

CHALLENGING THE MYTHS OF REUNIFICATION IN ADOPTION

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

### Challenging the Myths of Reunification in Adoption

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This capstone analyzes the underlying issues that are intertwined with the concept of adoption, including the adoption triad. The adoption triad consists of the birth mother, the adoptive mother and the adoptee. Each member's role is critically examined with the undertone of empathy and understanding. The triad suffers a significant amount of emotional trauma which are identified and explored and how it impacts reunification of the birth mother and the adoptee. Reunification is accompanied by a multitude of issues and concerns, and this paper serves as a guide to navigate uncertain relationships and its balances within the triad. Open and closed adoptions are brought to the forefront to provide further understanding of the impact of reunification later in the adoptees life. This is an paper that utilizes resources from various professionals that are considered experts in their field, in addition to adoptees, birth and adoptive mothers sharing their experiences of adoption and reunification.

## Challenging the Myths of Reunification in Adoption

Adoption has always been somewhat a “taboo” topic. It has not been until recent years that the aspects of “adoption” have been resurrected and pushed into the forefront. Often times, adoption is presented as a perfect “win-win” scenario for all involved. It is a familiar story of the biological parent in search of a loving home for the child. The adoptive mother is also on an endless journey to identify and welcome a child to take into her home and extend her family, and in the instance of the child, he or she ultimately is placed within the loving nuclear family. This is a traditional narrative consistently projected into society with assistance of media attention, adoption movies, and memoirs and novels. With such strong ideologies of lightness sprinkled on the concept of adoption, it therefore becomes romanticized, removing any deeper underlying actual human emotions that may cause inner and outer conflict in all components of the relationship. The adoption story is a beloved tale of society that is enchanting and heartwarming. It creates a sense of hope and love with a “happily ever after” premise, that comforting fairy tales are made of. Some of our society’s favorite films are rooted in the adoption world, including classics such as *Annie*, *Baby Boom*, *Problem Child*, *Three Men and A Baby*, and even the children’s animated cartoon favorite, *Kung-Fu Panda*. These movies reiterate heart-warming and cozy feelings that highlight only the positive attributes of adoption.

Although comforting, the false representation of adoption is laced with superficiality and unrealistic notions that are not recognized. With the recent push of unveiling the truth of adoption from adoptees and advocates, there has been a shift in understanding in the entirety of the adoption process and most importantly in the intricate

dynamics of the “adoption triad” that consists of the biological mother, the adoptee and the adoptive mother.

These efforts and increased media coverage of all members of the triad have allowed various voices to be heard and have brought attention to an aspect of adoption that occupies many adoptees, especially those who grew up in closed adoptions without knowledge of their birth parents. By way of background, the most two common types of adoptions are open and closed. Although no adoptions are the same, specific characteristics set open and closed adoptions apart. An open adoption allows open communication between birth families and adoptive parents. Depending on the circumstance and agreements with the family, this interaction can occur before placement and can continue through an adoptee’s lifetime. A closed adoption consists of no communication between the adoption triad. Minimal information is transferred between parties, as there is a recognized acknowledgement for privacy. One of the major aspects of a closed adoption that surfaces is the reunification of the adoptee with the one third member of the adoption triad, the biological mother. Adoptees from closed adoptions have various reasons that they should or should not reunify with their birth parent; however, there is a universal “uncertainty” that adoptees do commonly share. Unlike what is displayed in media and often left out of the representation of dynamic, there are often heavy circumstances and difficult emotions that accompany reunification with the birth mother. These, in turn, affect all three parties of the triad.

Exploring the motivations for reunification can provide greater understanding of the adoption triad: the adoptee, birth mother, and adoptive mother. It is imperative the three parties be critically analyzed as the desires and involvement of each can heavily

determine the outcome of the reunification and the future of the relationship. With each reunification looms the possibility of a negative or a positive outcome that affects the three members of the triad. Because of unpredictable circumstances, the adoptee must be prepared to handle inevitable repercussions that affect the dynamics of the existing triad. In addition to possibly securing answers about the adoptee's origins, reunification can bring uncertainty, emotional instability, unrealistic expectations, and a major issue of identity and lack of security in the current or new relationships.

After experiencing a closed adoption, if the adoptee decides to reunite with the birth mother, there are a multitude of issues surrounding reunification for all three members of the adoption triad. Failure to take into account the significant influences on the "triad" can result in negative or positive outcomes. The triad is symbolic, in the shape of the triangle; the three parts of the triangle represent the birth mother, the adoptee and the adoptive mother. Its three points sustain the triangle, in this case the triad. The three points are all important to stability and health.

