EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF ADOPTEES WHO HAVE NOT
SEARCHED FOR THEIR BIRTH RELATIVES

by

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of adult adoptees who have not searched for their biological relatives. The purpose of this study was to hear about the lived experiences of adoptees who have not searched and to explore the patterns and themes that arise through hearing these experiences. This study attempted to gain conceptual understanding of the relationship between adoptees' experiences in their adoptive families and communities and the decision not to search for birth relatives. This was an exploratory, qualitative study in which six adult women adoptees were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The interviews were approximately forty-five minutes to one and a half hours long. The transcribed interview data was analyzed using the constant comparative method. Through exploring the experiences of adoptees who have not actively searched for their biological relatives (and whose experiences have not generally been voiced in the literature), this study provided further insight into the diversity of adoption experiences and has direct implication for adoption policy and practice with all members of the adoption system.
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Introduction

The Research Focus

The focus of this research was to explore the issue of searching for one's biological relatives in adult adoptees, and, in particular, this project focused on the experiences of adoptees who have not searched. This exploratory study specifically looked at adopted persons' experiences within their adoptive family and community in order to determine if various themes and patterns arose out of these experiences. This project was limited to adoptees who were adopted as infants (i.e., adopted at eighteen months of age or younger). There is some consensus around the fact that adoptees who spent extended periods of time in foster homes prior to their adoption have different experiences than adoptees who were adopted at birth or at a young age (Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Groze, 1992; Smith & Sherwen, 1988).

The primary research question in this study was: "What are the experiences of adopted persons who have not searched for their biological relatives?" Some of the sub-questions for this research were as follows: (a) How does an adoptee experience being adopted? What does "being adopted" mean to a particular adoptee? (e.g., Does an adoptee feel that she belong within her family?); (b) What are an adoptee's thoughts, feeling and ideas about searching? (e.g., Does an adoptee have specific reasons for not searching?; Does an adoptee feel pressure to search or not to search?); (c) How does an adoptee describe her adoptive family life and experience? (e.g., What is the make-up of the adoptive family?; Does the adoptee have siblings?; What type of relationships does the adoptee have with family members?); (d) How was adoption regarded in an adoptee's immediate and extended family? What type of family environment did an adoptee grow up in?
Why is this Research Important?

There have been an abundance of studies looking at the experiences of adoptees who search for their biological relatives (e.g., Anderson, 1989; Auth & Zaret, 1986; Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Reitz & Watson, 1992; Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). However, very little research has been devoted to understanding the experiences of the large majority of adoptees who have not searched for their biological relatives (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989). According to Marg Harrington, Registrar at the British Columbia Adoption Reunion Registry, the estimated number of adopted persons in B.C. ranges from 35,000 to 50,000. Approximately 6,000 to 7,000 adoptees have registered with this agency to pursue a search for a birth relative (M. Harrington, personal communication, November 14, 1995). These numbers do not include the adoptees who may pursue a search through other means (e.g., privately, through non-governmental agencies). However, the numbers still do reflect the fact that a large number (a majority) of adoptees in British Columbia are not pursuing a search.

In the few studies that have looked at the differences between adoptees who search and those who do not search (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983), some significant differences have been found. Keeping in mind that these are findings from only a few, limited studies, non-searching adult adoptees have been found to have higher self-esteem, less identity conflicts and to be more comfortable with their adoptive status than searching adoptees. Also, when questioned about motives for searching, some adoptees are quite critical of their adoptive parents and adoptive home life (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989; Kowel & Schilling, 1985).

For these reasons alone, it seems quite essential to explore the experiences of both searching and non-searching adoptees in an attempt to determine if there are experiences or themes that are unique to either group of adoptees. If some
common themes do emerge through listening to the stories of adoptees who do not search, the commonly held assumption that adoptees "need" to search may come under question.

Questioning the prevalent assumptions could in turn affect practice with adoptees in that social workers working in the adoption field would have access to a broader view of the adoptee experience, beyond the view that is portrayed in the literature. Further research could also provide alternative explanations to the assumption that adoptees, because of their adoptive status, are at risk for various psychological difficulties (Kowel & Schilling, 1985) and that adoptees are "incomplete" until they unite with their biological relatives (Reitz & Watson, 1992; Triseliotis, 1973).

Exploring the stories and experiences of adoptees who do not search could also turn out to be very relevant to practice with adoptees who are in the decision-making process about whether or not to search and whether or not they are ready to search. Through hearing about the experiences of adoptees who do search and also about the experiences of those who do not, persons working in the adoption field may be better prepared to present various options to the adoptee involved in the search decision-making process.

Also, the information gleamed from hearing the experiences of adoptees who have not searched could be useful in providing support to adoptive parents in both pre- and post-adoption services. For example, in a supportive and educational format, new and prospective adoptive parents could be sensitized to the specific issues and potential difficulties associated with the adoption process, incorporating information about the diverse experiences of adoptees. This would, of course, also involve informing prospective adoptive parents about the healthy aspects and benefits of an adoption arrangement (see Portello, 1993).
Exploring the experiences of all types of adoptees is important not only in terms of how the social work field comprehends adoption and search issues but also in terms of how such information can impact social policy (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Sachdev, 1983). In terms of British Columbia's adoption policy, very specific changes will likely occur within the next year. A new Adoption Act has been passed and is expected to be proclaimed in 1996 (M. Harrington, personal communication, November 14, 1995). The changes proposed in the new Adoption Act will have an impact on the process of searching and specifically, on the issue of confidentiality of adoption records.

The issue of confidentiality has mainly been considered from the perspective of the birth parents. However, we must also consider the impact of these changes on adoptees and in particular, on adoptees who may not want to "be found" by their birth relatives. There seems to be an understanding as to why a birth mother may not want to be contacted (e.g., she may have kept her pregnancy a secret from her family and may not be willing to open a "closed chapter" in her life). However, through hearing the experiences of non-searching adoptees who may also choose not to be found, a better understanding of the implications of the British Columbia adoption policy changes on practice may emerge.

As social workers, we can learn from non-searching adoptees as well as continue learning from adoptees who do search. Such information on diverse adoptive experiences and perspectives would be invaluable in counselling and intervention contexts with all members of the adoption system. It is also critical to attempt to understand the particular familial, cultural and societal system within which the adoption and the decision to search or not search takes place. This study aimed to provide further understanding of the adoptive experience by exploring a perspective that is generally missing from the literature -- the perspective of adoptees who have not searched for their biological relatives.
My Position as the Researcher in this Project

I would like to briefly speak to my role as the researcher and interviewer in this project. It is important to point out at the outset that I do have my own perspectives and experiences on this research topic given that I am an adult adoptee who has not searched for my birth relatives. While I have worked in a professional context with adoptees who have searched, personally I have not felt the need to search for my own relatives. I recognize that some of my own assumptions influenced this research. For instance, I do have some ideas about why an adoptee may choose not to search for her birth relatives. These ideas are based, in part, on my own experiences and did impact this research project directly in that some of the open-ended questions that I touched on in the interviews reflect these ideas (e.g., inquiring into an adoptee's experiences in her adoptive family).

I felt that it was important to let the adoptees who participated in this research project know what my "lens" is with regard to adoption. That is, I conveyed to the adoptees in this study that I am adopted and that I have chosen, at this point in my life, not to search. Given that the literature on adoption tends to focus primarily on adoptees who search and on what their experiences have been, I communicated to each participant my assumption that it is valuable to hear from adoptees with other experiences. By pursuing this research project, I let the participants know that I believe that this is an issue worth exploring and hope that this in turn validated their experiences.

The format of this paper will be as follows: In Chapter one, the Literature Review, I present an overview of the literature and research on adoption and on searching. This chapter includes a review of the prevalent assumptions in the adoption literature as well as a look at theoretical perspectives which may be appropriate for framing the adoption search experience. In Chapter two, I discuss, in detail, the methodology used in this study. The findings from this study,
incorporating extensive direct quotations from the participants, are presented in Chapter three. Chapter four, Discussion and Implications, includes a brief summary of some of the main points that emerged from this project as well as a discussion of the implications of this project for social work practice, policy and research. At the end of Chapter four, I also discuss the limitations of this study.
Chapter I

Literature Review

Assumptions about Adoption and about Adoptees Prevalent in the Literature

Traditionally, adoption has been regarded as a process that places persons "at risk" for a wide range of general adjustment and identity difficulties (Kowel & Schilling, 1985; Melina, 1986; Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsey, Steir & Waters, 1985; Winkler, Brown, van Keppel, & Blanchard, 1988). It has been argued that all adoptees face particular challenges that must be mastered in order to reach a point of emotional maturity and identity consolation (separate and distinct from the typical challenges that all individuals must face). Adoptees have also been considered to be denied the resources and opportunities that persons who are not adopted have to use for the resolution of certain life challenges (Partridge, 1991).

The term "adoptee syndrome" has been used to describe the cluster of symptoms said to characterize adoptees (Partridge, 1991). Kirk maintains that adoption always implies a certain degree of "role handicap" (1964). Adoptees and their families have often been characterized in the mental health literature as being more vulnerable to psychological difficulties (Kral, Schaffer, & deShazer, 1989). It is quite common to read about the "fact" that adoptees, by virtue of being "transferred" to an adoptive family, are especially susceptible to a wide assortment of problems (Bartholet, 1993).

The emphasis in the adoption literature is often on the problems associated with the adoption process and with the adoptive family system. For example, the focus is frequently on the fact that the adopted person was "given up" or relinquished and thus was unwanted (Bartholet, 1993; Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991; Small, 1987). This view is based, in part, on societal notions of motherhood, parenting and family and on the importance of biological kinship (Hartman & Laird, 1990; Miall, 1987; Reitz & Watson, 1992). North American society generally gives priority to biological
parenting leaving parenting through other means, such as adoption, holding an inferior status (Andrews, 1979; Bartholet, 1993).

In this review, I am not attempting to deny that the adoption process does have some unique elements or to deny that there have been certain problems associated with the traditional adoption process (e.g., Hartman, 1984). However, the perspective in this review is that "unique" does not necessarily imply "deficient." It is important to recognize that the image of adoptees presented in the literature is actually based on a small and biased representation of the population of adopted persons. Adoptees and their families generally only become visible when problems occur or when an adoptee pursues a search (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989; Kowel & Schilling, 1985; Schaffer & Kral, 1988; Smith & Sherwen, 1988). Thus, in general, the literature tends to omit the fact that there are many different subgroups in the adoptee population (Bartholet, 1993; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983).

Assumption about the Need to Search
Adopted persons are vulnerable simply because they cannot recount with confidence their own full life history (Taimes & Timms, 1985, p.63)

In terms of the process of adoptees' search and reunion with biological relatives, most of the literature has focused on the "need" to search and on the identity conflicts that are resolved through searching (Auth & Zaret, 1986; Bradbury & Marsh, 1988; Rosenberg, 1992; Sachdev, 1992; Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). As illustrated in the above quote, the literature tends to hold a relatively consistent perspective: That adoptees' lives are not complete until they connect with their biological past. Some authors have pointed out that adoptees are not truly born or truly bonded until they have established connections with their geneology (Reitz & Watson, 1992) and that knowledge of one's biological origins is essential for mental
This perspective is articulated in research as well as in popular articles and books (e.g., Lifton, 1979, 1994).

Why do some adoptees search? An entire thesis could be written solely on this topic. For the purpose of this thesis, a brief review of some of the themes that have emerged in the literature will have to suffice. Some adoptees have articulated that their decision to search reflects an effort to overcome their sense of alienation and loneliness (Winkler et al., 1988). Adoptees have spoken of the necessity of filling a void in their lives (Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988). Other adoptees have spoken of their search being motivated by the need to better understand themselves or to achieve a sense of belonging. Some search to attain medical information or simply out of curiosity (Gladstone & Westhues, 1992; Kowel & Schilling, 1985; Modell, 1994; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Sachdev, 1983).

Adoptees have also expressed the need to know why they were abandoned, the need to gain a sense of genetic continuity and the need to bring together disparate pieces of their background in order to feel whole. It has been argued that adoptees' need to search reflects the pressure to resolve feelings of early loss (Anderson, 1986; Reitz & Watson, 1992). Thus, within the adoption literature, search is often considered to be an essential developmental task and growth experience (Auth & Zaret, 1986).

Studies on adoptees who re-unite with their biological relatives emphasize the immense psychological benefits of such reunions -- the adoptee feeling that, because of this connection, her life has stabilized and has become calmer. These effects are likely very accurate; studies have demonstrated such positive outcomes of reunion quite consistently (at least in the short term) (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). It is essential to acknowledge and understand these outcomes.

However, what about the adoptees who have not searched? In their study of adoptees' attitudes towards adoption, Aumend and Barrett (1984) found that
searching and non-searching adoptees are quite different groups in terms of self-concept and overall satisfaction with adoptive experiences. The sample in their study was drawn from search groups and adoption agencies and, even with the difficulties inherent in contacting non-searchers, the researchers were able to contact 47 non-searching adoptees and 66 adoptees who described themselves as searchers.

The Aumend and Barrett study (1984) concluded that research on searching adult adoptees should not be applied to non-searching adoptees and likewise, research on non-searching adoptees should not be generalized to all adoptees. While searching may be critical for some adoptees, a large percentage of adoptees are going "unnoticed" with reference to the search issue (and understandably so, as they are not searching!). While the search process and outcome may be very important to some adoptees, persons working in the field of adoption also need to validate the experiences and choices of those who have not pursued a search.

The research demonstrating the positive search outcomes may assist, to some extent, in understanding the motives and perspectives of those adoptees who have not searched. However, without thorough exploration of the experiences of those adoptees who have not searched, a complete and accurate picture of the adoption experience and the search situation is not really possible. It is possible that, for some adoptees "ignorance of one's forbearers is completely compatible with security about one's self" (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989, p.302).

Themes in the Adoption Literature

There seem to be particular themes that have emerged from the extensive literature on adoptees' reasons for searching (e.g., Anderson, 1989; Auth & Zaret, 1986; Bertoci & Schechter, 1991; Reitz & Watson, 1992). While these themes have arisen primarily from studies of searching adoptees, they may also be useful in
providing a framework for understanding the experiences of adoptees who have not searched. Three of these themes -- adoptive family relationships, the meaning of adoption for adoptees, and the issue of belonging for adoptees -- were specifically approached in this research project.

These themes are not necessarily isolated. That is, these themes are related and likely relate to other themes in the adoption literature. For example, it is possible that for a particular adoptee, feelings of belonging within her adoptive family directly relate to her adoptive family relationships as well as to her idea of what "being adopted" means. By exploring each of these themes, a more cohesive picture of the adoptee experience may emerge.

It has not been uncommon for researchers to look at adoptees' adoptive family relationships when examining reasons for searching (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Kowel & Schilling, 1985; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1975; Triseliotis, 1973). For example, Sobol and Cardiff (1983) found that adoptees who had negative relationships with their adoptive parents were more likely to pursue a search. Others have found that some adoptees who search are quite critical of their adoptive parents, while other searching adoptees are not. For instance, in contrast to Sobol and Cardiff's (1983) findings, Sorosky et al. (1975) interviewed adoptees who had experienced reunions with birth parents and found that poor adoptee/adoptive parent relationships were not related to searching.

Perhaps, to some extent, these differences in findings reflect differences in sampling methods. For example, Sobol and Cardiff (1983) contacted adoptees through placing advertisements in newspapers and thus were able to reach both searching and non-searching adoptees. Most studies, however, rely on only adoptees who are involved with search agencies and thus are typically searching adoptees (or reunited adoptees, as in the Sorosky et al. study). There are also
divergent ways of inquiring into adoptees' satisfaction of adoptive home life, for example, asking about childhood relationships with adoptive parents, or asking about current family relationships. Even considering the variability in methodology, in general, there still appears to be some consensus that overall quality of adoptive family relationships impacts adoption experiences and search issues (Groze, 1992; Triseliotis, 1973).

Given that the adoptive family relationship is likely to influence, at least to some extent, an adoptee's choice around searching, it may be useful to inquire into more details surrounding an adoptee's home environment. This could involve exploring the types of attitudes that were evident in the adoptive home regarding adoption and the significance of biological ties (Hartman & Laird, 1990; Miall, 1987). For example, did the adoptee grow up in a home environment that emphasized being able to change, to learn and to grow, or was the fact that the adoptee had different genes and therefore potentially different capabilities emphasized perhaps more often than not? (see Kaye, 1990, for a discussion of rejection or acceptance of differences in adoptive families).

A related issue would be to look at the adoptive family structure and how the make-up of a particular adoptive family may influence an adoptee's choice to search (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992). For example, did an adoptee grow up in a family with other adoptive siblings? Was the adoptee close to these siblings? Were any members of an adoptee's extended family also adopted (e.g., cousins)? These are some of the questions that were explored in this research project.

Another theme that has been touched on in the current adoption literature is the question of what "being adopted" means to a particular adoptee. For example, Beauchesne (1992) in her dissertation research looks at alternative perspectives and understandings of adoption as perceived by adoptees. As discussed earlier in this review, societal notions of adoption and of "being adopted" are often not overly
positive (e.g., Andrews, 1979; Bartholet, 1993; Partridge, 1991). When adoptees share the fact of their adoptive status with others, it has not been uncommon for the reaction to be sympathy (e.g., "I'm so sorry to hear that") (Bartholet, 1993). However, it is possible that, depending on a particular adoptee's experience, her idea of "being adopted" may actually be quite positive. Thus, the present research project explored adoptees' ideas about adoption and on what "being adopted" means to them.

A third theme that has been prevalent in the adoption literature is the issue of "belongingness" (or lack thereof) in adoptees. Adoptees' sense of belonging and connection within the adoptive family has come under question from a variety of sources (Kowel & Schilling, 1985; Partridge, 1991; Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). In their research, Kowel and Schilling (1985) found that some adoptees spoke of needing a sense of belonging as the primarily reason for their search. Adoptees who search for their biological relative have mentioned feeling as though they never quite belong (Anderson, 1989) and have also spoken of feeling like a permanent outsider (Partridge, 1991).

