, emotional, working with adoption agency, distance, common last name, incorrect name, and lack of knowledge about how to search. Despite many difficulties, adoptees saw searching as a positive experience. Adoptees recommend that other adoptees who are considering a search have a strong personal support system throughout the search.

Although the adoptees in this study indicated the laws on adoption records need to be changed, the review of literature does not

support a change. The available research shows that a very small portion of the adopted population chooses to search for their birth parents. However the accuracy of the research may be questioned because it is difficult to accurately determine the number of adoptees who choose to search.

Recommendations For Future Research

The present study offered a preliminary examination of some of the difficulties adoptees encounter while searching for their birth parents. In an effort to educate people about these difficulties additional research with larger more representative samples need to be conducted. Follow-up studies assessing the long term outcomes of reunions would add significantly to the knowledge of those working with adoption.

Research in adoption has focused on the triad members. Research using a control group of people who are not adopted may be helpful in pointing out possible differences in identity formation and perceived stability of the family. Although the number of adoptees who choose to search may appear to be small, people are likely to continue to hear about searching and reunions through the media, and if not through the media, a friend or relative. Adoption only directly effects a small portion of the population, but it effects many more indirectly.

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