The triad's components, the adoptee, the birth mother, and the adoptive mother collectively require deep understanding of the past and present relationships. From the perspective of the adoptee, there is much time spent on the inquiry of the birth mother. Regardless of the existing family structure or upbringing, the adoptee curiosity about the birth mother continues. The questions remain typically simple, such as "What does she look like?" "Do I look like her?" and "Why did she give me up?" As stated earlier the influence of social, movies, TV shows, and memoirs, and the imagination of the adoptee can create a romanticized version of reunification that includes highly dramatized

climatic moments of love and joy. The adoptee will also find they are visualizing in great detail reunification with the birth mother. The adoptee may ruminate over vivid conversations that include a question and answer section, followed with an exposing narrative of truth and compassion. Such non-realistic scenes can be created and linger throughout the imagination of the adoptee causing false expectations if and when reunification occurs with the birth mother. Although the goal of reunification may be fueled by good intentions, there is a lack of reality and dismissal of the actual impact reunification creates as well as a lack of awareness about how reunification interrupts the balance of the adoption triad. Nancy Verrier, author of *The Primal Wound*, describes these specific feelings, stating that, “despite the potential for healing which reunions the represent, perhaps nothing brings to the fore everyone’s feelings so much as search and reunion experiences. The fear of a second abandonment is ever-present in the minds of each and every adoptee that contemplates searching. Even though the reality may be much less threatening the fear itself, these fears the must not be taken lightly” (63). Fear is a natural powerful and primitive emotion that can be acted upon quickly. Fear is a reaction to something immediate that threatens security. In this case fear is what disrupts the steadiness of the triad.

The culture of adoption has promoted reunifications to have beneficial factors due to it allowing the opportunity for once separated individuals to re-connect, and possibly re-establish a pre-existing bond, but after many years of separation does reunification represent an accurate reality? What if the adoptee and the birth mother do not get along? And how does reunification alter the role of the birth mother? Understanding new roles and navigating both real and unreal expectations pose a serious

challenge to the triad members' comfort within their known world. There lies an abundance of complex feelings and concerns, and if dismissed or not addressed, these can lead to disastrous outcomes of disappointment.

When adoption is typically explained, it is simplified and minimized to just "the action or fact of legally taking another's child and bringing it up as one's own, or the fact of being adopted" (15). However, adoption entails many more complexities than a basic definition suggests. For generations, adoption has been perceived as the solution for families that seek alternative ways of expanding their families in a "non-traditional" way. Adoption has typically been thought of as a "win-win" scenario for the adoptee, the birth mother, and the adoptive mother. However, in adoption, trauma appears as an emotional theme that plagues all three people in the triad. . Throughout one's life the severity of trauma may shift, during specific milestones in each of their lives, but it does not go away. In the book, *Adopted: Not Special, Not Chosen* author Calum describes adoption as, "when a child is given by his mother for adoption. When a child is adopted, it means the natural order of things hasn't worked out. Someone wants a child can't have one; someone who has a child can't keep it; and a child is traumatically separated from its mother" (32). Calum describes adoption in its truest state, which is "traumatic." The triad faces a multitude of emotional terrors that is carried through the rest of the triad's lives.

The decision to put a child up for adoption should not be taken lightly and the severity of the impact must be recognized. As mentioned above, an open adoption refers to any adoption relationship between the adoptive family and birth parents in which identifiable information as well as contact are shared within both parties. This may include contact before and after the adoption including phone calls, emails or visits. A

closed adoption involves limited contact or identifying information exchanged although the adoptive family may still receive medical records in closed adoptions. In both kinds, the decision for relinquishment is placed heavily and often times solely upon the birth mother. There are new research findings that could change the adoption landscape for birth mothers struggling with their life-altering decision to place their children. When experiencing trauma, what is the birth mother's level of satisfaction and her identity? How is the feeling that a right decision was made affected by time? The birth mother's experience can accidentally be overshadowed, stigmatized and on rare occasions go unrecognized. Donna Portuesi, author of "Impact of the Birthmother's Experience, Then and Now," explains, "the minimal publications regarding the impact of pregnancy and the relinquishment of the birth mother's identity and having a negative self-image manifests into interrupted self-esteem." She continues, "For many young women, becoming pregnant and relinquishing a child during the crucial 'identity forming' years only compounds an already complicated situation. Often the birth mother believes that she is undeserving and a bad mother. In addition, she may feel punished for years because of her permissiveness. Over a decade of clinical practice at Adoption Search and Counseling Consultants (ASCC) has demonstrated that issues the self-esteem, relationship difficulties, 'numbing behaviors,' depression, over- and under-achieving, compulsive obsessive and panic disorders are often the residue of the relinquishment experience" (83). The birth mother's trauma may adversely affect any future relationships with the adoptee and the adoptive parents.