Perhaps a critical feature in adoptive relationships that leads an adoptee to feel that she truly belongs is a broad recognition of kinship. That is, a recognition on the part of the adoptee as well as on the part of the adoptive family that kinship is not strictly based on biological ties (Modell, 1994; Ward, 1981). Some adoptees have expressed feelings of being disconnected from their adoptive family, while other adoptees have articulated that they do feel that they belong within and connect with their adoptive family (Smith & Sherwen, 1988). Given that "a strong sense of self may be inseparable from a sense of belonging" (Groze, 1992, p.173), it seemed valuable to explore these experiences and feelings of belonging in more detail.
Placing the Search Issue within a Theoretical Context

Given the lack of literature and research on the experiences of adoptees who have not searched, it is difficult to place the issue of "not searching" within a particular framework or theoretical context. However, there are theoretical approaches within the social work literature that may be relevant to the topic of adoption in general and to the issue of searching more specifically (e.g., Bradbury & Marsh, 1988; Groze, 1992; Hartman, 1984; Johnson & Fein, 1991). It may be useful to briefly look at some of these approaches as they could provide some insight into the issue of searching in adoptees. The theoretical perspectives that will be touched on here are Attachment theory, Family Systems theory and Self-in-Relation theory.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory focuses on the importance of early child/caregiver relations and on how these relations influence a child's sense of security, identity and development (Ainsworth, 1991; Bowlby, 1982). However, Attachment theory has not been applied to the issue of searching in adoptees and therefore, there is not a body of literature that directly explores the role of attachment in an adoptee's decision to search. In order to determine whether Attachment theory can provide a suitable framework for understanding the adoptee search phenomenon, Attachment theory will be briefly reviewed and a "hypothesized" application of this theory to adoption and the issue of searching will be presented.

Attachment theory has been regarded as an important theoretical bridge between early childhood development and social work practice (McMillen, 1992) and thus may be a useful starting point for understanding the experience of adoptees. At the heart of Attachment theory is the idea that infants are predestined to relate to others from birth and that relationships with primary others are paramount in shaping psychological and social development (Schneider, 1991). Attachment relationships...
in infancy are believed to have long-term consequences for the psychological and relational functioning of a child (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990).

Bowlby (1982) articulated the magnitude of the role of attachment in understanding behavior: "Attachment behavior (characterizes) human beings from the cradle to the grave" (p.129). Bowlby referred to the complex constellation of attachment feelings and behaviors as the "attachment system" and argued that this system "evolved" to protect infants from danger by keeping them in close contact with their mothers. The three defining features of the attachment relationships are proximity maintenance (i.e., proximity-seeking and separation-protest from the caregiver), safe haven (i.e., in the case of threat or fear, the infant retreats to the caregiver for comfort and support) and secure base (i.e., the infant feels safe in exploring the environment when the caregiver is nearby) (Bowlby, 1982).

Through continued interaction with the primary caregiver, the infant constructs internal mental models or "working models" which contain beliefs and expectations about whether the caregiver is someone who is responsive (Collins & Read, 1990). The expectations incorporated into these working models are believed to be the most important sense of continuity between early and later feelings and behaviors in relationships. Working models serve to guide an individual in their appraisal of experiences and their choices of behaviors (Schneider, 1991). Thus "through the attachment relationship, the child develops a sense of security and expectations about others which form the basis for subsequent social relationships and conceptions of self" (Johnson & Fein, 1991, p.406).

The defining features and processes of attachment are believed to involve the same sequence at any point in the life cycle: Proximity seeking, followed by safe haven behaviour, followed by the establishment of a secure base (Hazan & Shaver, in press). According to Bowlby, "human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing behind
them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise" (1973, p.103).

Attachment theory and adoption have certain basic elements in common such as the focus on losses and separations. Most of the literature on adoption tends to emphasize the fact that adoption is inherently structured out of loss, such as the biological mother's loss of a child, the child's loss of a biological mother and the adoptive parents' losses associated with infertility (Bertocci & Schechter, 1990; Small, 1987).

In terms of the application of Attachment theory to adoption, it has been argued that adoption presents notable challenges to the attachment process, challenges such as the breaking of bonds between the infant and biological mother and the development of new attachments between the infant and the adoptive mother (Portello, 1993; Rosenberg, 1992). Secure attachments in adoptive families may be undermined by the complications inherent in the transition to adoptive parenting (Singer et al., 1985).

However, according to the adoption research, there are few reasons why an adoptive mother (typically the primary caregiver) could not fit the model of attachment as presented by Bowlby. In terms of whether adopted children do form healthy attachments to their adoptive mothers, the research has shown that attachments can very easily occur in adoptive families and can be just as strong and viable as attachment in biological families when children are adopted at very young ages (Johnson & Fein, 1991; Melina, 1986; Rosenberg, 1992; Singer et al., 1985; Smith & Sherwen, 1988).

How does Attachment theory explain the issue of adoptees' searching (or not searching) for biological relatives? Unfortunately, while there is an abundance of literature on the reasons why adoptees search and also a substantial literature on the process of attachment in adoptive families (e.g., Johnson & Fein, 1991; Melina,
1986; Watson, 1988), the connection between these two topics has yet to be broached. As an initial step towards this goal, a few "hypothesized connections" will be made here.

According to Attachment theory, the features of attachment involve the same sequence at any point in time: Proximity seeking followed by safe haven behavior followed by the establishment of a secure base (Hazan & Shaver, in press). Perhaps, for some searching adoptees, pursing a search is, in some sense, an attempt at proximity seeking to their biological mother (or other biological relative) with the goal of establishing a secure base. That is, given that adoptees who search have referred to hoping to fill a void (Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988) and speak of wanting to establish a biological connection (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990), perhaps searching can be regarded as a form of adult attachment behavior.

Given that some adoptees who search have rather distant relationships with their adoptive parents (e.g., Aumend & Barrett, 1984), perhaps the decision to search relates to an adoptee's working model that developed through interaction with adoptive parents. Instead of feeling secure and cared for within one's adoptive family and, in turn, developing a sense of safety (i.e., feeling that one has a safe haven and secure base), a searching adoptee may have developed a working model that contains feelings of insecurity and disconnection from the adoptive family. The adoptee may search in an attempt to find a "true" secure base with the biological family. This may be especially fitting for adoptees who search for a sense of belonging (Kowel & Schilling, 1985). Thus, an adoptee's working model of self and other may impact the decision to search (Schneider, 1991).

For some adoptees, having a secure base in their adoptive families may in fact allow them to feel more able to search. Adoptive parents have been shown to play a formative role in encouraging or discouraging questioning about biological origins (Feligman & Silverman, 1983). Thus, some searching adoptees may be
more able to explore their biological roots given the secure base that their adoptive parents have provided and continue to provide.

For some non-searching adoptees, experiences of attachment within their adoptive family may permit them to feel secure ("secure base") and safe ("safe haven") without needing to find their biological roots. Given what has been shown in the research, it may be that working models of self for non-searching adoptees are generally positive, that is, high in self-esteem, with less conflict around identity issues and with more sense of belonging within the adoptive family. Perhaps the early adoptive family attachment experiences of these non-searching adoptees were in some ways different than the early experiences of some adoptees who do search.

It is important to emphasize that searching may very well be a "normal" growth experience for some adoptees. It is very likely that some searching adoptees may in fact have had (and continue to have) very positive experiences in their adoptive families and may feel very attached to their adoptive parents. Similarly, it is likely that not all non-searching adoptees feel secure within their adoptive families. An adoptee's reasons for searching (or not searching) may be based on very different concerns than the adoptive family relationships.

While at this point still speculative and not yet supported by research, Attachment theory concepts such as proximity seeking, secure base, safe haven and working models may actually provide some insight into the factors that influence the adoption experience and the decision to search or not search. It may also be useful to examine other theoretical perspectives and to explore how these perspective could "speak to" the issue of searching in ways that differ from Attachment theory. Family Systems theory and Self-in-Relation theory will be briefly considered.
Family Systems theory

According to Family Systems theory, an individual exists as part of a larger ecological system that includes a genetic system, a nuclear family, an extended family and the social and environmental systems surrounding the individual. Family Systems theory is founded on the assumption that family relationships are central in an individual's life and that one can best understand psychosocial problems by viewing them in the context of the family as a resource for change (Bradbury & Marsh, 1988).

In terms of how Family Systems theory applies to adoption, the adoptive family relationship is not seen as signaling the absolute end of one family and the beginning of another. Rather, adoption expands the family boundaries of all those involved (Reitz & Watson, 1992). While adoptees become part of their immediate adoptive family system, they continue to be part of other family systems. Thus, adoption is a family restructuring process (Hartman, 1984).

In terms of why adoptees search, a Family Systems approach would likely argue that the pressure to search comes from unresolved feelings of earlier loss (similar to an Attachment theory approach). According to a Family Systems perspective, "an adoptee's request for help with search and reunion issues represents a healthy response to a pathological situation, not a pathological response to a healthy situation" (Reitz & Watson, 1992, p.242-43). The issue of searching is actually seen as very congruent with family-of-origin work, which is central to Family Systems theory, with the goal of searching being to connect with "disconnected" family members (Hartman, 1984). A Family Systems approach therefore tends to emphasize adoptees' need to search in terms of resolving identity conflicts. What does this say about adoptees who do not search?

Family Systems theory tends to assume that adoptees need to know their biological and adoptive family links and that adoptees are not "whole" until they are
reconnected with their entire family (Bradbury & Marsh, 1988). Unless we assume that adoptees who have not searched (and who do not wish to search) are "in denial" about their need to connect with their biological relatives, a Family Systems approach may not sufficiently explain the experiences of the majority of adoptees who have not searched. Some adoptees who have not searched may in fact be quite content with their adoptive family (Aumend & Barrett, 1984) and may not have this "need" to connect with their biological family of origin. Perhaps, for some adoptees, the adoptive family is viewed as the family of origin, regardless of the family's "biological unrelatedness".

It seems as though the experiences of non-searching adoptees may not be validated (or even acknowledged) in a Family Systems approach. Keeping in mind this limitation, there are some unique components in a Family Systems approach that appear to be missing from an Attachment approach. For example, Attachment theory focuses on the relationship of a child with a primary caregiver, typically the mother (Bowlby, 1982; Johnson & Fein, 1991). The child's relationship with the family is generally not considered, perhaps placing an inappropriate amount of emphasis on the "success" of the mother/child attachment (Birns, 1985).

Family Systems theory, however, focuses on the family as a whole. The emphasis is on the role of the entire family and on how one member of the particular family system influences all other members of the system (Reitz & Watson, 1992). This approach also looks at the family structure and at how family processes affect the individuals within the family. In terms of the issue of searching, Family Systems theory may draw attention to the potential influence of the adoptive family structure on an adoptee's feelings of identity and security as well as on an adoptee's decision to search. As shown in the literature, family structure may impact an adoptee's experience and decision around searching (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991).
A Family Systems approach would also likely incorporate an emphasis on family patterns in adoptive relationships. This may involve exploring the view of kinship held in the adoptive family, for example, does the family accept the adopted child as "true" kin? Whether or not an adoptive family has a broad recognition of kinship is also believed to impact the adoptee experience and the issue of searching (Ward, 1981).

**Self-in-Relation theory**

Self-in-Relation theory has, at this point in time, not been applied to the issue of searching or to the topic of adoption in general. However, given that the topic of "non-searching" is still quite speculative, this theory is briefly mentioned here because, while it does have some elements in common with Attachment theory, I believe that it could provide a different, less traditional perspective on the question of why some adoptees search while others do not. Given that the majority of searching adoptees are women (Lichtenstein, 1996) and that the participants in this research project were all women, I thought it would be useful to include at least a brief review of this theory of women's development.

Self-in-Relation theory is a theory of women's development based on the central issue of connection and the importance of connections for women's self-definition (Berzoff, 1989; Peck, 1986; Surrey, 1991). A main theme in Self-in-Relation theory is that a woman's sense of self is organized around being able to make and maintain relationships (Miller, 1988; Surrey, 1991). While Attachment theory tends to imply a one-way process (i.e., the child "attaches to" the caregiver), Self-in-Relation theory focuses on the mutuality of connections and on the establishment of relationships between individuals. This focus has implications for adoption given that adoption is not a one-way process. Adoption typically involves many different types of mutual connections and relationships.
Self-in-Relation theory is different from most of the prevalent, male-based developmental theories (i.e., such as Erikson's developmental theory) which emphasize and value separation and individuation as ideals in society. In terms of the prevalent themes in the traditional developmental literature, the primary task of adolescence is the consolidation of an autonomous identity, achieved through the process of disconnecting from others, especially from one's primary caregiver. Another theme in the traditional developmental literature is the goal of establishing a "firmly bounded self" (Kaplan, Gleason, & Klein, 1991). In contrast, Self-in-Relation theory takes an important shift from this emphasis on separation in relationships as the basis for healthy development.

Because in our society, the maternal relationship is generally regarded as the preeminent relationship, a main theme in Self-in-Relation theory is the importance of this relationship. The maternal/child relationship is believed to set the stage for later development and connectedness in other important relationships (Calloni & Handal, 1992; Matheson, 1992). A central premise of this theme is that, while typically young children are very connected to their primary caregiver (and in our society, this is usually their mother), only young girls continue to develop their "selves-in-relation" primarily because of cultural emphases on what is suitable and acceptable for young girls and young boys (Matheson, 1992).

Young girls are often encouraged to connect with and to be like their mothers. As a result of this connection, a woman's sense of self tends to become organized around being able to make and maintain relationships (Miller, 1988; Surrey, 1991). Young boys, on the other hand, are typically not encouraged to connect with or to be like their mothers and are, in fact, often blatantly discouraged from maintaining such connections. In terms of the issue of searching in adoptees and the impact of significant connections and relationships on an adoptee's life, Self-in-Relation theory
may in fact "predict" and help to explain differences in patterns of searching for men and women adoptees.

Another central feature of Self-in-Relation theory is the role of empathy in relationships. According to this view, empathy is the central organizing concept in women's relational experiences. "Mutual empathy" exists when participants in a relationship respond empathically to one another (Miller, 1988). This also involves an appreciation of and sensitivity to the different as well as the similar aspects of another person (Rubenstein & Lawler, 1990).

It has been pointed out that there is positive value in thinking of adoption from the perspective of relatedness (Silverstein & Demick, 1994). Adoption literature in general tends to focus on losses (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Small, 1987) and while losses may be a critical aspect of the adoption experience, an equally critical but less emphasized aspect are the connections made through the adoption process. Thus, while adoption may be structured out of losses, the adoption process is also structured out of important connections. Self-in-Relation theory focuses on such connections. This theoretical approach also makes no reference to the need for these connections to be biologically based (Surrey, 1991).

An approach that specifically draws attention to the role of connections (rather than separations) may offer a unique perspective into the adoption search experience. For example, adoptees who have not searched may experience a different sense of connection to their adoptive families than adoptees who do search (Schechter & Bertocci, 1990). Additionally, some adoptees may not be willing to take any steps which may be perceived as jeopardizing their adoptive family relationships. In fact, differences in an adoptee's feelings of connectedness within the adoptive family are believed to be an important factor in determining whether or not an adoptee chooses to search (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991). Self-in-Relation theory also stresses the need to accept the similar as well as different aspects of
another person, which is a central task in the adoption process. The "success" of this acceptance may also impact the issue of searching.

As was mentioned earlier, the theoretical perspectives discussed above are incorporated into this thesis as "potential frameworks" and not as guiding theories for this research. These perspective can provide some sense of the context within which the issue of searching could be framed. Elements of Attachment theory, Family Systems theory and Self-in-Relation theory will be referred to again, as appropriate, in the Discussion and Implications chapter of this thesis.
Chapter II
Method

In order to learn about the experiences of adoptees who have not searched for their birth relatives, I approached six adopted women and asked them to share their experiences with me. This research study was an attempt to understand a particular phenomenon -- not searching for one's biological relatives -- about which little is known. Given that the aim was to identify relevant themes and patterns that have yet to be identified in the literature, an exploratory, qualitative study, using a semi-structured interview, was deemed to be most suitable (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). A qualitative study seeks to explore the knowledge and experiences of the individuals involved and allows for a richness and a depth not possible with quantitative research. A qualitative research design was also considered appropriate as this study "searches for a deeper understanding of the participant's lived experience" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p.39).

Selection of Participants

Six adopted women were interviewed for this study. The women were all between the ages of 25 and 40 years old and living in British Columbia. The women were all adopted as infants (one woman was adopted at thirteen months of age; all the other women were adopted between the ages of five days old and three months old). All the women in this study were adopted through Canadian adoptions. One woman was adopted in Nova Scotia, another woman in Quebec, another in Alberta and the remaining three women were adopted in British Columbia.

Given that the main criteria for sampling was that the participant be an adoptee who has not searched for her biological relatives, all six women have not pursued an active search for their birth relatives at this point in time. Of the six
women, two have received non-identifying information (including medical information) from the province in which they were adopted.

One woman who participated in this project has recently placed her name on a passive registry (however, she does not consider herself to be a "searching" adoptee and thus was still considered appropriate for this study). Adoptees can register on a passive registry in most Canadian provinces, to request contact with birth relatives. When a birth relative and an adoptee have both applied to this registry and are "matched", a reunion can occur. The sample in this study was also limited to adoptees who have not been "searched for" and had a reunion with a birth relative. None of the women in this study have been searched for by a birth relative.

While this sample was not meant to be limited on the basis of gender, it was actually quite difficult to recruit participants who fit the non-searching criteria. While three men did originally express interest in being interviewed, when it came to setting up the interviews, coordinating and meeting turned out to be impossible. While recognizing the limitation of not including men in this study, I decided that the six interviews that I had with women would suffice for this exploratory project.

Thus, in part, rationale for this sample took into account the issue of practicality, including what was viable for myself, as the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This sample was not limited on the basis of ethnic or cultural background. Five of the women in this study are white/Caucasian and one woman is of First Nations heritage (raised in a "white" home). Since the stories of adoptees who have not searched for their biological relatives have not generally been voiced in the literature, and given the preliminary and exploratory nature of this work, an aim of this study was to keep the sample of adoptees in this research project as "open" and diverse as possible.

The number of participants chosen for this study was determined in part by my own energy and time restrictions, as the researcher and interviewer, as well as
on the availability of non-searching adoptees who were willing to be interviewed. The sample size, the choice of using a semi-structured interview technique and the decision to not limit the sample on the basis of ethnic or cultural background reflected my goal of attaining a certain degree of breadth of information (by hearing the experiences of several adoptees) while allowing for more depth than would be allowed for if I had used a more structured interview or questionnaire method.

Contacting the Participants

A variety of methods were used to contact the participants. This study was advertised in the Adoptive Parents Association Newsletter and copies of this advertisement were also sent to various adoption-related agencies in the Lower Mainland, including Hope Adoption Services and the Adoption Reunion Registry.

Given that adoptees who have not searched are not readily identifiable as they are not generally associated with a particular agency, the snowball method of sampling and word-of-mouth was also used to reach participants. Snowball sampling is considered appropriate when members of a specific group or population are difficult to find (Rubin & Babbie, 1989). I spoke to friends and colleagues about any adopted persons they might know of who might be interested in the study; they, in turn, asked the possible participant if it would be all right for me to contact her by telephone. As it turned out, all of the women who participated in this project were "friends of acquaintances" of mine and thus were reached through word of mouth.

Data Collection

The method of data collection in this study was an in-depth interview. My rationale for using such a technique (as opposed to a questionnaire or survey method for gathering data) was based on the exploratory nature of my research question. Given that the aim of the study was to attempt to understand individuals' adoption experiences, a semi-structured interview using an interview guide, seemed
the most fitting method of data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). According to Patton (1990), an interview guide typically "allows individual perspectives and experiences to emerge" (p.283).

