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OPEN ADOPTION AND THE MEANINGS OF REUNIONS

By

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Abstract

In this research, I focused on what it means to be an adoptee that either is a participant in open adoption, or is attempting to meet their birth parents, which is called a reunion. It seemed mandatory that in order to explain open adoption and reunions, I first needed to explain the sealed records controversy and how it all began. Throughout this research one thing was very clear: blood is not thicker than water. The reason for this is because throughout the initial phase of searching for one’s birth parents, there is this romanticized idea for the adoptee that there will be an instant connection between them and their birth parent, but this is not the case. At the initial meeting, it is awkward and the concept of ‘naming’ becomes very complex. The adoptee realizes that their adoptive parents are in fact their ‘mother’ or ‘father’ and that their birth parent is someone they need to spend time with in order to make a familial tie. The birth parent, on the other hand, usually feels as though the term ‘friend’ is too vague, but the birth parent also does not want to cross any boundaries with the adoptive parents or the adoptee, so they keep their feelings about the naming at bay. My hypothesis ties into reunions, and the outcomes with it, because reunions seem to solidify the adoptive and adoptee relationship and in fact makes it stronger, which support my hypothesis. Open adoption participants do not have such a hard time with meeting their birth parent because the birth parent was never a mystery. The adoptee of an open adoption never had to wonder, ‘why did they give me up’. They are able to talk about it openly and come to a realization that, at that time, giving the adoptee up for adoption was best for the adoptee and the birth parent. This allows a strong sense of agency that other adoptees do not attain.
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Adoption is a very broad subject, and it has some serious red tape wound around it. Adoption in America is not simplistic, and it is unjust. Before the 1950’s adoptees were able to access their adoption records feasibly. One would like to believe this has always been the case, for knowing one’s personal information is a right that should not be regulated, but sadly this is not the case. In order to explain open adoption and reunions, I must explain the sealed records controversy. The reason being, is that many adult adoptees want to know more about their birth parents, but their search gets stopped very quickly due to sealed records. Once adoptees are able to access these records, the reunions ignite. Some reunions have a happy ending and others do not. This paper will examine all the outcomes of reunions and why adoptees want to search for their birth parents in the first place. It will also discuss open adoptions and the different outcomes it can leave on families and the adoptee.

To fully understand the sealed records controversy, I must start from the beginning. As formerly stated, prior to the 1950’s an adult adoptee could access their records. In 1917 “The Minnesota’s Children’s Code” was enacted. This code was formed not to exclude the adoptees, but to protect them. Having one’s records visible to the public eye is not safe, especially during a time where negative and harsh social stigmas of illegitimate children were rampant. “Minnesota lawmakers wished to prevent access to adoption records by potential blackmailers, who might threaten adoptive parents with telling the public about the child’s adoption, or nosy neighbors, who might discover the child’s illegitimacy” (Carp, 2004: 6). A second wave of record reformation occurred due to two registrars, Sheldon Howard and Henry Hemenway. These two men recommended that the Model Law be changed. Their recommendation entailed: when the name of the
child was changed, the clerk of the court would forward the adoption decree to the state registrar of vital statistics, then the registrar would make a new record of the birth in a new name of the adopting parents, and finally, the original birth certificate would be sealed (Carp, 2004: 9). By 1941, almost every state began participating in this new way of producing birth certificates and sealing records. Again, this law was passed not to exclude the adoptee’s from their original documentation, they still could access their records upon request. It was not until the 1950’s when access to records became exceedingly more difficult to attain. “With the tremendous increase in illegitimate births during World War II and the pronatalism and baby boom of the postwar years, adoption soared, and so did the number of states passing laws sealing adoption court records” (Carp, 2004: 9). Between the 50’s to the 60’s most states sealed their records and adoptees were only allowed to view them if they petitioned the court, and most of the time their request would not be granted. Alaska and Kansas were the only states to never seal their records.

During the 1960’s things began to change in America. The Civil Rights Movement ignited, and America began dismissing old and traditional taboos, such as having a child out of wedlock. As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, “…..many adopted adults viewed their adoptive status in terms of liberation and rights, not shame and fear” (Carp, 2004: 14). Then, in 1971 Florence Fischer started the fight for opening records in America. Fischer was an adoptee and was extremely frustrated at the fact that she was not allowed to find her birth mother. After twenty years of searching, Fischer finally met her birth mother. This woman demanded a change and founded the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association. The goal of this association was to abolish sealed records
and allow any adult to access their records. Fischer brought her beliefs of opening adoption records to the Supreme Courts but lost the case. However, leadership sparked a movement for other adoptees to fight for their rights.

One of the most acclaimed and influential adoption associations, in my opinion, is The Bastard Nation. This passionate group started off as a website in 1996, led by Marley Greiner. The activists are extremely passionate about enforcing a ban to all sealed records to any adult adoptee. They believe it is a civil right to be able to access one’s original unaltered birth certificate and adoption records. Some of their tactics are rallying against the National Council for Adoption. The Bastards coin the word “bastard” to illuminate the ridiculous social stigma of illegitimate adoptees. Their best contribution to aiding adoptees to be able to have access to their records is the fight for The Ballot Measure 58. This law was passed in Oregon and allows adoptees that are twenty-one years or older complete access to their records. The Bastards are continuing to protest and falsify social stigmas of “illegitimate adoptees”, and they are actively informing Americans of the importance of America allowing adoptees to access their records.