The stigma birth mothers face can cause further divide in their relationships with those in the adoption triad if reunification occurs. Factors leading to relinquishment vary



from birth mother to mother. Circumstances can be from battles with addiction, lack of financial stability, other children, broken relationships from the biological father, or lack of support from the immediate family. If reunification were to occur, preconceived notions, or assumed negative character traits about the birth mother created by the adoptee or the adoptive mother might be a barrier. These can lead to birth mothers facing further external opposition from the adoptee and the adoptive mother. It is interesting how ideologies of birth mothers can be projected amongst different communities. All adoptive mothers navigate adoption and reunification with caution; however, it is interesting how each community portrays birth mothers. Dr. Angela Young discovered that in African American and Caucasian communities, adoptive mothers experience birth mothers differently based on the type of adoption and the involvement of the birth mother. For instance, “For black adoptive mothers, contact with biological mothers was associated with higher levels of perceived parenting efficacy, in other words, black adoptive mothers provided more parenting or effectiveness for their child’s birth mother. For white adoptive mothers, contact with biological mothers was associated with lower levels of perceived parenting competence” (15). For adoptive mothers it may be difficult to welcome contact with their child’s birth mother because the birth mother perceives that such contact can weaken her effectiveness.

According to Sister Mary Borromeo, author of “Effects of Adoption on the Mental Health of the Mother: What Professionals Knew and Didn’t Tell Us,” when a child is relinquished, a birth mother will internalize the trauma and compare the separation of adoption to the separation of a child through death. The loss is irrevocable in terms of relationship. The surrendering mother also knows that acceptance back into

her family circle is dependent on the ability to “put it all behind her” and so she is under double pressure to suppress her grief. In cases where this is done it is not unusual to find a severe breakdown in self-control around the birthday of the lost child (16). Children that are given up for adoption also have their share in their trauma or loss. Both child and mother are experiencing a unique set of emotional challenges under the circumstances of their loss and as the development continues this may lead to a difficult relationship if and when the two are re-united. Similar to Calum, Borroemero recognizes the re-occurring theme of trauma experienced by these two members of the triad. She identifies the weak areas of the emotional loss and instability, and given these factors, is there enough to motivate a positive and successful reunification? And how does the adoptive mother support the adoptee child and validate the traumatic experience if and when reunification occurs?

The adopted mother, the third part of the triad, is also in a critical role. She serves as a liaison between the two worlds of the adoptee’s past and present. The adoptive mother is on a continuous quest to maintain balance, provide answers, and nurture the adoptee through conscious and subconscious trauma. The adopted mother is the anchor of the triad but similar to her biological mother counterpart, she too is often overlooked regarding the layers of her experience. The adoptive mother may feel threatened, jealous, and uncertain of her position as a mother. She may even feel insecure, left out, and even second best. Many adoption agencies attempt to “quiet” the feelings that an adoptive mother may have about their position from the very beginning of the adoption process. For example, the Legacy Adoption Services, which recognizes the difficulties that both adoptive and birth mothers face, enlists the adoptive mother to help understand and

comfort the birth mother by offering a section of their website called, “4 Things Adoptive Parents want to Tell birth mothers.” This article uses a strategy to reduce and/or remove the stress, guilt or other internal conflict the birth mother may encounter when during the decision-making process. Legacy states, “ 1. You did not give up your child, 2. They gained a family, 3. We want you in their life, and 4. We will be open.” Some of those statements could hold possible truth; however, they are quite presumptuous. The Legacy Adoption Services is a perfect example of the dismissal of the birth mother’s reality and reiterates the falsehood of benign adoption. The website presumes a happy and comforting adoption experience without the trauma that occurs. The dismissal and human indifference toward the birth mother is a component in why reunification can be difficult and be unsuccessful for the triad. Relinquishment for the birth mother causes loss, grief, guilt, shame and even identity issues. Adoption services like Legacy allow emotional repression and false ideologies and expectations to manifest. There is a major lack of recognition of the realities of adoption.

Birth mothers and adoptive mothers experience face a unique set of challenges during the process of adoption. Each mother must gain complete control over internal emotions and put the child or adoptee first. With that being said, both the birth mother and adoptive mother may have to silence their own personal emotional needs and learn how to deal with contradictory thoughts. Whereas the birth mother grieves the loss of the adopted child, the adoptive mother is continuously thinking about and preparing for the moment of being asked about the loss of the birth mother, and the steps leading to reunification. The idea stirs up a multitude of feelings that one cannot ever seem fully prepared for. The adoptive mother can feel constant conflict when faced with the notion

of contact with the birth family, especially in a closed adoption. Adoptive mothers may feel threatened and hold their own versions of stereotypes of the birth mother. They may feel that once the reunification takes place, the adoptive mother will be replaced.