Prior to each interview, I spoke with each participant over the telephone to clarify the research purpose and to discuss the proposed format for the interview. At this point, I emphasized to each participant the voluntary nature of this study (i.e., that each participant is under no obligation to participate) and assured each participant that any information they provided would be completely confidential. This initial phone call was also meant to provide an opportunity for the participant to ask any questions or express any concerns about the interview and/or the research.

During this initial contact, I also presented each participant with several options as to where we could hold the interview, for example, the interview could be held in the participant's home or in a location of the participant's choice. I believed that choice regarding interview site was important in terms of attempting to ensure that each participant was as comfortable as possible in the interview as well as to reduce, to some extent, the artificial aspects of the interview experience. At the time of each interview, I again attempted to ensure that the participant was comfortable with the interview process. I answered questions about the research as they arose. Each participant was asked to read and sign a consent form and each interview was audio-taped with the participant's consent.

One in-person, in-depth interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews were between forty-five minutes and one and a half hours long. The length of each interview depended on each participant and on how much or how little each participant wished to share and discuss as well as on the participant's particular situation. For example, in one case, the participant and I met over lunch and she had her four-month old baby with her, so the interview was somewhat shorter and more concise than the other interviews.
I was the only interviewer for this research project and I used an interview guide to provide some structure to the interview process. I felt that a guide allowed for more flexibility within the interview than a more structured interview format. The guide served primarily as a "checkpoint" to ensure that certain topic areas were covered, however the interviews did not follow a strict format. As it turned out, most of the participants spoke to the questions in the guide before the questions were even asked. While there were certain topics that I attempted to touch on in the interview, the participant was considered to be the expert of her experiences and played the central role in deciding what was relevant to share and discuss.

The interview guide consisted of four main question areas. The first question explored what "being adopted" means to the particular adoptee. This involved asking about whether the adoptee recalls feeling safe and secure within her adoptive family, whether the adoptee had (and continues to have) a sense of belonging in her family as well as inquiring into the adoptee's experience of connection in her adoptive family. The second area of questioning dealt with the issue of searching. I inquired into the adoptee's reasons for not searching as well as into any pressures to search or not to search that the adoptee may experience. If the adoptee had obtained non-identifying information, I asked about how the adoptee felt about the information she received.

The third area of questioning explored the adoptee's adoptive family environment. In each of the interviews, the adoptive family was mentioned numerous times. A great deal of detail was provided on the adoptee's growing up experiences, on the structure of the adoptive family, and on the relationships within the adoptive family. The final question in the interview guide asked about the adoptee's extended family and community and included inquiring into the type of extended family and community that the adoptee grew up in as well as exploring the view of adoption and kinship that was held in the extended family.
After completing each interview, I asked each participant for feedback around whether they felt anything had been missing from the interview guide. Such suggestions and comments provided valuable information that I was able to incorporate into later interviews. For example, in the first interview, I did not directly inquire into the experience of learning about adoption, that is, how the adoptee found out about her adoptive status and the importance of this learning experience. After this initial interview, based in part on the participant's feedback, I realized just how important this topic is and in subsequent interviews, made sure to ask about the participants' "learning of adoption" experience (although typically, it came up at the beginning of the interview, without my needing to ask). Thus, while all participants were asked the same general questions, as the interviews progressed, the interview guide evolved to reflect new ideas and topics raised in previous interviews.

I requested each participant's permission to make contact with her over the telephone at a later date if questions arose while I transcribed and analyzed the interviews. This further contact helped to ensure that I would accurately capture the stories and experiences of the participants. I also emphasized to each participant that they could feel free to phone me if anything else came to mind that they wished to share or if they had any questions or concerns about the research or the interview process. I let each adoptee know that I am happy to discuss the research on an ongoing basis.

Following each interview, I sent personalized thank you letters to each participant. Throughout the entire interview process, I kept a journal of my own thoughts, feelings and reactions to this research experience. After gathering the data, the audiotapes were carefully transcribed and edited to remove any identifying information. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Behavioral Sciences Screening Committee for Research and Other Studies Involving Human Subjects, University of British Columbia. The names of the participants have been
Analysis

Given that the aim in this study was to explore and uncover the themes and patterns that emerged out of hearing the experiences of non-searching adoptees, the constant-comparative method of analysis was used (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Tesch, 1990). Due to the lack of literature on this specific research topic, I did not have a particular theoretical framework to serve as a guide in the analysis process.

The process of data analysis began with line by line coding of the first transcribed interview. This first step involved conceptualizing the meaning of each line and giving this meaning a "code" (Miles & Huberman, 1984). After coding the first 10 pages of the first interview transcript, the codes or concepts that related to the same general phenomenon were then listed and grouped hierarchically, with the least abstract codes becoming the "elements" and the most abstract codes, the "categories". This is how the preliminary framework began to develop. The remaining interviews were coded sentence by sentence and then, when appropriate, paragraph by paragraph. The coding process became much easier with practice although I was careful not to force the data into my initial framework. At each point in the analyses process, the elements of the initial framework were constantly being revised to represent what emerged in the data.

I attempted to be as true to the data as possible by using direct quotations from the transcribed interview to support the emerging framework; thus, the framework was directly grounded in the data. Using direct participant quotes also reduced the influence of researcher bias. All the interview were transcribed and analyzed in order to capture the themes and patterns as well as paradoxes and
differences in the data. By transcribing all of the interviews, I attempted to remain true to the experiences of all of the women in this study, rather than focusing on the experiences of only one or two of the participants.
Chapter III
Findings

Given the preliminary and exploratory nature of this research topic, I am hesitant to discuss "categories" that emerged from the interviews with these six women. Instead, I refer to "potential categories" or themes and "potential properties" and focus primarily on the smaller, more concrete "elements" or topics which seemed to emerge from the analyses. This categorizing is intended to help organize and understand the diverse experiences of the women involved in this research. In attempt to protect the identity and respect the privacy of the six women, the participants' real names will not be used. Rather, each woman is referred to by one of the following pseudonyms: Daria, Tracy, Mia, Kerry, Lisa and Kathryn.

Daria is an adopted woman in her mid-twenties. She is married and has no children. She is the only child in her family and was adopted and raised in Eastern Canada, where her adoptive parents still reside. Daria has received medical and non-identifying information about her birth family.

Tracy is one of two adoptees in her family. She has an older brother who is also adopted. Tracy is married and recently celebrated her fortieth birthday. Tracy was adopted in British Columbia as a young infant. Her adoptive mother lives nearby (i.e., in British Columbia); her adoptive father recently passed away.

Mia's heritage is part Native and she was adopted into a "white" home in British Columbia. She was thirteen months old when she was adopted. Mia is in her mid-twenties and is single. She is the only adoptee in her family and has three older brothers (birth children). All Mia's adoptive family members
live in British Columbia. Mia has received medical and non-identifying information about her birth family.

Kerry, who is twenty-six years old, was adopted in Alberta when she was two months old. Kerry has two siblings in her adoptive family: One younger brother who is also adopted and a younger sister who is not adopted. Kerry has recently placed her name on the passive registry in Alberta. Her adoptive family lives in Saskatchewan.

Lisa was adopted in British Columbia as a young infant. She is the only adoptee in her family. She has two older brothers (adoptive parents' birth children). Lisa is in her early thirties, is married and has two young sons (three years old and four months old). Lisa’s adoptive father died six years ago. Her adoptive mother lives in British Columbia.

Kathryn is thirty-three years old and is married and has a three year old daughter. Kathryn was adopted in Quebec and was brought into her adoptive family’s home when she was five days old. She is one of two adopted daughters in her family (Kathryn is the eldest daughter). Kathryn’s adoptive mother, step-father and sister live in Quebec. Her adoptive father died when she was seven years old.

**Being Adopted: What does this mean?**

The first potential category I will refer to is "Being Adopted". Each women spoke at length about what being adopted means to them. This included discussions of what they thought and felt about adoption as well as their own personal experiences as adopted persons. Within this general category, there
seemed to be three smaller sub-categories or potential properties: Experience of adoption, understanding of adoption and learning of adoption.

Experience of Adoption

Each woman described her experience of adoption in detail. The elements which came out of these descriptions are: Feelings of belonging and connection, feeling chosen and special and looking different (the issue of appearances).

The women involved in this project tended to tell their stories of "being adopted" as positive experiences. This involved talking about their feelings of belonging within their adoptive family and several of the women described how they feel connected to their adoptive family. This also involved talking about whether or not they felt different within their family because of their adoptive status. For the most part, the women described their experiences as not being ones that set them apart from their adoptive families.

Daria is very clear about her feelings of belonging and in fact, talks about not really experiencing "being adopted" per se. Her experience reflects her status as the only child within her family.

Well, I think that my experience might be different from others and the feeling of belonging might be different for me because I'm an only child...adopted, so...there's only me so of course I belong...I have to belong, there's just me! So I didn't really experience being adopted; I just experienced being part of my family and never felt any different being adopted (p.1)

Mia describes her experience in a way that is similar to Daria's even though Mia's family structure is quite different, Mia being the only adoptee in a family with three (biological) older siblings. According to Mia, her adoptive family is her family and therefore she always felt and continues to feel that she belongs.

I've never felt dislocated from anything and my family's my family and that I have another family somewhere is...strangers. So that's why I don't feel like I'm missing a whole lot, cause my family's really great (p.1)
Tracy describes her response to others when they ask her what it is like to be adopted. It seems that others may assume that, because Tracy is adopted, she should feel different.

I can remember telling (a friend) at work that I was adopted. He asked me "What's it like being adopted?" and I said "It's not different than you" (p.17)

So for Tracy, being adopted does not imply being different. When asked about whether or not she ever felt disconnected from her family, her response was an adamant "no". Kathryn had a similar response when asked this question.

I've certainly never felt that way (disconnected), ever. It never occurred to me and maybe it's just because I was lucky with the parents I got (p.1)

Kathryn describes how, when her father died, this feeling of connection and belonging did not change.

He'd (adoptive father) been sick and in and out of hospital for five years anyway so I didn't feel a great loss there. So it wasn't like "Oh, I don't belong anymore because I've lost one of the two people who chose to choose me". I still felt like I had mommy, so I still had that belonging and still had, I was still like her (p.1&2).

Kerry's experience of belonging and connection within her family is somewhat unique in that Kerry always felt quite different from her family, even as a young child. However, her attribution for this feeling of difference is not related to her adoptive status.

As I got older, I was feeling more sort of disconnected with my parents. Just because my priorities and the way I want to live and my lifestyle is very, very different from what they want. But I don't know if, I wouldn't exactly say that this has anything to do with me being adopted (p.1)

Kerry describes how she never really thought about being different from her family and only recently started to think about these feelings of disconnection.

I never really thought of it in terms of not being connected until the last few years. I've been here (in B.C.) for six years now - I've been away from my family and thought more about it just in terms of, like people saying "You're so different" like with almost nothing in common (with adoptive family) (p.4)
However, even with this experience of difference, Kerry says that she does not view this as an outcome of her adoptive status.

I don't think that the problems I have with my family have anything to do with me being adopted (p.15); I've never really felt like I belonged but I've always been pretty reluctant to say that it's because I'm adopted; I'm just different (p.19)

One woman, Daria, articulates that in her view, being connected in one's family really has little to do with whether you are a biological or an adopted child. However, when biological children experience disconnection within their family, they may be quick to question "where they came from" as if this is assumed to be an important aspect of their experience of not belonging.

I still meet people who say "I don't know where I came from, I'm not like my folks at all" and they obviously don't feel connected, they don't feel a part of that family and it has nothing...I mean, they're birth kids and it's just that they're not like their parents; they haven't formed a certain connection (p.21)

Another aspect of the adoption experience described was the feeling of being chosen and feeling special because of one's adoptive status. Twenty years ago, it was not uncommon for adoptive parents to tell their children that they were "chosen children"; this was regarded as quite an acceptable way in which to communicate the child's adoptive status to the child at a young age. As evident in the following quotes, most of the women interviewed actually have positive memories of being told they were chosen and in fact, "being chosen" was quite meaningful to them.

When asked about her feelings of security within her family, Daria says that these feelings probably have something to do with how her adoption was explained. I guess it's how my parents explained adoption. I remember being young and being told that I was "chosen". And I know now that they didn't actually go and pick me out of the line up - I'll take that one! - but that's the feeling you grow up with and so even now logically I know that my name happened to come up on the (adoption) list, you still have that feeling of being chosen (p.2)
Mia, the only adoptee in a family with three older brothers (biological children), spoke about how being the only adoptee was not at all stigmatizing. Being chosen made her feel very special, especially because of her First Nations heritage.

When I was younger, I thought that my parents choose me specifically and that they love me more than anybody cause they picked me out, you know, asked specifically for me (p.1); It was really neat, actually. I've always thought it was kind of cool that they choose me instead of trying again to have a girl and the fact that they specifically wanted me for being native (p.7&8).

Mia describes how this feeling of being chosen has always made her feel special:

"What I recall most is just feeling really special with my parents" (p.19). For Mia, this has to do with the idea of being really wanted by her parents.

I don't remember being told (about being adopted) but I seem to remember that I've always known and it has always made me feel special. I've always felt that, as I've said, that they wanted me....so I've never had a bad association with it, so it's always been...it's neat that I'm with them now (p.14).

Similar to Mia's feelings of being wanted, Kerry also describes her experience of being adopted as feeling wanted by her adoptive parents. She emphasizes the fact that being "picked out" and brought into a family was not at all traumatic for her, even as a young child.

I always have had this feeling that I knew I was really wanted - It's (being adopted) has never been this source of trauma for me (p.1); I think I've always been pretty comfortable with the idea of being adopted because I was made to feel by my parents, that they wanted me and everything like that (p.6).

How an adoptee finds out about her adoptive status and when she finds out may impact her experience of being chosen. Lisa and Kathryn, who were both around six or seven years old when they found out about their adoptive status, mention how being chosen was a reassuring factor in their experiences. Lisa first heard about her adoptive status from a young person at her school.

When I was six and somebody in school found out that I was adopted and she said to me "Your mother didn't want you. Nobody wanted you". But when I came home, my mother turned that around and said to me "You were
chosen. I was able to pick you and you were very wanted. It's just that your birth mom wanted a better life for you" (p.1).

For Lisa, even though she found out about being adopted from someone other than her parents, her mother's comments reassured her and she does not recall ever doubting her chosen status again. Kathryn also recalls her experience of learning that she was chosen.

I remember not being upset by it, or confused or anything because my mom really pushed the understanding that a lot of people have children who may not love them as much as we love you because we went and chose you and there's all this "chosen" stuff. And I think that's very comforting (p.2&3).

In general, it seems as though being told that one is chosen in fact did not negatively affect the women in this study. For the most part, the women express feeling that this was an appropriate and a "comforting" (to use Kathryn's word) way in which to understand one's adoptive status. They understood that they were not "literally" chosen children. As Daria says:

I think that kids grow into their knowledge. I think it is much better to lie to a kid and say "You've been chosen" (p.16)

Another topic that emerged from the interviews, reflecting the women's experiences of adoption, is looking different or the issue of appearances. Adopted persons who are not adopted through intra-family adoptions (as none of the women in this project were) do not have any genetic similarity to their adoptive parents and siblings. For some adoptees, the issue of not looking like other family members is very central to their experience (Partridge, 1991; Reitz & Watson, 1992). The issue of looking different came up in almost all of the interviews. While it wasn't discussed at length by any of the women, it was mentioned by five of them. Their comments ranged greatly. What the comments have in common is that the issue of appearances and looking different is something that the women are aware of and have thought about throughout their lives.
Daria spoke about how the appearance issue in families is a type of "small talk" in our society and that such small talk may not always be appropriate. Daria remembers a particular experience when a woman, who did not know that Daria was adopted, asked Daria's adoptive mother about Daria's appearance.

She asked "Where does she get her looks?" I mean, that is such a touchy question! You shouldn't ask this anywhere! Maybe, god knows where I got my looks! (p. 15)

Daria believes that this appearance issue is something that most adoptees likely come across at some point in their lives.

I think that the funniest "being adopted" thing and I'm sure other adopted kids get the same thing, people make comments...half the people say "Oh you look just like your mom" or "You look like your dad" and the other half will say "Well, you don't look like your mom or your dad". And it's funny, that's one of our basic comments about people - "Oh, you look like your family" or "You don't look like your family" and so you kind of laugh and say "Oh that's funny cause I'm adopted" or "Oh well that makes sense cause I'm adopted" (p. 9)

Other women also describe their experiences of looking different as somewhat humorous. For example, Tracy heard these types of comments primarily with reference to her adopted brother.

We always get a kick though - people always said that we looked the same when we were younger but we looked totally opposite. And then they would say that I look like my mother and I'd go "Oh, okay". But maybe it's like a pet - you can take on the characteristics of being around them! (p. 14)

Mia, who was the only girl in a family with three brothers, the only adopted person in her family and the only person in her family who is Native, did not have any problems with looking different and in fact, saw this difference as a positive aspect of her experience. She felt that "it was always neat that I was the only one in my family with brown eyes!" (p. 21).

Kerry, who grew up with an adopted brother and a sister (adoptive parents' biological child) points out that one of the risks of not telling children about their
adoptive status is the "wondering" that may go on for the adoptee. Looking different in her family never really bothered her.

I look nothing like them. And if I didn't know (about my adoption) chances are I'd be really wondering "How come?". But it didn't really bother me. I didn't look as different as my brother. My coloring and everything is the same (as my family's) it was just the body type and things that were different (p.20)

Perhaps, as Kerry's comments allude to, adoptees may at times look for similarities with their adoptive family and these may be similarities in appearance. It is possible that an adoptee would share some physical features with her adoptive parents as it was not uncommon when placing infants into adoptive homes to try to "match up" infants with prospective adoptive parents (Reitz & Watson, 1992). Kathryn's experience reflects this to some extent as she grew up feeling that she looks like her adoptive mother.

You know when kids are kids, you look for similarities, usually physical, to associate with. And my mom and I both had green eyes and brown hair and my sister and my dad had fair hair and blue eyes. So we used to always say "You're like daddy and I'm like mommy" (p.1)

Kathryn voices another aspect of her adoptive experience that relates to the issue of appearances, having to do with her own child. A fact which may be significant for some adopted women is that when an adopted woman gives birth to her first child, this is often the first time in the adoptee's life that she is looking at someone who is biological related to her (Hartman, 1984). Kathryn has a three-year old daughter and Kathryn recalls how upset she was when she realized that her daughter does not look like her, but in fact looks very much like Kathryn's husband.

I wanted her to look like me and she doesn't look a thing like me; She is (husband's) twin! It's just unbelievable. I said (to husband) "You already look like your mom and you look so much like your grandfather; why can't I have somebody who looks like me, cause I don't look like anybody?" (p.12)

Even though Kathryn describes being able to connect with her adoptive mom around their similar appearances (i.e., hair and eye colour), it is significant to Kathryn that
she does not find physical similarities with her daughter, someone to whom she is biological related.

Understanding of Adoption

The second sub-category or potential property of the broader theme "Being Adopted" is the understanding of adoption articulated by the women in this project. There seemed to be two main elements in this understanding: The "fact" of the adoption and the meaning of relinquishment and thoughts of birth mother.

Several of the women spoke of their understanding of adoption as a fact. It seems as though, for some adoptees, that adoption is "just the way it is". In part, this "fact" of adoption seems to be based on whether or not adoption was considered secretive in the women's lives. Daria articulates her understanding of adoption at several points throughout the interview.

To me, being adopted is just a fact. The grass is green, the sky is blue, and I'm adopted! It wasn't any special information. Some people are adopted, some aren't. I don't know if you experience being adopted, if I experienced being adopted, any more than I would experience having brown hair (p.1&2)

In terms of Mia's understanding of her adoption, she also spoke of it as not being a big deal. For Mia, "it (being adopted) wasn't a key feature. I think because I had known from when I was so young. It was no big deal...just like oh yeah, I'm adopted" (p.11). Similarly, Tracy mentions that she actually didn't give the fact of her adoption much thought: "I never thought about it, because those (adoptive parents) are my mom and dad" (p.1). When Kathryn learned that she is adopted, she remembers that "it didn't phase (her) much" (p.3).

For several of the women, it seems as though they understood their adoption as being "not a big deal" and can recall feeling this way throughout their lives. For some women, the fact that adoption was not considered secretive seems to be an influential factor in their understanding of adoption as "just the way it is". As Kerry
comments: "It (being adopted) was never a big deep dark secret" (p.1). Daria also made reference to the fact that adoption was not considered secretive in her family and, more than once, referred to the "fact" of her adoption.

It (my adoption) had all been explained to me. It was just part of the facts of life and it wasn't any big family secret. It wasn't any big surprise. It was just the way things are. It really is...the grass is green, the sky is blue, I'm adopted. As I learned the basic fundamentals of life, I also learned that I was adopted (p.1&2).

The second aspect of the women's understanding of adoption that came out of their stories was the meaning of relinquishment and thoughts of birth mom. Most of the women in this study made reference, at some point during the interview, to their perspective on their relinquishment. The women had different ways of speaking of their relinquishment, including their understanding of it and the meaning it had for them. However, there does seem to be some consensus in the women's experiences that relinquishment was a good decision. The view and perception of birth mothers seemed to be related to the topic of relinquishment. These women's diverse experiences seemed to be woven together simply by the fact that the issue of relinquishment and the perception of birth mom emerged, in some form or another, in all of the interviews.

Most of the women tended to describe their understanding of adoption and relinquishment in fairly positive terms. For example, several women spoke of the fact that they were relinquished and "ended up" with their adoptive families as a good thing. Some of the comments reflected the view that birth mothers must be strong to be able to relinquish their infants. When Lisa was asked what adoption means to her, she spoke of relinquishment in the following way.

I think of being taken into a home in a family that loves you. I think of a mother giving away a baby for a better life (p.1)
Lisa also spoke of the strength that it must have taken for her birth mother to do this and, being a mother herself, Lisa feels that she has an understanding of just how difficult this must have been. Lisa describes how grateful she is to have been given the opportunities she has had and to have been raised in her adoptive family. You really have to commend somebody to actually have the strength and the love to give away a baby, now that I've had my own, I mean, that's a big decision...to be able to see that there is something better for them. I think it's wonderful that she (birth mom) gave me the chance for a great life, and, had she kept me, I might not have had the chance. Who knows where I would be? And because I've had that wonderful childhood, I can give that same strong threshold to my own children and if I'd been brought up in a family that may not have had that background, I maybe wouldn't be able to provide that for my own children (p.10&11)

Daria also feels grateful that her birth mom was able to relinquish her and expresses her sense of just how difficult this must have been. Daria mentions that she never felt rejected - that isn't what relinquishment or adoption meant to her. I don't think I ever felt rejected. I thought "Wow, what a shame" as it must have been a tough decision for my birth mother, the situation she was in, already having other kids and just being in a situation where she couldn't raise one more; she probably couldn't raise the ones she had and that must have been a difficult situation and I can remember thinking "Wow - good decision" because I had advantages being an only child - financially and emotionally - that I would never have had in that (birth mother's) family (p.10)

For Mia, while in some ways her view of relinquishment is similar to Daria's experience in that Mia expresses being "glad" that she has her life with her adoptive family, Mia also mentions feeling resentment towards her birth mother. Mia's experience is somewhat different from the other women in this study as Mia was adopted at a slightly older age (13 months old) and spent several months in a foster home prior to her adoption. Mia's birth mom had some contact with Mia in the foster home, although Mia has no recollection of this contact. Mia describes a letter and a
gift that her birth mother had left for her when Mia was a baby which was passed on to Mia by her adoptive parents.

She (birth mom) wrote a letter saying that this (gift) was the most significant thing (birth mom had) and that it is very special and I respect that, but I think that more importantly, she gave me...my life....my life as it is now (p.9)

While Mia expresses her respect for her birth mother, she also has feelings of resentment towards her.

There is also a bit of resentment, in the fact that somebody didn't want me, to have my parents want me...like the only reason my parents got me was because this woman (birth mom) didn't want to bother with me (p.1)

When Mia received her non-identifying information, she found out about a half-sibling who was also relinquished and this information served to increase her feelings of resentment towards her birth mother. Mia is still very clear about how positive her adoptive experience has been.

I think that (receiving the information about her sibling) helped to increase the sort of resentment, although I'm happy to be alive. I've had a wonderful life (but) what the hell was she (birth mom) doing to have it happen twice; it put me off a bit! The sibling was raised by the grandparents and from the sounds of it, it could have been a more positive thing that she did give me up because it sounds like, whoever did the write-up about her (birth mom's) parents, it sounds like they were just awful. So, it's probably better - well, it's 100% better that I grew up in the family that I did (p.18).

Typically, the women referred to their "birth mother", a somewhat standard term in the adoption literature. Mia however mentions how this term does not fit for her experience. The term "mother" is one that has particular meaning for Mia and is a term she prefers to reserve for her adoptive mother.

I'll find myself saying "birth mother" and then it will be like "Ack, no!" Mother is something totally different! I can't picture having a different mother (p.1)

Kerry feels that her adoptive status does not necessarily contribute to her lack of closeness and connection with her adoptive family. In terms of her understanding of relinquishment, she does question whether or not the fact that she was
relinquished influenced the development of her independent personality. Kelly was adopted when she was two months old and spent some time in a home for "babies waiting to be adopted" prior to her adoption.

I think that being adopted has made me incredibly independent because I spent those first couple of months (of my life) in a little nursery without that sort of contact (p.2)

Kathryn was adopted at five days old and came into her adoptive home directly from the hospital. Kathryn mentions thinking along similar lines as Kerry, in terms of the impact of her relinquishment and those first few days without any "mother contact". Following the birth of her own daughter, Kathryn wondered about the effects of the lack of contact with a caregiver in those early days following a baby's birth.

I thought, well, how did I feel when I was three and four days old and wasn't being loved by anyone? Were the nurses really friendly? I mean, touch to a baby is so important and I remember thinking how did I feel in those five days there (in the hospital)? (p.21)

An adoptive person's birthday may serve as a reminder of their adoptive status, a reminder of their relinquishment, and a reminder that there is a birth mother out there, who likely remembers the significance of the particular day. Since her own experience of giving birth to her daughter, Kathryn's own birthday has taken on somewhat new significance.

There is no way, no way, I now know that (my birthday) goes by and that woman doesn't think of me; there isn't a way that I know that she isn't thinking of me on my birthday. Which I only clued into like maybe three years ago. I guess once I got pregnant I started thinking about it. And just this past year, I remember getting teary eyed thinking that she must be thinking of me - "I don't know where you are but I'm thinking of you too because I know you're probably thinking of me" (p.14)

Kerry points out that, as she was growing up, she did not really consider her birth mother - "I never even actually thought about her - it never occurred to me"
Something that I have thought about more over the years is that I think about it (my adoption) on my birthday...that she's (birth mother) probably thinking, thinking about that and to let them (birth parents) know that "Hey everything's okay, like I don't resent you for putting me up for adoption. You were 18 years old, so that's okay, it hasn't ruined my life" (p.8)

Several of the women relay what they would like to say to their birth mother if they ever met her. Kerry mentions (in the quote above) that she would reassure her birth parents that she does not resent them for relinquishing her. Daria says that she really does not want to meet her birth mother but if she ever did search, it would be to tell her birth mother one thing: "The only reason I would ever look for my birth mom is to say "Thanks, you did a really good thing" in case she was wondering" (p.3). Mia spoke of how she wouldn't want things in her family life to be any different. She also spoke of her feelings of resentment towards her birth mother, and voices what she would like to achieve if she ever met her.

Learning of Adoption

The women also raised another topic that seemed to fit within the general theme of what being adopted means to them: The experience of learning of their adoptive status. This involved talking about the telling of the adoption story and the importance of this telling.

Telling has been described in the adoption literature as the way in which adoptive parents inform their children that they are adopted (Lichtenstein, 1996). When these interviews began, I did not consider asking the women about their
"telling" experience. However, each of the women independently offered this information and it seemed to be quite an important part of their adoption story. The **Telling Experience** includes how one is told about their adoptive status as well as the circumstances of this telling experience.

One thing that came up when the women spoke of this telling was the fact that they were all told of their adoptive status at a young age. Several of the women comment on the significance of learning of their adoptive status as a young child, rather than as a teenager or adult. Another common feature was the fact that most of the women did not recall the actual telling experience. Daria describes the significance of her age in her telling experience.

I never felt any different in any way because my parents told me that I was adopted very young. I don't remember being told and I think at each age, I just got more information about what being adopted meant. So by the time I had gotten to an age where it had some kind of meaning for me, I actually knew what it meant. It had all been explained to me (p.1)

Mia also describes learning of her adoptive status at a very young age and "growing into" her understanding.

They told me right when I was, I think they told me before I even understood and then I began to understand that, okay, they (parents) weren't biological and they were still (my parents). They never made me feel...I don't even think any of my brothers ever teased me about not being really "with" them (p.2)

Kerry also has no memory of her telling experience but knows that she has been aware of her adoptive status for as long as she can remember.

I don't even remember when they told me, but as far back as I remember, I've known. And same thing with my brother, he's known. It wasn't a secret (p.4)

Tracy describes how her adoption was explained and her reaction to the information.

My parents told me when I was really young and I don't remember too much but my mom said that I never got excited about it, or upset, it didn't bother me. All she said was that I didn't come out of her tummy and that was it. And I was like "Oh, okay that's fine. I'm okay with that" (p.1).
Tracy's adoptive mother's explanation helped Tracy to understand the concept of adoption and was quite meaningful at the time, given Tracy's age and lack of knowledge about "where babies come from". The only thing I ever related to when I was little was that I didn't directly come out of her tummy, but (I was) no different. I was put into her arms when I was a baby and that was it. And you don't know about sex when you're younger anyway so you don't understand the stork! That was the way she (adoptive mom) sort of explained it - that I didn't come from inside her but that I came from someone else and "You're mine, you're ours" (p. 18).

Kathryn also spoke of how her adoptive mother's explanation of adoption was very appropriate and left Kathryn feeling that she understood and was not confused by the fact of her adoption. Kathryn describes her telling experience in great detail as she has quite vivid memories of this experience. She is even able to recall the room in which she was told!

I remember when she told me. I was six or seven and Mommy made me promise that I wouldn't tell (adopted sister) because she was too little and she wouldn't understand. And I remember where we were. I remember what room we were in. And of course, I immediately ran and told (adopted sister) and got in major trouble for it. But I remember not being upset about it, or confused, or scared or anything cause my mom really pushed the understanding that a lot of people who have children may not love them as much as we love you because we went and chose you. And there's all this chosen stuff, right!? And I think that's very comforting (p. 2&3).

A similar explanation was provided to Lisa about being chosen. Lisa also spoke about her telling experience quite vividly. Lisa first found out about her adoptive status from a young friend at her school who knew of Lisa's adoption and taunted Lisa by saying that Lisa's birth mother "didn't want her". This was quite a difficult experience for Lisa. After approaching her adoptive mother about this and hearing her mom's explanation, Lisa felt she had a good understanding of her adoption, perhaps, she says, because she felt so close to her adoptive family.
The second aspect of learning of adoption raised by some of the women was the importance of the telling. When describing their own experiences with learning of their adoption, a few of the women spoke of just how important it is to inform adoptees of their adoptive status, preferably at a young age. Daria, when asked about her close relationship with her family, points out how she sees this closeness as based in part on her telling experience.

I think that being told when I was young is a big part of it. I know people who were told when they were older and to them, it was a huge surprise. It was like a family secret that was being let out now (p.2)

Later in the interview, Daria again articulates her opinion that honesty and openness around adoption is essential for close family relationships.

I think a real big part of it too, personally, I feel that it has something to do with the age that you're told at...that if you've always known, it's just part of life. But if you were told later in life, or worse, found out without being told, by mistake, than you'd really feel conspired against (p.12)

Given that adoption had and continues to have some stigma, it is possible to understand why adoptive parents may not always be as open with their adoptive children as might be appropriate. However, even with this understanding, Daria feels that adoptees should be told.

I think that the best thing to do is tell children that they are adopted. I think that if you tell kids they're adopted, it would be like "Oh..okay!" But I can also see how adopted parents didn't believe that then, especially in the time when adoption did have some kind of stigma. If you're told late, then it's a big deal, and if you know, then it's just life (p.18&19)

When talking about the issue of appearance in adoptive families, Kerry also points out the importance of telling children that they are adopted. For Kerry, the fact that she looked different in her family was not a big deal because she knew why she looked different (i.e., she knew of her adoptive status from a very young age). You wonder how many kids have been adopted but have no idea they've been adopted, cause some people are really...I don't know! It's kind of silly
because if you don't tell them, someday they'll be like "How come I don't look like anybody?" (p.20)

Tracy spoke of the issue of telling almost as if she could not imagine that parents would not tell their adoptive children about their adoption. She had read about a particular adoptee in the newspaper and wondered if this adoptee was not told of his adoptive status until he was an adult.

The guy that was in the paper, the one trying to get his medical information, he was quite upset about being adopted. But I don't think he was told (about being adopted) for a long time, like maybe he was told later. Maybe he was an adult when he found out. But that's the parents fault for doing that! (p.16).

Growing Up: The Adoptive Family Experience

The second major theme that came out of the interviews with these women was their adoptive family experiences. The women spoke at length about their adoptive families, including their immediate and extended families. Within these discussions, the family structure or "make-up" was often mentioned as was the family atmosphere.

Family Structure

The six women I spoke with have quite diverse adoptive family structures. The women in this study spoke of their immediate family and of their extended family and community. In terms of the adoption literature, while there are somewhat mixed results, some studies have found that adoptive family structure may influence an adoptee's experience and choice around searching. For example, it has been argued that adopted children tend to have more difficulties when there is a biological child in the family. Others have found that adopted children are at risk only when a child is born to the adoptive parents following the adoption (see Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992 for review).
In terms of the place within one's immediate family, Daria was the "only" only child of the six women. Daria mentions that, given the fact that she was the only child in her family, her sense of belonging was never questioned as there was only her so of course she belonged! Being an only child was in some ways very positive for Daria; she felt that she was able to have a great deal of attention and affection from her parents and was able to spend quality time with both parents as she was growing up. Daria's parents had waited several years before adopting and were very excited and ready to adopt when they did: "They had been married several years before they adopted me so I came into this really ready family" (p.2).

In terms of searching, Daria found out (through her non-identifying information) that she has half-siblings and expressed interest in possibly meeting them one day. Daria mentions that, being the only child in her family, she did feel somewhat of a loss at times in that she missed out on having siblings. Daria did have a cat when she was growing up and describes how difficult it was for her when her cat died. Daria explains this difficulty as being due to her only-child status; her cat had been "like a sibling" to her.

Tracy also speaks of her adoptive family in very positive terms. In terms of her family structure, she was one of two adopted children in her family. She has an adopted brother and both she and her brother were adopted as young infants. Tracy describes how her family was quite a traditional family in that her mother stayed home until both Tracy and her brother were in school.

It's just my mom and dad and my brother and I and my brother and I were both adopted. We grew up in Vancouver and we stayed in the same house right until we (she and brother) moved out. My mom only worked when we finished school; she was home all the time. That was the way, that was very common in that whole era - mom stayed home and she was there all the time. Dad even came home at lunch time, all the way from downtown (p.6).
Kathryn's family make-up is somewhat similar to Tracy's in that Kathryn has one sister who is also adopted. Kathryn's adoptive father died when Kathryn was quite young and she spoke of having little memory of him as he was sick for several years, in and out of the hospital. She refers to this man as her first father. After his death (when Kathryn was seven years old), Kathryn and her sister were raised by their mother on her own and then by their mother and step-father once their mother remarried. Kathryn mentions that her mom actually lived with her step-father for several years before they married. Kathryn and her sister had always assumed that they were married and Kathryn says: "We had been calling him dad for years!" (p.7).

Mia, Lisa and Kerry share in common the fact that their adoptive families are a mix of adopted children and children who are not adopted (birth children). In Mia's case, she is the youngest child, and the only girl, and the only adoptee in a family with three older brothers (all birth children). She is also the only one in her family of First Nations heritage although Mia's adoptive mother was always quite active and involved in the local Native community. Mia speaks of her family and of her "difference" (i.e., being adopted, being First Nations) as not being an issue for her.

In terms of searching, like Daria, Mia is aware of the fact that she has a half-sibling "out there". Mia also expresses some interest in possibly meeting this half-sibling one day, given other positive stories she has heard about siblings connecting. While she is very close to her brothers, Mia would be especially interested in meeting her half-sibling if she found out that this sibling is a sister.

Lisa is also the only adopted girl in a family with older brothers (birth children). Lisa's adoptive mother had difficult pregnancies which instigated Lisa's adoption. There's three of us - three of us children. My mom had five pregnancies, five children but only two of them lived. So that's why she adopted me, she really wanted a girl. I have two brothers (p.6).

Similar to Mia, Lisa also describes herself as not feeling separate or different from her family, even with two brothers who are her adoptive parents' biological children.
While Lisa is close to one brother, her oldest brother was born with cerebral palsy and he has distanced himself, physically and emotionally, from the family.