Reunification can encourage insecurity about her own role as mother and affect her identity. Jana Wolff, author of “Secret Thoughts of an Adoptive Mother,” describes her experience as an adoptive mother and states that, “Adoption is not the repertoire of child’s play. And it’s an experience for which we as adults are woefully unprepared. As my husband and I went through the process of an open transracial adoption I sensed that I was on uncharted ground emotionally, with no road maps or role models. I was having feelings that weren’t the kind the I had read about anywhere” (22). Wolff recognizes how social services can fail the adoptive mother, especially due to the lack of acknowledgement of the feelings involved.

Wolff’s vivid depiction of her experience is refreshing and offers adoptive mothers a voice that it usually edited and dismissed. Wolff identifies the reality of the trauma adoptive mothers tackle when faced with the concept of contact with the birth mother. Their parenting emotions are intensified and woven in fear and anxiety. As Wolff writes, “Most adoptive parents live with some anxiety about the birth mother changing her mind. Many adoptive mothers can understand why she would. The grief of adoption is not lost on the woman who brings the baby home.” The adoptive mother’s position is atypical and constantly shifts. She has rules and guidelines of her own that she must follow, in addition to societal expectations, all the while attempting to be the best mother she can be.

Similar to the adoptive mother and birth mother, the adoptee must address their complexity of issues and sentiments from childhood well into adulthood. Resolving the adoptee's issues of adoption is a lifelong process. Through an awareness of the issues inherent in adoption, nurses and parents can use strategies that will enhance the children's self-esteem and decrease their emotional vulnerability. The presence of adoption-related issues does not mean that adoption inevitably leads to psychopathology. What it does mean is that the experience of adoption makes the adoptee deal with more complex emotional issues, such as rejection and grief, at an early age. Eileen Smit, author of "Adopted Children: Core Issues and Unique Challenges," states, "To say an adoptee doesn't have adoption issues is like saying a girl has not been affected by being female, or that an African American doesn't have race issues" (97). Adopted children must determine how adoption has affected them and come to terms with their adoption. Adopted children can grow up joyfully but they grow up differently. Through an awareness of adoption-related issues, parents and specialists who work with adopted children can provide anticipatory guidance for the expected issues adoptive children and family's encounter, especially if reunification is involved.

Unresolved issues surrounding adoption can be considered a major motivating factor for the adoptee to reunite with the birth mother, forcing a fusing of the triad. Adoptees can often feel uncomfortable with who they are and struggle with security. Seeking reunification can be due to lack of identity, medical information, connection with possible siblings, and lastly curiosity. However, when proceeding with reunification, for the adoptee as well as for the birth mother and adoptive mother, there are much question and conflict. The adoptee might question every move and decision in hopes of

maintaining the delicate balance of the triad. The adoptee wants to ensure that their loyalty to the adoptive mother does not fall into question. The adoptee also manages their reoccurring feelings of loss, grief and anger that may resurface. Danielle Kathleen Boettcher of Walden University explains that “Reunification appeared to be the most emotionally important among reported issues associated with obtaining background information, loss, and identity.” She continues, “ Many researchers believe that the search process for the birth parent begins as a result of psychological problems that are unresolved. In a 2010 study conducted by Curtis Pearson, reported that often adoptees struggle with the issues related to separation, which include grief, loss, and inability to form a sense of identity or intimate relationships. Unresolved psychological issues in conjunction with the desire for medical and genealogical history account for 60% of adults placed in closed adoptions that engage in search and reunification. Other feelings such as worthlessness, fear, loss of control, unfilled needs and loss of biological /cultural background may lead someone to the decision to search for a birth parent” (42). Boettcher clearly identifies the adoptees’ uncertainty and provides further clarification as why reunification is so important for the identity and fulfillment of the adoptee. Boettcher brings up another point, as to when is a good time for the adoptee to begin their search?

There is a major push for adult adoptees to reunite with the birth mother and some would even argue the benefits of later in life reunions. Stephen Betchen argues that adoptees do not feel whole until a reunion happens. Not appropriately coping with the magnitude of trauma adoptees experience attacks their self-esteem and can make them feel inadequate all their roles within family and societal structure. He writes, “Many adoptees have trouble feeling completely comfortable wherever they are, no matter how

welcomed they may be. At times their discomfort can manifest in distancing, indifference, or even rudeness, but usually don't intend to insult anyone. There is a nomadic notion that they don't belong anywhere in particular. Even when they settle somewhere they work their asses off to prove their worthiness--just in case in anyone gets any ideas about putting them back up for adoption" (2).