Kerry is one of two adopted children in her family and also has a sister who was born to Kerry’s adoptive parents. Unlike Mia's and Lisa's situation, where they were adopted after all the other siblings were born (i.e., Mia and Lisa are the youngest in their families), Kerry's younger sister actually "arrived" several years after Kerry and her brother were adopted.

My brother and I are adopted and my little sister, she's an accident cause they (adoptive parents) thought they couldn't have kids which is why they adopted. So three kids, three different sets of parents. I was the first one adopted. I'm the oldest. My brother is 14 months younger than me. He was adopted when he was only 2 weeks old. So they (adoptive parents) essentially had us since we were very tiny, tiny little babies (p.2)

There is quite a range of experiences in terms of the adoptive family structures of the six women in this project. Such diversity is important to recognize in order to avoid assuming that certain family structures are better or worse than others for adoptees. For example, as mentioned earlier, it has been pointed out that being the only adoptee in a family with other birth children could be very difficult for the adoptee, perhaps leading her to feel separate and not really part of the family (Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989). However, as both Mia's and Lisa's stories demonstrate, this is not necessarily the case.

The immediate family is not the only aspect of an adoptee's family experience. In fact, several women also mention their role or place within their extended family and community, as this larger context within which an adoptee grows up likely influences an adoptee's experience as well. The women in this study again had quite a range of extended family and community experiences, some growing up within very close-knit extended families, and others with extended family members who were not very central in their lives. One thing that came out of these
descriptions was whether or not the adoptee was the only adoptee within their extended family or within their community. When speaking of the communities in which they grew up in, some of the women also talked about their current social network and about the other adult adoptees in their current community.

Tracy's extended family is not very large or very close, either in terms of relationships or proximity. She attributes this lack of closeness in part to the age of many of the members of her extended family.

We're not a big family. My mom's family is from Manitoba, but we don't keep in touch with them. Again, they're all quite old, and most of them have passed away now (p.9).

She also spoke of her paternal family, in particular, her paternal grandmother, as someone who she "didn't really know...cause she was sort of senile; I don't really remember her at all" (p.7). Tracy and her brother are the only adoptees in her extended family (and her brother now has two adopted children). However, in terms of the community that Tracy grew up in, she was aware of other adoptees: "In my little neighborhood that I grew up in, there were a few adoptees there" (p.11).

Lisa's extended family is quite small and she is the only adoptee. She mentions that she does have an aunt and uncle who she is quite close to and who visit quite often. Like Lisa, Mia is also the only adoptee in her extended family. Mia did not really grow up within her extended family given how far away some of her family members live. Also, three of her grandparents died either before Mia was born or when she was quite young.

Kathryn and her sister are also the only adoptees within their extended family. In terms of the size of her extended family; Kathryn's mother has one sister who had four children. These are Kathryn's only cousins (as her father had no relatives) and there is quite an age difference between Kathryn and these cousins. Kerry on the other hand, grew up within quite an extensive extended family in which there were other adopted children.
I have some other cousins that are adopted as well. Three other cousins that were adopted, so it was never, even in the extended family, it was never like a big deal (p. 4); There were five of us in total and we all knew who was adopted. And it never became an issue (p. 17).

Daria also grew up within a large extended family and she is very close to the members of her extended family. She is also the only adopted person in her family although she grew up knowing other adoptees who lived within her community. I have a huge extended family. And I grew up living next door to my grandparents on my dad's side and my grandparents on my mom's side only lived about 20 minutes away. In my family, I am the only adopted person but on our road - we lived in a somewhat rural area - and on our road there were four adopted kids. Including me, there were four of us. We all knew we were adopted and laughed about it, that it was odd that there was four of us. So I guess back to the original question, not feeling different being adopted - I was surrounded by kids who were adopted (p. 7 & 8).

At various points in the interviews, a few of the women spoke of their current communities, whether they are now in contact with other adoptees and whether or not these other adoptees have searched for their birth relatives. For example, Kerry says: "I know people who were adopted in my circle of friends" (p. 17). Lisa also knows of other adult adoptees: "I don't really know a lot of people who have actually searched. I do know people that are adopted, but not ones that have searched" (p. 5). In Mia's social group, there are quite a few other adoptees.

The social group I'm in right now, a lot of my boyfriends friends, several of them are adopted (p. 13); Most of the people (adoptees) I know with the exception of (a male friend) and this friend of mine who had a really bad incident (with her search), most of the people I know haven't (searched) or don't want to or don't want to talk about it (p. 14)

Kathryn is aware of other adult adoptees in her current community, for example, her husband's cousin, a close friend of Kathryn's (who has found her birth mother) as well as the husband of one of Kathryn's work colleagues (who is currently
searching). Tracy describes how surprised she always is to find out just how many people around her are adopted.

I worked at a trust company and one of the girls I hung around with, she was adopted. Then our boss, he was adopted too. And his sister was adopted. And I'm sitting here going "Whoa - I don't believe this!". And now there is this other girl at the company I work at now - both she and her brother were adopted (p.12).

All six women have some experience and contact with other adoptees, either growing up within their extended families and/or communities or as adults, at work or within their social circle. Perhaps knowing other adoptees contributes in some ways to the acceptance and appreciation of an adoptee's own adoptive status. In terms of searching, several of the women mention having heard both positive and some not so positive search stories and reunion experiences from other adult adoptees.

Family Atmosphere

It is likely that an important aspect of an adoptee's family experience is the atmosphere in which she was raised. Atmosphere is used here as a general term to describe the relationships within a family as well as the views of adoption and kinship and the sense of acceptance of adoption evident within that family. These two elements - close relationships and adoption "acceptance" - emerged from the women's stories.

The six women all spoke in detail about their close family relationships. These descriptions were generally quite positive, often describing very connected family relationships. At times, the women would describe close relationships with the entire family, and sometimes with just one or two family members. As would be expected of most relationships, these relationships were also described at times as trying and difficult.
Mia describes her adoptive family as being very close. She is especially close to her mother and her two eldest brothers. Her family relationships, as a young child and as an adult, have always been very positive and supportive. I got along so well with my siblings and there is so much moral support behind me. My parents and my brothers totally encourage me and you know, would do whatever I wanted them too. I think I was pampered a lot, treated well, being the only girl and also being the youngest and I don't think adoption had anything to do with this (positive treatment) (p.7)

Mia feels that she and her family have gotten even closer over the past few years - "We've gotten a lot closer as friends" (p.9). Mia describes memories of her childhood and how, given how secure she feels in her family, she is able to speak of the "bad things" that happened, as few and far between as these things were!

We were always pretty close. My parents got along really well. A totally happy family. My mom always gets upset when I remember bad things. I have maybe ten memories of bad things but that's all! That's all I remember! And they're "bad" just because they never really happened, things like "Oh you hit me with a wooden spoon once and that was awful". But you know, it just happened once and it was because I had done something totally horrible but she takes it like "Oh you think I'm so bad!" No! Not at all! I think it's just that there are numerous good things that I just take for granted (p.9&10).

Kathryn has always been very close to her adoptive mother. Since her father passed away when she was young, she did not have a close relationships with him. Kathryn mentions how her adopted sister who is not as close to their mom, may in some ways have suffered more after the death of their father given that her sister was closer to him.

I've always been really close to my mom. And we still have a really close relationship. I wouldn't say it was an unhealthy relationship. But it was probably unhealthy for my sister, that my mom and I were so close. I don't think she (sister) ended up having a replacement after my dad died, or feeling that connected (p.6)
Daria describes her relationship with both her parents as being very close. She voices how difficult the physical distance between them has been (as her parents live in Eastern Canada).

I am very close with both parents. It's hard for me to live so far away. That's hard. We talk every...at least once a week for at least an hour, sometimes more. As a family, we did a lot of things together. And I was, because they only had one child, only got one shot, I was very much a tomboy. I had to split my time. So I'd be baking one day, going hunting the next! (p.7&8).

As mentioned earlier, Daria spoke quite strongly about her feelings of belonging within her family. When asked about these feelings, Daria's response reflects her close relationship with her parents.

I think it (feeling belonging) has to do with how much attention I got in my own family. For me, I had so much attention. I had two adults, giving me constant attention so I never felt a lack of anything in my life (p.12)

Tracy also describes herself as having been close to both parents, but especially to her father. Her father unfortunately died just this past year and this has been quite difficult for Tracy. Tracy feels she "had a very good childhood...very good parents" (p.1). Tracy talks about how much she has always counted on her parents and has always known that they would be there for her if she needed them. She describes a few situations in which this support was very apparent.

I always went running to them for something. Even as I got older and had problems anywhere, I'd phone them, even as I grew up, even like, up until my dad passed away, you know and even when something happened later, I'd phone my mom up and tell her (p.8).

In terms of her relationship with her brother, there have been changes in their relationship over the years but she says they are now quite close.

I was close to my brother and then he got married and I sort of moved away and we sort of lost track of each other and then we sort of got back together again. We always talk on the phone; he doesn't live very far away (p.8).

Lisa's adoptive father also passed away and she spoke of how close they were, closer than Lisa and her adoptive mother have ever been. Given Lisa's
description of her father and Lisa's way of being (somewhat quiet and soft spoken), it sounds as if Lisa and her father may have been similar in many ways. My dad and I were very close and I think my mom was threatened by that relationship. We are close (Lisa and her mom), it just, it wasn't as close as my father and I. With dad and I, we could sit in a room and not speak and we understood each other. But with my mom, she's always sort of got to fill the space and she's just a high strung person so sometimes it's sort of hard to get along. But she is a very caring person. She has got wonderful traits (p.6)

Lisa's mother lives nearby and visits often and is very involved with Lisa's children. As a child, Lisa describes having had a wonderful family life and Lisa's family, like Daria's, did a lot of activities together. Lisa describes how this closeness has influenced her. My mom and dad had a really wonderful relationship. He (adoptive dad) died six years ago of cancer. Up until then, they had a really loving relationship. We were brought up in a really wonderful environment - always really fond of each other. My brother who's next to me, he's 3 years older than I am. He and I are very close. So I think we've had a wonderful childhood. My parents had a summer cottage and we spent most of our summers out there and we did a lot of family things and went on small family driving trips, singing songs for hours in the car. I think I had strong relationships which is what I think has made me more secure in being happy with just what I have (p.6).

Kerry spoke of her relationship with her adoptive parents in less positive terms. She does however mention that she and her adoptive dad get along quite well; it's primarily she and her mom that have difficulties. As she describes it, "I get along with my dad; I've always been a pretty emotionally independent person but more so, I could identify with my dad" (p.13). Kerry feels that in fact, her being an independent person wasn't something that her parents seemed too happy about. I was a totally nonaffectionate little kid and do have to admit that that's something that is sort of, to the dismay of my parents. I was just like...independent and wanted to be left alone and didn't want to be held or hugged or anything like that (p.5)
When they were growing up, Kerry's adopted brother was always getting into trouble and this meant that parental attention was generally focused on him, rather than on Kerry or on her younger sister. Kerry actually preferred this, as she was able to just be by herself which is what she wanted.

I wanted to be left alone most of the time, just wanted to do my own thing and that was fine because my brother was always getting into trouble so my parents were always focused on him and I was like "Great! okay, I'm just doing my thing!" (p. 3)

In terms of her relationships with her siblings, Kerry mentions how the age difference between Kerry and her younger sister seemed to prevent them from being very close but that Kerry thought that they would probably become closer now, as adults. Kerry and her brother have also become closer over the years: "He and I are now friends" (p. 14). Even in families that may not be very close, there are things that the family members can typically connect on and as Kerry describes, she has found such things in her family.

It is a fairly political family; that is something that I do have in common with them; we can talk politics - politics and the cats! (p. 15)

A topic that came up quite often in most of the women's stories was the view of adoption and kinship expressed and evident in their adoptive families, views that contribute to the general atmosphere within the family. These two things are linked in that a particular family's view of adoption also likely reflects that family's view of "what family is" - that is, are true kin only biological kin? Are biological children "natural" children and adopted children "unnatural?"

These question were not specifically broached in this project, however the women's stories often spoke to these types of issues. A related issue is whether or not adoption was considered secretive in the family. For the most part, while some women referred to the adoption secrets in their families, their stories and
experiences generally seemed to reflect a sense of acceptance - when you're in, you're in.

The type of "growing up" atmosphere the women experienced was in some ways quite diverse, yet there were also similarities evident in their stories. For one thing, all of the women were adopted under the traditional closed adoption system in which adoptive parents were typically told to treat their adoptive children "as if born to" them (Winkler et al., 1988). Another similarity is that, for the most part, the women in this project express being comfortable with their adoptive status and not feeling stigmatized within their families. A few of the women however, were able to recall various incidents in their lives in which the secretive aspects of their adoption were apparent. The atmosphere of adoption that surrounded and continues to surround these women seems to be an important part of their adoption experience.

Daria, who is close to both her parents and to the members of her extended family, did not feel any stigma around her adoptive status growing up nor does she feel any within her family today.

I never remember at any point feeling in any of the extended family any different. Certainly I felt, if anything, favoritism and I am close with all my aunts and uncles and my cousins. In my family, it's (adopted status) never been something that I felt kept me separate from my family members (p.7)

Daria has an explanation for the acceptance of adoption in her family. This acceptance seems to be a basic part of her family's view of kinship.

I think about people who have married into our family. Once somebody has married into our family, they're family! It's not like "Oh, that person who married in". They ARE, you know, they're an aunt, they're an uncle, they're right in there. And there have been divorces in my family and my grandparents have stayed close with some of their sons-in-law and daughters-in-law who are no longer sons-in-law and daughters-in-law...Because once you're in, you're in! (p.22)
Similarly, Tracy does not recall adoption being an issue in her family, immediate or extended. In fact, Tracy's arrival into the family was a very positive event for certain family members.

I don't think that in the family it made any difference at all, with all the relatives. I remember my mom saying that when she had brought me home, her mother-in-law being there, my grandmother, just thought it was the greatest thing and she just had to name me (p.10).

Mia's experience within her family around her adoption has also been one of acceptance. In terms of her extended family, she feels that "they haven't made me feel any different" (p.10). Mia also mentions her eldest brother's reaction to Mia's adoption and how he tells the story of going to get Mia when she was a baby. His story reflects his excitement and acceptance of bringing Mia into the family.

My eldest brother says he can remember when they got me...came to Vancouver to pick me up. He thinks it's just the neatest thing. He always said that he thought it was cool - a new sister that we just got to pick up (p.7).

Lisa's feels her family is also quite accepting of her adoptive status and in fact, as far as Lisa can remember, being adopted did not seem to be a big deal. It was never really an issue. My aunts and uncles have always known, it's just not an issue. And my grandmother, I was really close to my dad's mom, she lived downstairs and I would spend a lot of time down there with her, having tea all the time. And my mom's mom, she lived in town and we would visit her and that was always fine. I never felt any different (p.9).

Kerry also describes how she was never made to feel any different and even after the arrival of her younger sister (birth child of Kerry's adoptive parents), Kerry was never made to feel "less than" her sister.

I was never made to feel any different being adopted and especially after my sister was born; there was never like "Well, she's (younger sister) really our child". Things like that would never happen (p.4)

However, Kerry does recall hearing some comments about her adoptive brother - comments that reflected stigma around his adoption.
I do think that they (adoptive parents) would sometimes make distinctions between my brother and I because my brother caused a lot of problems, because he was naughty, there would be things said like "Well, with Kerry we got to choose but with (adopted brother), we didn't"...things like that (p.15)

Kathryn's extended family is not large but there were a few things that did come up around her adoptive status with particular extended family members. While Kathryn has no memory of this particular experience as it occurred when she was a very young child, her adoptive mother told her about it. Kathryn's father's mother lived with them for a few years when Kathryn was quite young. This grandmother, who Kathryn describes as being "insane", had some very strong views about adoption and in fact, would refer to Kathryn as a "devil child" because Kathryn was not a blood relative. As Kathryn describes this, luckily, this women did not play a big role in Kathryn's life after Kathryn's father died (when Kathryn was seven). In fact, Kathryn had no continued contact with this grandmother.

Kathryn recalls another incident which relates to the issue of adoption stigma and secrets. She describes this experience of learning that her cousins had never been told about her adoptive status.

I remember Auntie (adoptive mom's sister) telling me that she remembers being so excited when my mom got me and brought me home. Now she'd never told me anything like that before and that was really a lovely thing (for her) to say. And one of her daughters was standing there and I said something about...made a comment, something about adoption. And Auntie's face kinda went (horror expression); And I realized, oh my god, my cousins don't know! And that was about three years ago when that came up. I mean these are my cousins; these are my mom's only sister's kids, my dad had no relatives. This is it! These are my only cousins and they didn't even know! I mean, you could see Auntie's face like "Oh, I haven't told them yet". I'm 30 years old and you haven't told them!!? (p.16&17)

Kathryn describes how many things were quite secretive in her family and how adoption seemed to be something that was not talked about. According to
Kathryn, her father's view was: "You are my child and that's the way it is and that's all that matters" (p.4). Family issues in general were not talked about much and Kathryn attributes this in part to her father's religious orientation. In fact, Kathryn was not informed of her adoptive status by her mother until after her father died. Kathryn stills wonders if her adoptive mom has more information about Kathryn's birth than she is willing to share.

You know, I have this feeling and I've never talked about it with my mom, but you know those little safety boxes that you buy that are gray and with a little lock on it? I swear that my mother has one hidden in her closet in her bedroom at home and in it are the official papers and documents (p.13)

In terms of adoption being somewhat secretive, Tracy also mentions how in her family "we never brought it (adoption) up, it wasn't something we really talked about" (p.14). Similarly, Lisa recalls how adoption was rarely discussed in her immediate or extended family: "It was a bit secretive. Nobody ever referred to it" (p.9). Daria's experience was quite different in that her adoption "had all been explained to her" and that "it was just part of the facts of life and it wasn't any big family secret" (p.1). Daria did however describe a rather humorous story about a cousin's reaction to Daria's adoption.

She (cousin) goes "I have a secret". So I asked her "Well what is it?" And she (cousin) goes (whispering) "You're adopted!". And I tease her about it since then! But it was just funny that this is how she reacted. I told her that I'd always known and she was sort of deflated, like "Oh, I guess it's not a bit secret". But for her, because she hadn't always known, it was a big secret, but as soon as she found out that I knew, it was kinda like "Oh okay, well obviously it's not a big deal" (p.17&18).

One other issue that came up for two of the women that also has to do with the issue of adoption stigma was when, as children, they were referred to as "foster kids". Both Kathryn and Kerry had such experiences and describe how they reacted. For Kathryn, she felt somewhat upset about this teasing.
I think that the only time it (being adopted) ever upset me was when I was younger and I would tell people (about being adopted) cause it didn't phase me as anything negative. And then, my maiden name was Foster, so they (kids) used to say "Foster kid, foster kid" and I don't think other kids saying that would even necessarily know that I was adopted, but just hearing that and knowing that I'm adopted was like, well there must be something wrong (with me). So I remember being taunted like that a bit (p.3).

Kerry felt that other kids were demonstrating their lack of knowledge and ignorance with particular comments.

I think it was in grade three. She'd (a girl in her class) teased me about being a foster child - "Your parents aren't your real parents". And I'd say "No, I'm adopted. They are my mom and dad by law!" And I'm thinking, what is this kid - stupid? Doesn't she understand the concept of adoption? (p.18).

Searching or not Searching: Desire to connect with Birth Relatives

The third major theme or category that was apparent in the women's stories was the issue of searching. I specifically asked about each woman's perceptions of the searching issue, knowing that none of the six women have pursued an active search for birth relatives. These discussions fell into two main sub-categories:

Reasons for not searching and reasons for searching.

Reasons for Not Searching

A few main points emerged from the stories about reasons for not searching. The main reasons described were: Anticipated negative impact on adoptive parents, the adoptee feeling no need to search, the adoptee's fears of anticipated outcomes of the search, and the adoptee viewing searching as intrusive and invasive.

Several women discussed the anticipated negative impact on their adoptive parents. Daria has several reasons for not searching and the first reason that she describes is that she believes searching would be difficult for her adoptive parents. Daria knows that her parents would be supportive of her, whatever she decides to
do in terms of the searching issue, but Daria is still very aware of the impact that such searching would likely have on them.

I think it would be disrespectful to my parents. I know that they would be hurt because...they wouldn't discourage me from looking but I know they would be hurt because they would think, well, when they adopted me, it was for life! It wasn't (just) until you are old enough to look for other parents! (p.3)

Lisa is also aware of the fact that searching could hurt her adoptive mother. When asked about her reasons for not searching, Lisa's response is that "part of it is my mom. I think she would be really hurt. She's the sort who wouldn't understand" (p.2). Kathryn also spoke of her concern of hurting her mom - "I think for the longest time you don't believe your parents are capable of handling things" (p.10). When asked by others why she hasn't searched, while she has several reasons, Kathryn typically alludes to her adoptive mom as her main reason for not searching.

I think I probably say that I think I'm afraid it would hurt my mom. It's easier to blame someone else for your own lack of doing (p.15).

Besides being aware that searching may be hurtful to her mother, Lisa also feels that she is under pressure from her mother not to search. Lisa sees this pressure as primarily reflected in her mom's hesitancy around talking about the adoption and sharing information about the adoption with Lisa.

I think there is the pressure not to search from my mom. Anytime I've asked questions, she's really evasive and you can see she gets uptight about it. She's very funny about it. She says that all the information (regarding Lisa's adoption) was left with the lawyer and the lawyer has since retired but she didn't say who that was. And I would think that it wouldn't be left with the lawyer...that there would be copies of any information, so as far as I can understand, they've probably destroyed (the adoption papers). So, she's uptight about it so there's sort of the pressure not to search from her (p.3).

While Kerry has recently placed her name on the passive adoption registry, she discusses her lack of willingness and lack of desire to pursue an active search for birth relatives. Kerry has not told her adoptive parents about her decision to
register for a passive search and her reasons for keeping this quiet have to do with
her view that this information would not be taken well by her adoptive mother.
I haven't told my parents that I put in for the passive registry because I think
my mother would be really hurt; I think she would take it as a personal sort of
statement about her raising me. She'd be really hurt because she gets
offended if I don't want a second helping of food! (p.7&8).

Kerry points out that, while there may be tension in their relationship, Kerry would
not want to hurt her mother and believes that searching would do so
I don't have a great relationship with my mother but I wouldn't want to offend
her and I know it would really hurt her. I think my mother is too unstable; she
couldn't handle it (p.10)

When talking about the impact of searching on their adoptive parents, a few
of the women mention that the death of their adoptive parents may influence the
decision to search. Others do not feel that it would be right to search, even after
their adoptive parent(s) died. There tended to be qualifiers on what type of search
each women would be willing to pursue. For example, Lisa says that "the only way I
would pursue a search was if my mom was gone but even at that, I don't really see
the need to meet my birth mother" (p.5). Both Lisa's adoptive father and Tracy's
adoptive father have died. Tracy mentions that she may search one day: "Maybe if
my mother wasn't alive, that might make a difference, but I don't think so!" (p.5).

Daria discusses how her parents' deaths would not likely be a factor that
would lead her to search. She describes feeling quite certain about her choice to not
search and again, refers to the fact that she feels she would have her parents
support, regardless of what she decides to do.
If they died, I still wouldn't want to search so it's not as if having this affront to
them keeps me from doing it. Because if I did do it, they would be supportive
of it, but I know that somewhere, it would hurt them (p.5)

Kathryn also discusses the issue of whether her adoptive mom's death would
influence her decision to search. For Kathryn, who is very close to her adoptive
mother, waiting until her mother died to pursue a search seems disloyal. She talks about what it would be like to search after her mom dies.

I think it would be worse for me. I don't think I could after my mom would have died; I'd feel like I was being totally untruthful and betraying her by waiting until she's dead...sneaking behind her back. It would seem so dishonest to do that! (p.15&16).

For the most part, the women in this project spoke of their decision not to search as being at least somewhat influenced by their view that a search would have a negative impact on their adoptive parents, either by hurting them or by being disrespectful of them. The anticipated impact on parents, however, was only one of the issues the women spoke of when talking about their reasons for not searching.

Several women describe how they feel they have no need to search and that there are no missing pieces in their lives. For Daria, this feeling of "no need" has to do with the fact that she has her "real parents".

I just don't feel any loss for birth parents. Like I have parents, so why would I need another set of something? I have parents! When I meet people and it comes up, that I'm adopted, they'll say "Oh, have you looked for your parents?" which always infuriates me! "No! I live with my parents! I know where to find them!" (p.3&4)

For Daria, a reason for not searching then is that she doesn't feel that she is missing something and, as she describes "I never felt a lack of anything in my life" (p.12). Mia, who has been encouraged by her adoptive parents, particularly her mom, to search, also describes having little need to do so.

So far, it hasn't seemed like something that I want to do...just because I don't need...I don't feel that something is left undone or that I need to do this (p.3).

Mia spoke of her feelings of resentment towards her birth mother, however this resentment hasn't pushed her to search. While searching is something she may pursue at some point in her life, she does not feel the need to do so right now as she is content with what she has.
I'm just really happy in my family and it (searching and finding birth mom) ultimately doesn't matter - it won't change me. If I found her, it might enhance my life experience but it won't change who I am, what my values are (p.16).

When talking about her choice not to search, Lisa spoke of feeling some curiosity about looking for birth relatives, especially when she was pregnant with her own children. However, she feels "no great need to know who they are" (p.2). She also talks about feeling very happy with what she has, in terms of her family and her life as it was when she was a child and as it is now.

I don't think I'm missing anything and I think it's just because I had such a wonderful childhood. I have no horrible memories of my childhood, they're all good, so I don't feel that need to find something that's missing. I don't think there is anything missing (p.10).

Lisa spoke of her positive childhood experiences influencing this feeling of "no need". Tracy describes her reasons for not searching in somewhat similar terms. Tracy says that perhaps if her life was different than it is now, and if she wasn't happy, maybe she would change her mind and feel like she needs to search. At this point in her life however, Tracy describes searching as "not a priority" (p.17).

It's really strange but I don't have any inclining to know them (birth parents). Maybe because I had a very good childhood and that if I had been unhappy growing up, maybe I would want to search (p.3).

Kerry describes active searching as something she does not feel the need to pursue. Kerry mentions that she has not "felt enough of a void to cross that line. I don't have that sort of determination about it. It's not that big of an issue" (p.10).

Kerry also spoke about not feeling "incomplete" and how this influences her choice. I don't feel incomplete because I haven't met my birth parents; maybe that's a good way to term it - I don't have this feeling of incompleteness or a personal void because I haven't got all the answers (p.7)

Kerry's discusses her decision to place her name on the passive registry as being based primarily on her wish for updated medical information. While she has thought about searching more now that she is a legal adult, she feels she does not have a
"pressing need" (p.12) to search. For Kerry, the issue of searching "doesn't keep (her) up at night" (p.13).

In her kitchen drawer, Karen has a piece of paper with the number she needs to call to apply for an active search. This information was passed on to her several months ago, but she has not acted on it. According to Karen, while she has heard many positive search stories, "it still hasn't pushed me to do it yet" (p.9).

When asked about whether they felt that adoptees have a "need" to search, both Daria and Mia reacted with some apprehension and questioning. Mia comments that in fact she "almost takes offense to that. I guess we can label that ignorance" (p.22). Daria feels that this assumption of need is not the case for her.

Just to comment on this "need" (to search) or else you're in denial. It almost sounds like, what I can be guilty of, that the people who are looking, well, they're just not balanced enough...which is sort of a flippant comment for me to make but that says how for me, searching would be a waste of my time...It's not something I "need"(p.13).

It seems as though the assumption that all adoptees need to search - an assumption made quite readily in the adoption literature - does not fit for these women. While several women mention having a sense of curiosity about their biological background, and express the opinion that adoptees have a right to know about their heritage, most of the women clearly state that they do not have a need to search. The stories told by these women challenge the assumption that adoptees must search for their biological relatives in order to feel complete or "whole".

A third reason for not searching that was mentioned by a few of the women was the fear of what the search would yield -- fears of the anticipated outcomes of the search. For instance, when asked about whether or not she felt she would ever like to meet her birth mother, Kerry's response reflects her hesitancy due to the unknown, not knowing what her birth mother's reaction would be: "I don't even know if I'd want to (meet birth mom)...what if she doesn't like me? You never know!" (p.9).
Mia spoke of her fear as being a reason for not searching. Mia relays a story of a friend who has met her birth mom and had a very negative reunion experience. Mia has seen what both positive and negative outcomes of searching can look like but is hesitant to pursue a search of her own. When asked about her reasons for not searching, Mia articulates the following:

"I think (my reasons) hinge on resentment and fear just completely. I oscillate between hating this person (birth mom) for not wanting me and not wanting to change what I have. My parents would be totally thrilled if I actually went out and did something about it but I think I'm also just afraid of what kind of person she was, or is (p.3)."

Even though Mia has the support of her adoptive family, she still has not felt that she wants to pursue a search. She mentions her curiosity in finding out about her birth mother - "I have twinges of curiosity but then sort of worry about the consequences of it " (p.3). Mia also spoke of the fear that she would not like her birth mother.

"If I were to find her and if I were not to like her - which is a fear, that I'll meet her and just be like "NO - I can't share the same genes as you!" (p.17)."

Kathryn also voices fear as a reason for not searching. She spoke of several different types of fears, fear that has to do with the type of information she may find out, as well as fear around the possible experience of another type of "rejection" from her birth mother.

"I think all along the reasons have been - fear. For a lot of different reasons. Fear that I'd find out that I was a product of rape; Fear that I'd crush my mommy (adoptive mom). Mommy more than the rape. My mom had told me that all I'd need to do is contact the hospital where I was born, and put in a request to meet my (birth) mother and if I put that request in and they put it into the file and my (birth) mom's already put hers in, then we'd be connected. And so there was always the other fear that I'd finally do that and find out that she hasn't been interested, so it's like a double rejection, in a form (p.8&9)."

The other part of Kathryn's fear around searching, which actually has more to do with fear about "waiting" to search, has to do with her birth mother's age. Kathryn
feels that if she waits too long to search, she may find out that her birth mother is deceased and may always regret having not searched sooner.

The other part of the fear...let's see, how many have I had, like three now? Fourth is, she (birth mom) was 26 when she had me and my mom was 26 when she adopted me, so she's the same age as my (adoptive) mom. So my mom's turning 59 this year. Well, if I don't look soon, she might be dead. She could easily be dead already. But you know, she's getting older. What if I finally decide that the urge hits me and it's too late? (p.11&12).

For Kathryn, her fears seem to be based on both what if she searches as well as what if she doesn't search. For various reasons, such as the fact that, in Kathryn's case, the "urge" hasn't hit her yet, and for Kerry, who does not feel a "void" in her life, these six women have not actively searched. Their fears and concerns about the outcomes of a search are valid as, of course, there are no guarantees that a search and reunion will be positive and successful. These women seem to be very aware and thoughtful of this fact.

A few of the women mention that, besides their concerns over the anticipated impact of a search on their adoptive parents, besides their "lack of need" to search, and besides their fears regarding the search outcome, some view searching as intrusive and invasive. This wasn't always mentioned as a specific reason for not searching, however, it seems that, for some of the women, their view of searching as intrusive likely impacts their decision. The issue of searching as intrusive also came up in discussions around the opening of adoption records.

Lisa points out that the outcome of a search could be extremely difficult for all those involved, the person being searched for as well as the person doing the search. While there is a biological relation between these people, they are still essentially strangers and searching could be quite an imposition on another person's life. Lisa describes this as one reason why she would not actively search.

I don't want to actually go and meet them and say "Here I am - your long lost..." because I think it would be hard for them and it would be hard for me. I
mean, here's a complete stranger that is your biological mother, but other than that, that's all they are (p.5)

Kerry comments that, while she feels doing a passive search is acceptable, she would never pursue an active search. According to Kerry, an active search would be intrusive.

I would never do an active search. I don't think I would do that regardless of any personal reasons, just because it would be fairly intrusive into the other person's life because I have no idea what the experience of giving up a child for adoption meant to my birth parents. I don't know, maybe they didn't want to give me up, maybe they really wanted to. I have no idea. So I think that an active search would be kind of intrusive (p.6)

Searching may be considered an intrusion for the birth family as well as for the adoptee. The issue of opening adoption records raises this concern as well. When talking about her reaction to the proposed changes in the British Columbia adoption legislation and the potential opening of records resulting in easier access to information, Tracy mentions that she would not want this type of contact for herself.

I think at this moment, I would probably veto it, against it. I don't think I want them to contact me because they're (birth relatives) not part of my life. They could be anyone (p.5).

Daria also refers to the potential problems associated with the opening of adoption records. For Daria, who feels very connected within her adoptive family, the idea of "being found" by a birth relative is not especially threatening. As Daria describes, "I feel very secure in my real family so whatever information I get about my birth family is just interesting tidbits" (p.21). However, in terms of the opening of records, Daria spoke of the danger of an adoptee not knowing of her adoptive status and finding out through the process of being "searched for".

A birth mother always knows that she is a birth mother but an adoptee might not know and that would be quite a shock, if someone phones you and says "There's someone looking for you...from your birth family" (p.6)
Daria's concerns around searching and the opening of records is that an adoptee or birth relative may not be open to being found and that this need should be respected. Like Kerry, Daria sees this as a potential invasion into a person's life. There comes a point where, on either side of the adoption issue, you don't want someone to phone someone who isn't open to that...for someone to track someone else down and enter their life. I think that this is a real invasion.

The issue of searching and opening of records not only affects the adoptee and the birth mother, but also has an impact on the adoptive and birth families. Daria comments on the potential impact of searching and opening of records on her adoptive parents.

It will be forced on the adoptive families. Why should my parents have to pay a price because all these decision were made 26 years ago? I don't think they should have to pay an emotional price because my birth mom might now be having feelings of anxiousness and wondering and, I empathize with that, but also, if she wants to find me, she could do a passive search and if I want to find her, we'll find each other. But for her to now impose herself on my life and my family's life, especially now as an adult, I form my own life and I've incorporated my parents as part of my adult life, so I don't want someone coming into my life and disrupting it (p.14)

It seems as though the issue of searching and the issue of opening adoption records are in some ways closely related. Both searching and being searched for can be seen as intrusive and as a potential invasion into another person's life. Some adoptees may not wish to search and similarly, some adoptees may not wish to be found. A few of the women describe just such wishes.

Reasons for Searching

When talking about reasons for not searching for birth relatives, the women in this study, not surprisingly, also refer to their reasons for searching. It became quite clear through listening to the women's stories that the issue of searching or not
searching can be quite a complicated one and in fact, is an issue that most of the women have given some thought to at various times in their lives.

It seems as though there is a searching continuum ranging from those adoptees who do not search at all, to those who search for medical information only, to those who place their names on a passive registry, to those who pursue an active search for birth relatives (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). While each of these six women could be called "non-searchers" (as they have not pursued active searches), several of them have searched for their medical and/or non-identifying information. Three main reasons for searching came out of these discussions: Pressure, questions and encouragement from others, searching for medical information and searching for non-identifying information.

In each of the interviews, I asked each woman whether or not she felt any pressure on her to search (or not to search). In terms of pressures to search, the women spoke of varying degrees of pressure, questions and/or encouragement from others to search. It seems as though such questioning and encouragement from others can influence an adoptee's decision to search or not to search.

Kerry describes how she never really thought about her birth family or about searching until she started being asked by others "why" she hasn't searched and began to feel pressure to search from certain people around her.

I was just cruising along in life and it was other people who would say to me "Well, don't you ever think about it? Don't you wonder?" and I'd go "Well, no!". But then you start to go hmmm...is there something wrong with me because I'm not out there looking? (p.6).

Kerry also mentions that two women she worked with who are both adopted and have both searched have been "kind of encouraging" (p.17) Kerry to search. She refers to a man she was involved with who also felt that Kerry should search.

I was going out with this person a few years ago and he would say...he was kind of pressuring me...he'd say things like "You have nothing in common with
your family; You have all these ideas and sort of ambitions in life; Don't you ever wonder where they came from?" (p.8&9).

Kathryn says that when people find out about her being adopted, the issue of searching is typically the first thing that comes up: "The first question is "Well, have you tried to look for her (birth mom)?" and then it's "Why not?"" (p. 15). Lisa also mentions that people often ask her about searching and that others seem to have difficulty understanding why Lisa may not be inclined to search.

I think sometimes from others there is the pressure to search. People can't understand why you haven't. I don't think that they can understand that you can be content with the way you are, without knowing. And I think for other people, it's just sort of a curiosity. A lot of people want to know why your mother gave you up (p.3&4).

Like Lisa, Daria feels that other people are often interested and curious about "what you've found" in a search. It seems that it is expected that adoptees will search. I guess a lot of people expect that I would have looked for my birth parents or maybe it's just their interest, that would make it a more interesting story than "No, I haven't." So, I guess people do ask (p.4)

Mia has similarly experienced questioning about her decision not to search. When asked by one of her roommates "don't you want to know?" Mia's response is that she might like to know a little, but it's not all that important to her. Mia also talks about the encouragement she has from her adoptive parents to search but she articulates that this encouragement does not feel like pressure. Mia knows that her mom and her whole family would support her in whatever decisions she makes.

My mom is especially interested to see what kind of person (birth mom) is and what makes me the way...if there is some sort of difference in me that can be identified through (birth mom). I think that my parents would probably be a bit happier if I did (search), for my own mental well-being, but I don't feel they pressure me (p.20).