For other adoptees, motivators for reunification can vary from person to person. Some like Betchen feel the need to find out their medical information, fill the emotional void, seek their worthiness, etc. However, there is not strong evidence that after reunification there is a positive outcome; especially with unresolved issues within the dynamic of the triad, reunification can become complicated. For example, Desiree Shannon of *Narcissistic Mothers: The Complete Guide to Understanding*, explains the experience of Nick Lewis, a twenty-six-year-old adoptee from a closed adoption, who grew up with a wonderful childhood and sought out his birth family post adolescence at age of twenty-three. She describes his experience, "I knew things were going to be complicated. And they were. Nick stated that it turned out that his birth mother wasn't always completely honest. She phoned me up and while drunk saying she didn't want to have anything to do with me anymore, it was all too much for her. She was raised in foster care, history of alcohol and drug abuse, mental health problems, sexual and physical abuse and other issues. But if you didn't have that level of support around you, it could be really tough to uncover the sort of things I've uncovered in my own biological family" (15). Nick is correct when referring to having a strong support system to assist the adoptee with the reunification process, especially if it becomes undesirable. Regardless of the behavior from the birth mother, it is the responsibility of the adoptee to

re-examine and identify the relationship and what the needs can and cannot be met by the birth mother.

If reunification does take place, how does the uniqueness of emotional barriers manifest into positive relationships later in life? Or do they at all? Is it possible for all components of the triad to put aside their emotional trauma and assimilate themselves into each other's lives as adults? The optimistic and fantasy version of the previous questions would be "yes" or "absolutely," but the reality may be the opposite. Due to the trauma of the adoption experience and the components that led to the decision for relinquishment and adoption, especially for the birth mother, the birth mother may feel the most inadequate of the three members of the triad. The birth mother may also feel she has the most to prove in reunification as she has to re-emerge back into the lives of the adoptive mother and the adoptee. Wolff confirms the connection among the members of triad, "Whether or not you've met the birth mother of your child, she has a presence in your life. The emotional symbiosis of that solution is not severed with the legal ties. She is forever a part of the child's life and the adopted mother, and the child will always be a part of hers" (18). However, the birth mother may continue to struggle in attempting to reunify with the adoptee. One way to explain the challenges of the birth mother is that the birth mother shares some of the same social dynamics of assimilation of the recently released prison inmate.

At first, these two perspectives can appear to have no similarities between them; however, it is just the opposite. Like the birth mother, the inmate made a decision that resulted in life-altering outcome and removed them from the comfort of society; in the



case of the birth mother, she was physically removed from the adoptee and the triad. Similarly, the inmate is alone and forced to revisit the consequences of their actions. Once the inmate has served their time, they are released back into society and face multiple barriers with re-assimilation. These include the fear of rejection, stigma, and most importantly the lack of recognition from the world they once knew. Although obviously different circumstances, the inner experience of the birth mother and inmate can be the same. Reunification for the birth mother is re-introducing one's self to the triad. The birth mother faces stigmas, judgment, and opposition from not only society but from the existing dynamic. Additional support is required to re-enter a world they are no longer familiar with. In the case of the inmate, life has moved on and forward and does not decrease in speed because of an individual's wrong doings or poor choice making.

For the birth mother, the adoptee, and the adoptive mother, they share a re-occurring theme of "not belonging." There is no concrete understanding of their position or role in life. All three members of the triad fear exploring uncertainty of uncharted territory, and fear rejection. However for the birth mother these feelings immediately emerge at the beginning of the adoption. Due to these feelings the birth mother may be content living in a world that does not require reuniting with the adoptee similarly to an inmate re-entering society. Limits and boundaries are established so pain, fear, and rejection cannot penetrate through their exposed vulnerability. For example, the *New York Times* published an article about an inmate that was accidentally released and arranged his own return to the prison. The inmate and birth mother share a similar concept on their perception of the entering the lives and world once left behind. An

inmate released by mistake in Ohio arranged his way back to the prison in Colorado where he still has two more years to serve. He even called to say he was on his way. Jailers in Stark County, Ohio, let the inmate, Ricky Lee Claycomb, go on Tuesday after he was acquitted of rape charge that he had been brought to Ohio from Colorado to face. Jail officials apparently never saw the paperwork to return him to the Colorado prison. This case was interesting in the fact that we wonder what motivated Mr. Claycomb to want to remain within the prison walls. Was it due to his fear of not wanting to return into society before his time? Or the idea of facing a reality that he was not prepared for? Or perhaps it could have been the fear and or rejection previously discussed? Mr. Claycomb could have been feeling what many birth mothers may have experienced. His experience provides depth and insight to the perspective and thought process that could be equivalent to the hesitation that birth mother feels to move forward.