A frequently mentioned reason for searching is the desire for medical information. In some of the women's cases, medical information has already been
obtained. However, typically the information that is provided is quite sparse and not updated (i.e., containing only information that was gathered at the time of the adoptee's birth). Tracy, who is quite clear about not wanting to search for or meet with her birth family, would like to gain access to her medical file. Tracy mentions that her husband also feels it is important for Tracy to have this information.

Both Kathryn and Daria describe how frustrating it is to go to doctors and not be able to answer questions about family medical history. For Kathryn, this lack of information was especially apparent for her when she became pregnant.

Not knowing your history every time you go to a new doctor drives me insane! I don't know any family history! So I was very curious when I was pregnant if my adoptive mom knew anything else (p.13&14).

Daria also comments on this frustrating experience: "Going to doctors and constantly being asked what your medical history is and getting a bit frustrated by the whole experience" (p.9).

When applying for medical information, most adoptees seem to expect that they will receive updated, detailed medical family history, which is typically not the case. Daria has received her medical information and was somewhat disappointed with the information she received.

It was actually a weird experience (getting medical information). I wasn't prepared for what they sent me. I asked for medical information thinking that what I'd get is: There is diabetes or no diabetes, cancer or no cancer. What I got was really quite in-depth personal information about birth parents (p.9)

Mia has also recently received her medical information. Similar to Daria's experience, Mia found that the information she received was actually somewhat disappointing. Mia mentions that "there was nothing exceptional. Like I thought it will have these earth shattering medical things but there was nothing" (p.5). Kerry hopes to gain medical information from her passive search.

I would like to get some medical information. I know that there is a history of heart disease in my birth mother's family. I know that much from my adoption
papers. But I don't know anything else in terms of...there is a whole sense of -
genetically! - that I'd like to know about (p.8)

For Lisa, like Kathryn, pregnancy was an experience that heightened her
interest and curiosity about her medical background. Lisa felt that, given the
difficulties she was having with her pregnancies, medical information could have
been useful. However, considering the length of time it can take to receive the
information, Lisa never did pursue it. As she describes:

My first pregnancy ended up with a stillbirth so I sort of wanted to, at that
point, search out for medical information just to see because they (doctors)
felt it was genetic, but I didn't know my background. And then because
(receiving the medical information) takes so long, we just went ahead and got
pregnant anyway and the baby was fine. And then there was another
miscarriage, a late miscarriage, so then again, I sort of thought well, maybe
there is more to this, but then this one (refers to 4 month old baby)...and I just
sort of haven't pursued it (p.2&3).

Like the other women, Lisa would also like to have information about her birth
family's medical history but is aware of the fact that the forms were not necessarily
completed accurately at the time of her adoption.

The only thing I want to know is information, if I had brothers and sisters,
medical information which, you know, a lot of them, the (birth) mothers, didn't
fill out the forms properly anyway because they wanted their babies to be
adopted. So it might not be true information (p.4)

Besides searching for medical information, a few of the women also mention
interest in receiving other types of non-identifying information, for example,
information about siblings or half-siblings. Lisa expresses interest in finding out
whether or not she has half-siblings. Daria found out about the existence of her half-
siblings through her medical search (as typically, in most provinces, adoptees apply
for what is called "non-identifying information" which contains the medical
information as well). For Daria, in terms of searching, she says that "the only thing I
would ever be interested in is siblings" (p.11).
I did find out while doing my medical search that I have half-siblings, not that I would actually go out and search for them, but I would be much more interested only because I don't have brothers and sisters. That's something I have always felt a loss for in my life. It's much more interesting to me that there are half-siblings, but, even if I found them, there would be no connection there, it would just be people who share half a genetic history (p.4)

Mia also learned of a half-sibling through her medical/non-identifying information search and, like Daria, expresses more interest in learning about and perhaps contacting her half-sibling than in contacting her birth mother.

I would be more interested in finding that person (half-sibling) than (birth mom). Also, having seen things like (a friend) and her half sister...I think I could relate to a person more my age and under similar circumstances (p.6)

For Kathryn, who has not received any medical or non-identifying information, finding out about her heritage and her nationality would be important. She wonders, given her fair skin, if she is Irish or Scottish. Tracy always wondered where her height came from and was pleased to find out (from her adoptive mom) that in fact, Tracy's background is Irish and Austrian. This provided some explanation for her.

Both Mia and Lisa mention that, besides non-identifying and medical information, they would be interested in learning their birth mother's name. This desire does not seem to have to do with wanting to meet their birth mothers, but just to "have the information". As Mia points out, "it would make me feel more like I did have a potential with her (birth mom), if I just found out her name" (p.15). For Lisa, learning a name could provide more information about Lisa's heritage.

I wouldn't mind knowing the name, but not because I want to meet my birth mother. What sort of background, if it's an ethnic name. If they change (the legislation) so that you can actually find out their name without meeting them, that would satisfy me (p.4&5).

As the women's stories describe, the decision to search or not search is typically not a black and white one. That is, while these six women have not pursued active searches for their birth relatives, they have thought about searching
and are able to articulate reasons for and against pursuing a search. These discussions on the issue of searching should serve as a reminder that assumptions about why adoptees search or do not search need to be continually questioned. Each adoptee's story is unique and while some similarities and "themes" can be found, each of the reasons discussed, for searching and for not searching, should be given equal weight and regard and treated as equally valid.
Chapter IV
Discussion and Implications

It is difficult to integrate the present findings into the adoption literature given that there has been so little exploration into the experiences of non-searching adoptees. However, keeping in mind this limitation, the first section of this chapter will touch on some of the themes that emerged from the interviews. This section will also include a brief look at how these findings could possibly fit within the theoretical orientations presented earlier in the literature review.

The next section will be a discussion of the implications of this project to adoption practice and policy. This will be followed by a look at the implications for further research, a section which will discuss what is missing from the current adoption literature and suggest "where to go from here". The final section of this chapter will review the limitations of this study. It is important to keep in mind the fact that the present findings are based on the experiences of only six adopted women and therefore can not be considered conclusive but as beginning conceptual themes and patterns that need to be further explored.

Belonging and Difference: The issues of belonging and difference are generally regarded as being central to the experience of adoption. While adoptees are often viewed as having difficulty in achieving a sense of belonging within their adoptive families (Anderson, 1989; Kowel & Schilling, 1985; Partridge, 1991; Schechter & Bertocci, 1990), in fact, the stories of the women in this study demonstrated quite a different finding. It appears as though some adoptees do grow up feeling that they belong within their adoptive families. Part of this feeling has to do with the sense of being "wanted" by their adoptive families, being chosen and being special. While there may be potential problems inherent in telling some adopted children that they are chosen, depending on an adoptee's understanding of
this explanation and on how literally the explanation is taken, being told that one is chosen may not necessarily be detrimental to all adoptees.

Related to the feelings of belonging is the issue of "being different". According to Schaffer and Kral (1988), adoption has often been the victim of the dictum: If it is different, there must be something wrong with it. Adoptees are different than birth children simply in the fact that adoptees are not biologically related to their (adoptive) family members. It has been pointed out that adoptive parents who acknowledge this difference are more likely to foster an open, accepting family environment (Kirk, 1964).

While an adoptee may miss out on the feeling of "sameness" (due to the lack of biological family resemblance) (Partridge, 1991), this difference may not necessarily be a negative aspect of an adoptee's experience (Kaye & Warren, 1988). Perhaps acknowledging and accepting this difference allows the adoptee to focus on other aspects of herself and her family, without dwelling on the difference and without being negatively affected by it. While an adoptee may be aware of these differences, feelings of difference do not necessarily pervade the personal experience of adoption for all adoptees (Beauchesne, 1992).

As discussed by several of the women in this project, feeling different was not typically considered problematic. In fact, if the women did feel different, this difference was often presented as a positive aspect of their experience (for example, Mia enjoys being the only one in her family with brown eyes). The one woman, Kerry, who did speak of feeling different from her adoptive family articulated her sense that this feeling has little if anything to do with her adoptive status. Again, as with the issue of belonging, the findings in this study challenge some of the assumptions in the adoption literature -- that adoptees are at risk and are vulnerable to psychological difficulties because they are different. According to Kaye and
Warren (1988), if adoptees "deny having any feelings of difference or disadvantage about adoption, (they) may very well be telling the truth" (p.428).

In terms of theoretical approaches to adoption, aspects of Attachment theory and Self-in-Relation theory may assist in understanding the experiences of belonging and difference in adoptees. While the women in this study did not speak specifically of attachment in their adoptive families, some of the women did mention that they felt secure within their families and spoke of being able to rely on their adoptive parents. According to an attachment perspective, knowing that one can rely on others and feeling secure within one's environment are critical aspects of healthy attachment relationships, which in turn allow a person to develop further attachments and intimate relationships (Silverstein & Demick, 1994).

According to Bowlby, "human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to best advantage when they are confident that, standing being them, there are one or more trusted persons who will come to their aid should difficulties arise" (1973, p.103). Tracy's story described this type of situation. She always felt able to approach her adoptive parents and knew she could always count on them to be available and supportive. Perhaps for some of the women in this project, feeling secure within their adoptive families and feeling that they belong has allowed them to make the decision not to search for their birth relatives and not be in turmoil over their "lack of biological connectedness".

According to Silverstein and Demick, "while adopted children do have separate psychological and genetic parents, the capacity for intimacy and identity and a cohesive sense of self develops through consistent empathic attachment between the adoptive parent and the child" (1994, p.113). While the focus in this study has been on family relationships, it is important to note that a child may form a strong attachment with someone other than a parent, for example, with an extended family member such as a grandparent, or with a close family friend. These types of
attachments can also contribute to the development of feelings of security and safety for the adopted person (Werner, 1989).

Self-in-Relation theory also focuses on the importance of attachments but takes a different slant than Attachment Theory. Self-in-Relation theory emphasizes the connections in a woman's life (Miller, 1988; Surrey, 1991). According to the adoption literature, adoptees have profound difficulties with connectedness (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991). However, most of the women in this project referred to the strong connections within their adoptive families. For some of the women, the strongest connection is with their adoptive mother; for others, it is with their adoptive father. A main point is that most of the women described themselves as connected and not isolated within their adoptive families. While adoptive status may place an adoptee in a unique position within her family (McRoy, Grotevant, Lopez & Furuta, 1990), the stories of several of the women demonstrated that this unique position does not necessarily interfere with the adoptee's integration, connection or belonging within the adoptive family.

Adopted persons are typically not able to connect with their families around their physical similarities. It has been argued that this lack of physical connection leaves an adoptee feeling that she is invisible as she is unable to mirror her biological mother (Partridge, 1991). Without denying that, for some adoptees, the issue of physical similarities may be a special area for connection which may in fact be lacking from adoptive family relationships, what about all the individuals who are not adopted and yet do not physically resemble their biological parents? Do these individuals experience feelings of invisibility as well? While adoptees may miss out on this physical connection, it is possible that many adoptees do come to "resemble" their adoptive family members in other ways.

A Self-in-Relation approach emphasizes the role of mutual empathy in relationships (Miller, 1988) and what this entails is an appreciation of and sensitivity
to the differentness as well as the sameness of another person (Rubenstein & Lawler, 1990). This directly speaks to the issue of difference for adoptees. Some of the women's stories described relationships and connections within their adoptive families which do seem to contain this sense of mutual empathy, where similarities and differences are acknowledged, appreciated and understood.

**Adoptive Family:** Family structure and environment likely influence the experiences of most family members, and adoptees are no exception. However, some have argued that adoptees in particular types of families (e.g., the adoptee as the only adopted child in a family with biological children) are more at risk for difficulties (see Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992). The adoptive family experiences of the women in this project are quite diverse and it is therefore difficult to make any general statements about the role of family structures on the experiences of these six women. The fact that the family experiences discussed in this project are so varied illustrates the need to be cautious in making assumptions about what type of adoptive family "works best".

For example, Daria, an only child, is very close to her adoptive parents. Mia, the only adoptee in a family with three biological children, always felt that she belonged and was accepted in her family and has close relationships with all her family members. Tracy, who has one adopted brother, also describes quite close connections with her adoptive parents. The women in this project mentioned the pros and cons of their particular family structure and on the whole, described quite positive family experiences, regardless of their position in the family.

One aspect of adoptive family experience that came up quite often is the atmosphere of the family environment, especially as it pertains to adoption. In terms of theoretically framing this issue, Family Systems theory would emphasize the importance of acknowledging the role of family patterns and family secrets and how these impact the individual members of the family (Reitz & Watson, 1992). This
particular theoretical perspective is also useful in understanding the influence of family beliefs about "who is family". The issue of kinship is an important aspect of adoptive experiences, as the women's stories indicated. Several women spoke of their adoptive family atmosphere; some also spoke of their family's view of kinship.

The women's experiences differed to some extent in terms of how secretive adoption was regarded in their family and also in terms of how much stigma they felt. Even the women who spoke of feeling very little (if any) stigma with regard to their adoptive status, could recall stories, often humorous, where the secretive aspects of adoption were apparent. Another important part of these stories was the sense of acceptance within the family. At times, this acceptance was conveyed by the entire family (such as in Daria's and Mia's families). It seems critical that particular family members communicate this acceptance, most important being the immediate family members - the adoptive parents and siblings.

Family Systems theory also emphasizes the importance of family relationships. This perspective focuses on all family relationships, not just maternal/child relationships (the emphasis in both Attachment and Self-in-Relation theories). The women in this project spoke at length about their relationships with their family members. It seems that for these women, their adoptive experiences depended on not only their relationships with their adoptive mothers but also on their relationships with other immediate and extended family members.

The Question of Searching: The women in this project were specifically approached to be involved in this research because they have not searched. Not all adoptees wish to search and of those who do search, not all wish to meet their birth relatives (Winkler et al., 1988). As was mentioned earlier, it seems as though there is a searching continuum ranging from those adoptees who do not search at all, to those who search for medical information only, to those who place their names on a passive registry, to those who pursue an active search for birth relatives (Sobol &
Cardiff, 1983). While the women in this project could be classified as non-searchers, the issue of searching was still a central one in each of the women's stories.

I would like to raise two specific points in regard to the question of searching. The first point is that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the decision to search or not search is not typically a black/white, either/or decision. In fact, these six women have thought about and were able to articulate both reasons "for" searching and reasons "against" searching. For some of the women, the decision not to search seemed quite firm and final. For example, Daria, Tracy, Lisa and Kerry do not feel that they would ever pursue an active search for their birth parents. Mia and Kathryn both mentioned the possibility of actively searching one day. Some who are clear about not searching for birth parents contemplate possibly searching for birth siblings. The issue of searching or not searching is typically not a simple one and is a decision that may fluctuate over time.

The decision to pursue an active search is one that most adoptees approach with some hesitation and ambivalence (Gladstone & Westhues, 1992). Regardless of whether an adoptee can be considered a searcher or a non-searcher, the decision to pursue either option has several components. For many adoptees, it is likely a matter of weighing out the pros and cons of both choices. The stories of these women demonstrated this weighting of choices. These six women have, for various reasons, come to the decision not to actively search at this point in their lives.

Related to the above point -- that searching/non-searching is a complex issue -- is a second point that stands out from the stories of these women and that is that some of the assumptions in the adoption literature need to be questioned and challenged. As described at length earlier in this thesis, the assumption that adoptees "need" to search is very prevalent in the adoption literature.

Of the three theoretical perspectives mentioned earlier, a Family Systems approach to searching would tend to assume that adoptees need to search in order
to reconnect with the disconnected parts of their family (i.e., biological family) (Bradbury & Marsh, 1988; Hartman, 1984). In contrast, an Attachment approach, which acknowledges the strengths and viability of adoptive attachments, may be less likely to assume that adoptees have this "need". Self-in-Relation theory also tends to place less emphasis on biological ties, instead focusing on the connections that a person does develop (as opposed to the "missing" connections). However, given the lack of literature integrating these theoretical approaches with the issue of searching, these connections are only hypothesized and speculative and need to be explored in greater detail.

According to Small (1987), adoptees who do search have chosen to give up their denial. Instead of simply assuming that adoptees who do not search are "in denial" of this need (see Kaye & Warren, 1988), the stories of non-searching adoptees, such as these six women, should be heard and, most importantly, should be treated as valid. These stories can also provide insight into an adoptee's process with regard to the search decision.

Attachment, Family Systems or Self-in-Relation? As mentioned earlier, this project was not specifically guided by a particular theoretical framework. Attachment theory, Family Systems theory and Self-in-Relation theory are presented in this thesis to provide some sense of the context within which the issue of searching could be understood. Each approach has some strengths in this regard.

Attachment theory validates the adoptive family experience by recognizing that attachments can and do occur without biological ties. While attachment in childhood relationships is believed to influence attachment in adult relationships, working models of attachment can be modified and there is always room for personal growth and development (McMillen, 1992). Another informative aspect of Attachment theory is that it confirms a relational model of development (Schneider,
An adoptee's decision to search or not search does not occur in a vacuum. Significant relationships strongly influence an adoptee's experience and choices.

What Attachment theory does not consider, however, is the family as a whole and how this "system" impacts an adoptee's experience. Family Systems theory does emphasize the importance of the entire extended family system in adoption. While Attachment theory primarily emphasizes the impact of losses in adoption and is limited in discussion of the importance of connections in an adoptee's life, Self-in-Relation theory speaks to the value of these connections. Perhaps a suitable framework for the issue of searching would involve an incorporation of certain aspects of each of these approaches. For example, this could involve bringing together an Attachment approach with an emphasis on the role of significant connections in an adoptee's life, as well as an emphasis on the impact of the entire extended adoptive family and community and on the influence of the adoptive family structure and patterns on the adoptee's experience.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The need to question and challenge the assumptions in the adoption literature about adoptees' "need" to search ties into this next section as these assumptions often directly influence adoption practice and policy. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the assumptions are not only about searching. There are also assumptions about adoptees' self-esteem, vulnerability, feelings of belonging, feelings of being complete, and the list continues.

In terms of practice with searching or non-searching adoptees, practitioners must be extremely cautious not to hear only the most vocal perspectives. Instead, supportive and empowering practice must begin by listening to the unique story of each individual adoptee and not questioning the truth of the story simply because it is believed to be a different or "less frequently voiced" experience. Adoptees who
have not searched are a majority of the larger adoptee population, however, the stories and experiences of these adoptees have rarely been heard and are certainly not represented in the adoption literature.

The assumptions about adoptees exist not only in the adoption literature but at a much larger level in contemporary Western society. The issue of kinship and the importance of biological ties has dominated our view of "acceptable" family forms and while this has shifted somewhat over the years, the underlying stigma continues to exist (Beauchesne, 1992). Society as a whole seems to have difficulty dealing with the idea of adoption (Schaffer & Kral, 1988) and yet little attention has actually been paid to the role of social attitudes towards adoption and, in particular, how these attitudes impact adoptees, adoptive families and birth families (Miall, 1987).