Unresolved issues inside the triad may linger and spill over into new relationships causing severe challenges. A successful reunification relies heavily on the evolution of the birth mother. Since being reintroduced to the existing triad, her stability can influence the outcome of the relationships. Reunification for an adult adoptee would be most beneficial for the triad with the hopes that time will allow all parties to address specific feelings and be prepared what the future may hold. In order for a positive reunification, the members of the triad must recognize emotional changes and/or progress, and in the event of a difficult scenario, an action plan must be identified to implement actions to rectify the concerns. For instance, adoptive mother Lynn Sollitto, author of the article, “A New Path In Our Adoption Journey,” documents her experience with reunification of her two teenage daughters with their birth mother. “Lynn and her

husband Andrew adopted two girls Paige and Peyton. The birth mother had previous battles with addiction. Within the triad an agreement was established that Ruth would continue contact with the girls; however Ruth demonstrated inconsistency. After a few years, Lynn and Andrew had to remove themselves from Ruth due to the emotional turmoil that Ruth was projecting onto the family and affecting their daughters”(9). The Adoptive children also have needs that must be met. Adopted children tend to suffer from the anxiety, sensory procession disorder, ADHD and Reactive Attachment Disorder. These disorders can be magnified when the birth mother has not dealt with her personal tribulations. The trauma suffered by all, Lynn and her daughters, confirms a premature reunification for non-adults is not ideal and can have long-lasting effects. In addition to the previous trauma the triad had endured, Lynn and Andrew were forced to identify a resolution to fix the damage caused by the birth mother leaving the triad unbalanced and vulnerable. In the case of Lynn and Andrew and their daughters, reunification after their daughters became adults may have been less severe. As adults, Andrew and Lynn’s daughters would have had the opportunity to create boundaries and rules that would serve as guidelines for the new relationships. If more time were allotted, the birth mother would have a longer period of time to recover from her addictions and ultimately prove herself to the triad. Conversations of honesty, integrity and most importantly consistency could take place as the adoption journey involves various paths.

Trauma must be recognized by the adoptee, the birth mother, and the adoptive mother, and it is accompanied by the theme of suppression which has the ability to manifest into a protective veil for each member of the triad. Trauma causes pain and people will avoid feeling pain if given the ability to do so and shield themselves. Society

encourages adoptees to engage in the narrative to appreciate “your birth mother/parents” because “they wanted to give you a better life” and “you were adopted into a family that could give you a that better life and who loves you, you should be grateful.” Statements such as these can be damaging to not only the adoptee, but to the entire triad. A loaded narrative can cause further internal conflict within the adoptee, who is at risk of projecting these insecurities onto each member of the triad during reunion. There may be confusion on how the adoptee feels, causing further uncertainty and unnecessary analyzation.

As the journey of the reunification process continues, each member should be armed and protected to prevent any damage that can happen as a result of meeting. All parties must be ready and prepared. *The Primal Wound* author Nancy Verrier discusses reunification in the article, “Where’s Mum when it hurts?” on the website [grapevine.org](http://grapevine.org) and explains, “reunions are advisable but I don’t try to talk anyone into it when they are not ready. On the whole, I think the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. But of course it the birth mother does not want a reunion, if there are secrets going on or she can’t pass the trauma of child she no long ago, then a reunion can be difficult.” Verrier would agree that if one party is not ready, it puts the relationships in jeopardy for a negative reunion.

Reuniting without clear stability can lead to disastrous effects for those not prepared to deal with the repercussions. Failing to address the loss and grief adoptees experience can develop into self-destructive behaviors. These behaviors could be inherited from the biological mother, which may have resulted in their own placement for adoption. Facing the reality of reunification can cause further distress. The underlying fear can be the catalyst for adoptees to explore other various coping mechanisms to assist

in managing their feelings. However adoptees must be careful as author Lisa Coppola explores in her in-depth exploration of risks and susceptibility of adoptees. “*An Inner Turmoil*”: *The Adoptee Struggling with Addiction and Challenges in Recover*, studies the effects of adoptees and explains, “It is well documented that adoptees are at high risk for addictive disorders, and quite often found that people who are adopted and spent time in foster care, plays a significant crucial connection and deserve a thoughtful investigation. We know that as addiction progresses, systems in the brain associated with decision making, and inhibition become “hijacked” and changed. Prior to these brain changes, I believe that the root cause of addictive behavior in many cases--and especially in the cases of those adopted or fostered--lies in a deeply embedded pain. It has been discovered, when working with adoptees pre-and post- recovery that there is a deep feeling of inner turmoil, disconnection, low self-worth, and overwhelming fear and anxiety. It is believed what leads adopted and fostered clients into addiction or compulsive behavior often stems from the suppression of inner pain. Sometimes this pain can be recognized. Substance abuse can be thought of as an attempt at a solution to inner turmoil rather than the cause of it” (30). This is an interesting point that Coppola identifies. The revolving case of fear becomes a cycle that adds an additional barrier to why reintroduction when not properly prepared can make the relationship even more challenging with expectations of the birth mother not being met.

In addition to trauma and addiction that a birth mother experiences, there may also be an underlying narcissistic component that fuels much of the damaging relationships that birth mothers create with their adult children. As Betchen mentioned above, he eventually had to distance himself until he faded away and out of his birth

mother's life indefinitely due to feeling that he was the initiator in the relationship and maintaining the relationship as a whole. Just because an adoptee is biologically connected to the birth mother, does not mean they are not without flaws. Birth mothers can carry negative attributes, and be undesirable in relationship. Being a birth mother does not make them exempt. Desiree Shannon, author of "Healing from Narcissistic Mothers: The Definitive 2-in-1 Guide for Daughters," makes a valid point stating that, "Your mother has likely been narcissist since well before you were born, meaning you have been exposed to her narcissistic behaviors all your life. You have probably never known anything different, for this reason, we can conclude that the beginning of our problems around this starts with your mother and her disorder" (4). Shannon is assuming that there is a relationship from birth between mother and child lasting until adulthood. However what should be taken away is the pre-existing issue of narcissistic personality disorders that can create a barrier for development of later relationships regardless at what stage. A significant amount of trauma can trigger this condition and if left unaddressed, like with anything else, it can halt any further personal evolution. Shannon describes Narcissistic Personality disorder as a mental condition that gives people an inflated sense of self-importance, dysfunctional relationships, an excessive deep-seated need for attention and admiration, and a complete lack of empathy for other people. Even though this is what they are experiencing, their symptoms can look somewhat different on the outside. This is because narcissists develop what is known as "masks" which are a sort of alter ego that they hide behind to cover up the act that there is something wrong with the way behaves. The point is not to generalize all birth mothers as narcissistic monsters that run around with heightened deceptive behaviors, but to understand that

birth mothers have to wear a type of mask to cope with the choices they had made over the course of their lives. Often times, due to their experiences, birth mothers indulge in some of these self-absorbed behaviors as a defense mechanism to hide their vulnerability to others, especially their adult children. They try to project an image of stability and confidence regardless of the reality.

Another important narcissist trait that birth mothers share is that they have an incredibly exaggerated sense of self-importance, which often manifests as them behaving as if they are better than everyone else and lying to others. They also have a sense of entitlement and feel as though they should get everything they want, including unlimited amounts of admiration for what they do. A narcissist will also obsess over having the perfect everything in life, including the house, the perfect mate, the perfect friends, and the perfect anything else. In their opinion, perfect things match their need for perfection, adding to their level of superiority. Since the reunion of my own birth mother, over the years I have seen many of the qualities and traits that Shannon identified associated with narcissism. My birth mother continues to remain in a selfish world created by her that projects perfection without error. As mentioned before, it is a way for her to hide from the world that is and the world that once was. With such strong under currents of behaviors, and failing to recognize her own fault or trauma, our relationship was challenging and unable to get past the infancy stage. The birth mother's mental health plays a vital role in understanding the birth mother and her re-introduction into the life of her adult child; hence it can be problematic to advance to any further in reunification relationship. Facing the harshness of reality and leaving the safe world that has been

created can be terrifying for the birth mother and frustrating and misleading to the adult child, who may or may not understand the intentions of their birth parent.

Reunification remains a balancing act especially amongst adult adoptees. Adult adoptees that proceed with the reunion have no rulebook on how to navigate these relationships, nor do they know how to cope with the inner layer of the feelings of the triad members. Uncertainty accompanied by anxiety could stem from treading the charted territory of old relationships while cautiously attempting to foster new uncharted ones. For instance, in the article, “Female Adoptees: Experiences Balancing Relationships with Biological and Adoptive the Mothers post Reunification” author Phyllis Swint writes that, “Adult female adoptees struggle with managing their two mother-daughter relationships and need clinical help addressing their own emotional needs” (50). They continue to add on a concept of split loyalties, which would further add to an internal divide and conflict of the adoptee upon meeting the biological mother.