Therefore, not only do practitioners have to question the assumptions in the adoption research and literature, questioning and educating needs to be done on a larger societal level. A starting point could be to at least educate those directly involved in the field. Communicating acceptance and understanding to adoptees and their families, without assuming that the adoption situation is "inherently pathological" (Bradbury & Marsh, 1988) would be an essential first step. For example, in terms of practice with adoptive families, practitioners should attempt to assess the extent to which adoption is an issue for each family member, while also assessing the other familial, cultural and societal factors that may be contributing to any presenting problems (McRoy et al., 1990). What is required is an awareness by adoption practitioners of the effects of their own practices, structures and assumptions (Taimes & Timms, 1985).

The institution of adoption has changed quite dramatically over the last 25 years and is continually evolving (Dukette, 1984). For example, aspects of the British Columbia adoption legislation are currently in the process of being modified and these modifications will likely influence all those involved in adoption, at a
personal, practice and/or policy level. The six women who shared their stories were all adopted under the traditional, closed adoption system. These adoptees are now faced with a very different situation in that access to information is becoming somewhat more available.

Most adoptees do express their desire to have more information about their backgrounds and medical history, even though they may choose not to actively search and meet with birth parents (Baran, Sorosky & Panner, 1978). The issue of receiving medical and non-identifying information is a central one for the women involved in this study. Some of the women expressed feelings of discouragement with the policy and practice aspects of receiving such information. For example, Lisa referred to the difficulties in getting medical information in a short period of time. Daria and Mia both mentioned feeling that they were not really understood when speaking with persons working at the adoption legislation office. Sensitivity is an essential component of adoption practice and is an aspect of practice that cannot afford to get "lost in the shuffle" with adoption policy changes.

Due primarily to funding cutbacks, there are not as many persons working in the area of adoption as may be required. Within British Columbia, there have been changes in terms of "who does what?" in providing, for example, non-identifying information to adoptees. Regardless of where the information is coming from, however, adoptees do need to be fully informed as to what they can and will receive with regard to their medical and non-identifying information.

A few of the women in this project mentioned how frustrating it was to receive their non-identifying information. It appears as though adoptees are not always aware of "where" the non-identifying and medical information comes from (i.e., from the original adoption files). Each adoptee should be forewarned that the information is typically not updated and often does not contain much in the way of pertinent medical details. Providing more preliminary information to each adoptee when she
 initializes the application for medical information would be useful in that it could provide the adoptee with realistic expectations about what she will receive.

Adoption practitioners must also be cautious not to assume that an adoptee calling for information necessarily wants to pursue an active search. Practitioners should be aware of the "searching continuum" mentioned earlier. For example, when speaking with adoption professionals, a few of the women in this project mentioned feeling some pressure to apply for active searches when all they wanted was medical and non-identifying information.

At a recent adoption conference in Vancouver, one adoption practitioner commented that when she receives a call from an adoptee requesting information about searching, she interprets this call as an indication that the adoptee clearly wants to search. Many adoption practitioners likely do not make this assumption. However, if a practitioner does hold such a view, an adoptee may feel pressure to search when in fact she may not be ready or willing to do so.

The decision to search or not search is a very personal one. While an adoptee may request assistance with this decision, the decision is still her own and needs to be respected as such. If adoption practitioners hear the stories of adoptees who do search as well as the stories of those who do not, they may be more able to provide options and alternative perspectives to the adoptee in the search decision-making process.

Another major practice and policy implication raised in this study is the issue of opening adoption records. Some of the women felt that opening records would not be an appropriate policy decision and in fact, would be an intrusion into their lives and/or into their adoptive parents' lives. In the adoption literature, some have argued that the decision to open records should be made on a case-by-case basis rather than dictated by general policy (Feligman & Silverman, 1983). Others have pointed out that the majority of adoptees are not likely to exercise their right to
information once the records are unsealed (Baran, Sorosky & Panner, 1978).
Typically the birth mother's privacy is the main consideration in terms of the opening
of records. As the stories of these women illustrated, adoption practitioners also
need to respect and be sensitive to the choices of adoptees. This may involve
supporting an adoptee's decision "not to be found" by birth relatives.

The stories of these women provide insight into the experiences of non-
searching adoptees and this insight extends not only to other adoptees but to
adoptive parents and birth parents as well. For instance, the women in this study
spoke of their experiences of learning about their adoptive status and mentioned the
importance of learning of their adoption at an early age. Children's understanding of
adoption is seen as a constructive process (McRoy et al., 1990) and several women
mentioned that they "grew into" their knowledge about adoption.

Adoptive parents are typically told to talk about adoption with their adoptive
children at an early age. The women's stories reinforce the need to do this on an
ongoing basis. It has been pointed out that open communication about adoption
with the adoptee from a young age directly relates to the adoptee's openness with
adoptive parents about her choices and decision with searching (Lichtenstein, 1996).
Sharing adoptees' experiences around "learning/telling" could be valuable and
informative and have direct implication to practice with adoptive parents.

There are other implications of practice with adoptive and birth parents. The
literature tends to focus mainly on the losses associated with adoption and on the
problematic aspects of the adoptive situation. Closed adoption practice has been
the subject of rather extensive criticism (Dukette, 1984; Sorich & Siebert, 1982) and
yet, as several of the women's stories indicated, this practice may have in fact
"worked well" for many adoptees (Silverstein & Demick, 1994).

The women in this study generally spoke of their adoptive families in positive
and accepting terms. Most of the women also expressed their feelings towards their
birth mothers, often describing feelings of gratitude and understanding about their birth mother's decision to relinquish. It may be useful to present different perspectives to adoptive and birth parents in counselling contexts, perspectives such as the ones provided by several of the women in this project, that are, in many ways, supportive of the adoptive experience.

Adoption may imply losses for all those involved. How people deal with losses, however, and the impact of the losses varies dramatically from person to person. While the women in this study did mention the losses in their lives, searching for birth relatives is not necessarily the way these women chose to deal with such losses; searching is not necessarily "the answer". This choice needs to be regarded as being as equally valid as the decision to search.

There are many practitioners in the adoption field who provide counselling that is respectful of their clients and who are very sensitive to the varied adoption experiences. One of the most critical aspect of adoption practice seems to be the need to listen to each individual's story and to work with each individual adoptee in making sense of their story. While there are some similarities and themes that emerge from these stories, this study has shown how diverse non-searching adoptive experiences can be.

Implications for Further Research

Several of the points raised in the previous sections of this chapter also point to the need for further research on searching in adoption. What must be first acknowledged is the fact that the experiences and perspectives of those who have not actively searched have not been explored. Much of the current research on adoption and searching tends to generalize to all adoptees, and yet is typically based on a nonrepresentative group of adopted persons (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Feligman & Silverman, 1983).
A related limitation in the current research is that most of the studies tend to be quantitative studies intended to generalize to the larger population of adoptees. There is a need for more exploratory, qualitative studies in adoption as such studies can provide more in-depth insight into the lived experiences of adoptees (Beauchesne, 1992). The stories of adoptees need to be individually voiced and not just represented as numbers on a scale. While there is room for both types of research, areas that have been relatively unexplored (such as the area of non-searching) may be more appropriately approached with a qualitative, relatively unstructured design. Further quantifiable investigations could build on these qualitative, exploratory studies.

While there has been some work looking at the impact of adoptive family structure on the adoptee's experience, this research tends to be limited to the immediate adoptive family. Several of the women in this project spoke of their extended families and on how particular extended family members viewed adoption. Given that family often does extend beyond the house in which we live, a more thorough look at the influence of extended family and community attitudes may provide further insight into how an adoptee experiences her adoption.

Most adoption research tends to focus on women as most searching adoptees are women (Lichtenstein, 1996). We need to hear the stories of both women and men adoptees, searching or not searching. Further research could attempt to determine if there are different themes in the adoption experiences of men and women (e.g., Gladstone & Westhues, 1992).

Another area in adoption requiring further investigation is the area of cross-racial, cross-cultural and international adoptions and how these types of experiences impact an adoptee's decision to search. The context within which an adoptee is raised clearly influences the adoptee's experience. How does this context differ in mixed-racial homes? What is the view of kinship in each particular home? How do
adooptees integrate the different aspects of their background within their adoptive home? As part of the new British Columbia Adoption Act, the adoption of children from other countries must conform with the terms and regulations of the 1993 Hague Convention on International Adoption. How these regulations will impact the experiences of adoptees has yet to be examined. The issue of context and environment in adoptive experiences is one that needs to be continually explored.

It may also be valuable to look at the theoretical orientations to adoption in more detail and in particular, how these orientations "speak to" the question of searching. For instance, further studies could focus on the role of attachment in an adoptee's life and how attachment to family members or to other significant persons in an adoptee's environment impacts the search decision. At this point in time, the theoretical links are primarily speculative. Further research could help to connect particular theoretical frameworks to the issue of searching.

One woman in this project mentioned that the stories of non-searching adoptees may not be considered "as interesting" as the searching stories. Perhaps this is one reason why so little has been done in this area. Personally, I found each women's story fascinating and incredibly informative and insightful. I imagine that other adoption researchers would also quickly come to see the value in these experiences, once the time and energy is devoted to hearing these stories.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to raise and keep in mind the limitations of this research project. One limitation of this study had to do with the sample size and sampling method. There is no way of knowing whether or not the adoptees in this study were representative of non-searching adoptees. However, given that the purpose of an exploratory study of this type was to develop a framework concerning the experiences of these individuals, my goal was not to generalize to the larger
populations of adoptees. Rather, the goal of this study was to develop insight and increased understanding into this area. Further research will perhaps be able to make such generalizations once a beginning conceptual framework is developed.

Given the exploratory nature of this work, I had hoped to hear as many different types of adoptive experiences as possible. However, due to a variety of factors, this study is limited in that only women adoptees were interviewed. This is an important consideration as it is quite possible that the stories and experiences of adopted men who have not searched may be quite different from the experiences of these adopted women. For example, as mentioned earlier when discussing Self-in-Relation theory, women and men may have different types of connections with significant persons in their lives. Differences in connections with others may lead to different patterns of searching in men and women adoptees. This study is only a first step into research in this relatively unexplored area. Further research must take into account the fact that the stories of non-searching men also need to be heard.

Another potential limiting factor in this research is my choice to have only one interview with each participant. This choice was based on several factors, one being what was physically possible (time and energy-wise) given that I was the only interviewer for this project. Another factor in this choice was discussed in the Method chapter. That is, I hoped to attain a certain degree of breadth of information (by interviewing several adoptees) while also allowing for more depth of information than would be permitted in a more structured research format (e.g., questionnaire). I also attempted to ensure that I could reconnect with each participant following the interview if I found that further contact would be useful.

The decision to use in-depth interviews to collect data does have the limitation of requiring a great deal of participant cooperation (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Given that participant cooperation was essential, I attempted to ensure that each participant was as comfortable as possible with the interview process. I also
emphasized to each participant that there were no "right or wrong" responses to the interview questions, but that my interest was in their perspective on the topic, on their subjective views and on their unique experience of adoption.

There are two limitations to this study that I recognized only in hindsight. While I consciously chose not to use a particular theoretical framework to guide this research, I now recognize that it may have been useful to include questions in the interview guide that could have "spoken to" certain theoretical frameworks more specifically. For example, perhaps I should have directly asked each adoptee about the role of attachment in the adoptive family. In terms of exploring the appropriateness of a Family Systems framework, I could have inquired into the types of family values that were apparent and important in each adoptive family.

Another potential limiting factor in this study, also recognized in hindsight, has to do with the issue of belonging for adoptees. I did ask each adoptee about her experience of belonging and connection within her adoptive family and within her community. What I did not ask about, however, was each adoptee's sense of belonging in general, for example, does an adoptee feel that she is able to connect with others (i.e., other than family members) and that she "belongs in the world?" Given that some adoptees have spoken of feeling like they do not belong, more detailed inquiry into these feelings may be valuable and may contribute further to our understanding of the issues of belonging and connection in adoptees.

A final issue that I would like to draw attention to, which I referred to in the introduction of this thesis, is actually, I believe, a potential limitation and potential strength in this project. This has to do with my positioning as the researcher and interviewer in this research. In terms of my own assumptions as a non-searching adoptee influencing this project, I believe a weakness or limitation would be if I had "pretended" that I did not have my own ideas about adoption and searching and did not allow these ideas to be present in this research. Another potential weakness
would be to have only focused on my own adoption experience as the goal of this project was to hear a range of experiences. I feel that my own experience was "present, acknowledged, but relatively quiet" in this project.

In terms of potential strengths, I believe that being an adoptee and having a sense of "what it is like" to be adopted was a valuable element in this project. The participants may have in fact felt that I could understand and share some of their experiences given the common fact of our adoptions. I also felt that my perspective was valuable in that it offered a different view of the adoption experience (i.e., different from the prevalent view that adoptees' "need" to search). If it were not for my own assumptions and experiences, I likely would not have pursued this area of study. There are currently many adoption experiences that are not being heard. In this project, I explored some of these more "silent" experiences.

The aim of this project was to learn from the participants. By using open-ended questions, I left room for each participant to identify the issues that were relevant and important for her. While my position as a non-searching adoptee was known, I did all that I felt was possible to provide an open, flexible setting where the sharing of different perspectives, assumptions and experiences was encouraged.
Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed why I believe that the present research is important. My hope is that, through the course of "listening" to the stories of these six women adoptees, the importance of this project became apparent. I would, however, like to reiterate and emphasize a few points that this study raised.

In the adoption literature and research, adoptees are often considered to be vulnerable because of their adoptive status. Being different and not biological related to one's adoptive family members is often considered problematic for adoptees. Growing up within particular types of adoptive families (e.g., a family with both adopted and biological siblings) has also been presented as having inherent difficulties. Not being able to recount one's full life history (i.e., one's biological background) is seen as placing adoptees at risk for a variety of psychological and emotional problems. Adoptees, therefore, "need" to search for their biological relatives. These are only a few of the prevalent assumptions in the adoption literature.

It is critical to acknowledge that adoptive experiences may be negative and very problematic for some adoptees. However, the present project begins to challenge the "global" nature of many of the assumptions listed above. In terms of the experiences of the women in this project, they generally spoke of feeling a sense of belonging within their adoptive families, and often described their experiences of difference in quite positive terms. If a statement was to be made about the impact of family structure on adoptive experiences based on these women's stories, perhaps it would be that there does not seem to be a clear "winner" in terms of successful adoptive family structures. Each family structure has its strengths and weaknesses. In terms of what the women's stories tell us about searching, they indicated, quite clearly, that the "need" to search is not representative of their experiences.
Adoption is a lifelong, continually evolving process; it is not a one-time event and adoptees therefore "live with" their adoptive status for a lifetime. Some adoptees, questioned as adults, perceive their adoptive status positively, noting few problems emanating from their adoption per se (Schaffer & Kral, 1988). Other adoptees, for a variety of complex reasons, have more difficult and problematic adoptive experiences. In the social work profession, the emphasis is typically on the latter -- the difficult experiences and the problematic situations.

What I hope this project has brought to mind is the diversity of the adoption experience and the need to explore this diversity in greater detail. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, persons involved in adoption, personally and professionally, need to understand and acknowledge the particular individual, familial, cultural and societal systems within which each adoption and each decision to search or not search takes place. While the present study is based on the stories of only six adopted women, given the lack of literature and research on the experiences of adoptees who have not searched for their birth relatives, this exploration can at least serve as an initial step towards building knowledge into this rather "silent" experience.
References


Appendix 1

Interview Guide

I would like to thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we begin, I would like to give you a bit of background information on my reasons for pursuing this area of study. As you may know, there is a great deal of work (i.e., research, literature, etc.) on the topic of adoption and specifically, an abundance of literature on the issue of searching for one's biological family. In the course of my own reading (and through my own experiences), I realized that there is very little work that looks at adoption and searching from the perspective of adoptees who have not searched. I am very interested in hearing about the experiences and stories of adoptees like yourself, who, at this point in their lives, have not searched for their birth relatives.

While I do have some specific questions and topic areas I was hoping we could cover in this interview, I regard you as the "expert" of your own experiences and hope that you can be the one "in charge" of what we talk about. These questions simply reflect some of my own ideas about the issue of searching; There are no right or wrong responses to these questions. I am hoping that you will feel comfortable talking about whatever your experiences have been.

I am wondering if you have any questions that you would like to ask me before we begin the interview.

The first question I would like to ask you has to do with your thoughts and feelings about adoption. Some adoptees have spoken of feeling "disconnected" or like the "don't belong" because of their adopted status...

1) I am wondering about how you experience "being adopted?" That is, what does "being adopted" mean to you?
- For example, do you recall feeling "secure", "safe" and having a sense of belonging within your adoptive family during your childhood? What about as an adult?
- Do you feel "connected" to your adoptive parents and family? (Or does "disconnected" more accurately describe your adoptive experience?)

The next question I would like to ask you has to do with the issue of searching for biological relatives. There is a lot of work in the area of adoption that looks at the reasons "why" adoptees search for their birth relatives. I realize that you have not searched for your biological relatives, however...

2) I am very interested in hearing about your thoughts, feelings and ideas around "searching"
   a) Do you have specific reasons for not searching, at least up until this point in your life?
   b) Do you feel that there are pressures on you "to search?" How about pressures on you "not" to search?
- Do you think that you may choose to search at some point in the future?
- Do you think anything has specifically influenced your decision not to search?

The next two questions have to do with your adoptive family life...

3) Can you tell me a bit about your adoptive family and your adoptive family life?
   - For example, what was the make-up of your adoptive family?
   - Did you have siblings?
   - How would you describe your relationship with your adoptive mom? Your adoptive dad? Your siblings? (Adoptive? Birth?)
   - Do you feel that you were close to your adoptive parents/siblings as a child? What about as an adult?
This is the last question that I would like to ask you.

4) How was adoption regarded in your adoptive family, including your immediate and extended family? What about within your community?
   - For example, was adoption openly discussed in your family?
   - Were you told about your adoption at an early age? Do you recall being told about your adoption? Was finding out about your adoption a positive experience?
   - How do you think your relatives (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) felt about your being adopted? Did you feel that they easily accepted you as part of the family?
   - If you grew up as part of a larger community (e.g., Greek community, Jewish community, etc.), how do you feel adoption was regarded within this community?

Thank you so much. Is there anything that you would like to add or do you have any suggestions about something you feel I should have asked but didn't? If you do think of something that you would like to add, or if you have any further questions or comments about this study and interview, or if you would like something clarified, please do not hesitate to call me at any time. Also, if you wouldn't mind, I hope I can contact you if I need anything clarified while transcribing this interview. I would like to make sure that I accurately "capture" what you have said. Thank you again.
Appendix 4

Figure 1
Framework for Understanding the Experiences of Non-Searching Adoptees

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<td>Being Adopted, What does this mean?</td>
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