Using a feminist post-modern perspective and the sensitizing concept of split loyalties for the contextual theory, the primary purpose of the study was to develop a better understanding of how adult female adoptees from closed adoptions negotiate relationships with their adoptive and the biological mothers post-reunion. Their findings suggest the adoptive mother–daughter relationship has a salient effect on adoptees’ relationships with biological mothers post reunion. In most cases the relationship between adoptive mother and adoptee can be strong. Especially in the mother-daughter dynamic or female–female relationship. (122)



She goes on to say that “In a positive relationship the adoptee may feel guilty by seeking the birth mother and is concerned about hurting the Adoptive mother’s feelings. She may replay in her mind what truly defines motherhood and ‘nurture vs. nature’ theory. It is a complicated struggle that takes a complicated approach to address (50). Swint also explains the close links among the three members of the triad: “Loyalty to the adoptive mother seems to influence the evolving the relationship and closeness displayed toward the birth mother. Adult female adoptees from closed adoptions described struggling with managing their two mother-daughter relationships and need clinical help addressing their own emotional needs.” In another interesting twist, the authors highlight this dual or split loyalty by the adoptee, and these new unidentified feelings in which the adoptee struggles with being caught between the two. There is loyalty to the birth mother because they provided them with life and their original identity, despite not nurturing them throughout their lives. Additionally, loyalty often shapes adoptees’ identities as they try to manage these dual and often competing alliances. Without the appropriate supports and transition systems in place, a reunion later in life for the adult child does not offer the most promising and healthy outcomes. The burden of the split loyalties can lead to the adoptees creating distance between themselves and their adoptive mother because of the need to protect their feelings or react to messages received from adoptive parents that their biological parents could be problematic to the current parent-child relationship. Adoptees may even distance themselves from their birth families to appear “loyal” to their adoptive families.

If a reunification is done without caution, and insecurity lurks within the triad, the birth mother may use the sense of dual or split loyalty to their benefit. Birth mothers who

are still in search of validation and repentance can utilize these tools to further complicate matters. The biological mother can use this opportunity to gain the emotional support she may feel is lacking independently and create a facade or illusion of a relationship that they desperately want to create. Due to traumatic experiences, trust becomes hard for the adoptee to establish with their biological mother. Birth mothers often forget that adoptees continue to struggle with feelings of adoption from childhood well into adulthood. They run a range of feelings that stem from feeling abandonment and attachment issues. Usually with the birth mother's history of inconsistency and lack of reality, the misconnection of feelings can lead to a less than positive reunion outcome.

Reunifications are not to be discouraged or avoided for the adoptee and the triad; however, the underlying theme is that triad must be ready to face this new experience that includes more than just them. With the complexities of new and pre-existing conditions, reunification can be an overwhelming experience for all, which is why it is best for the adoptee to wait until adulthood and sometimes even then a reunion may not be satisfactory enough. The article, "New Territory: Memoirs of Meeting Original Family by Seven adopted American Women," written by Marianne Novy, confirms the falsehoods of the adoption process. She agrees "newspaper folklore and classical comedies find convenient endings in reunions. Looking at "Twice Born" along with six of the most recent memoirs by American adopted women, I find a complicated picture in which reunions though important is not enough" (42). Proceeding with an open mind, heart, realistic expectations, and no assumptions is the best technique to use when reunifying with biological mother. The adoptees within "New Territory" claim that, "most of them mention fantasies about their birth parents. In the passage from Hipchen she

quotes she thinks that her “imagined mother” would welcome her as a part of her body she’s been missing all these years” (40). It is also important that these authors all recognize that contrary to the suggestion that the reunion is simply healing, every writer finds it hard to integrate the birth parents into their life. Some of the difficulties they encountered were secrecy from the birth mother, the difficulty of the adoptee’s reaction to expression of intimacy that they find seem premature or inappropriate, and birth mothers who hurt the adoptee. Meeting the birth mother can shape and drastically change the adoptee’s worldview.

There is a sense of and desire for healing that makes reunification desirable. For the adoptee, meeting the birth mother may assist in filling the emptiness and sense of rejection that adoptees struggle with once they learn of their adoption status. Reunification is appealing because it provides the adoptee possible answers to assist them with their own personal growth as they try to remove unwanted feelings and emotions. Despite the respective roles of the adoption triad members, the triad will forever be linked, and the reunification confirms that sense of identity for all three. The birth mother, the adoptee, and the birth mother should be allowed to feel the flurry of emotions that arise at the time of reunification and these need to be validated. There is no “wrong” or “right” way to continue with the reunification process. However, reunifications should be in adulthood and should be handled delicately. The authors of the short stories place emphasis on their constructed family and highlight that the adoptee must stay in control when making choices in each of their situations.

Adoption relationships are ever evolving, and understanding the totality of the adoptive experience may be a lifelong journey. It has been established that true reality of adoption is not like in the movies, TV shows, or memoirs, and because of this it has altered the perception of what adoption is and what reunification is. Education seems to be the most important tool to equip the triad members as they prepare for the new phase of life following reunification. Education provides appropriate insight and knowledge. The insight and understanding of one's experience is what facilitates the healing process and provides each member of the triad the opportunity for personal growth and eventually empowerment.

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