It is evident that sealed records in America are extremely complicated, and it still is not fixed. Alaska, Oregon, Kansas, New Hampshire Maine, and Rhode Island are the only states that allow adult adoptees unrestricted access to their records. Currently, only these five states allow adoptees access to their records, this fact is appalling. America is so fixated on traditional patriarchy views on having a child out of wedlock; it is dismissing adoptee’s rights. There needs to be a change.

Furthermore, I believe that before I delve into the concepts of open adoption, it would be logical to illuminate the reasons why women would relinquish her parenting
rights. In the early twentieth century being a single parent was unheard of or having an affair was culturally taboo; women did not have much choice as to what to do with their child. If a young woman were to get pregnant, her parents would send her away to a maternity home where adoption was the expected outcome (Meehan, 2013: 1). In contrast, infertility was a disgrace at this time, so the adoptive parents would lie and take full credit for their adoptive child, which completely nullified the role of the birth mother. Mary Meehan studied this era and called it the “Era of Secrecy.” In one of Meehan’s interviews a woman who gave up her child stated “I never felt like I gave my baby away, I always felt like my daughter was taken from me.” This statement sums up the reason behind why many mothers of this era gave up their children, which was because of the negative social stigma of having a child as a young and single woman. In these maternity homes a woman explains, “We were never told anything except adoption- it was the only option offered to us. We weren’t told that we could get child support from the fathers. We weren’t told that we could go on welfare” (Meehan, 2013: 3). These women were stripped of their rights and not counseled when they really needed it. They were young, pregnant, and unaccepted by society; adoption was their only option at this time.

Nowadays, women agree to adoption by choice, not force (though society’s judgment still has an impact). Some women are addicts, and for the welfare of the child, the state takes the child. Also, some women want to finish school and without a family or friends to help watch their child, this is not feasible. Other women are not financially ready for a child and realize their child will have a better life with someone who is more financially stable. These are some of the reasons why mothers decide to relinquish their parenting rights.
Since many women feel like there is no choice but to put their child up for adoption, open adoption is a great compromise. The reason being is because the child is able to have a great life, and the birth mother is able to further her future but still be a part of her child’s life. By the 1970’s some agencies, such as the ALMA, started experimenting with the idea of open adoption since keeping adoption a secret was becoming known as a very malicious thing. Although to this day there are agencies that still believe in the confidentiality of adoption, many agencies have started to use a form of open adoption, for they believe it is for the best interest of the child. There are two forms of open adoption—semi-open and open adoption. “Semi-open adoption tends to be arms length; usually the adoption agency or law offices passes information from one party to another” (Meehan, 2013:5). Semi-open adoption occurs mostly in the public sector, but many times semi-open adoption leads to a more open adoption as the years go on; birth parents stay in contact with their child via Internet or phone calls. A completely open adoption entails “Full disclosure of all identifying information and ongoing contact via face to face visits” (Siegel, 2012:1). A complete open adoption occurs predominantly in the private sector.

There are pros and cons to open adoption. Open adoption is great, especially when the mother or father is stable. If the open adoption occurs immediately after the child is born, it makes it a much easier transition, and having two parents is more of a natural concept for the child. In an open adoption, there are no secrets, which is always beneficial for the child. Open adoption can help children with their biological ties, and they will not be searching for a personal agency. Also, another positive aspect to open adoption is that the adoptee will have full disclosure of medical records, which is of great
importance when one is trying to seek their genetic heritage. Deborah Siegel, who is part of the National Association of Social Workers, studied a group of adoptive parents involved in an open adoption. She wanted to see how their perspectives on open adoption have changed over time. When Siegel asked, how they feel about open adoption overall every parent except for one answered positively. One woman said, “If anything, I’m probably more deeply judgmental and disapproving of closed adoption. I believe open adoption is enriching” (Siegel, 2012: 4). Open adoption is a great system when both sides of the parents know their place and are willing to work together to find out what is best for their child.

Though there is much good that comes out of open adoption, there are some negative aspects. The most obvious concern of open adoption is the child. Adoptive parents fear that their child will be feeling ‘caught in the middle,’ feeling as though they have to choose a side. This can easily happen if both parents do not work together. The parents must communicate and discuss what their child needs from both sides, and they cannot be jealous of one another’s relationship with the adoptee. During Siegel’s study she came across some faults to open adoption. Many parents were disappointed about the amount of contact the birth parent had with the adoptee. The adoptive parents would see the disappointment in their child’s eyes when they would call or write their birth mother and get no reply. Another main issue that occurred was when the birth parent got married or had a child. The adoptee’s felt resentment and could not understand why the birth mother would keep this child but not the adoptee. The last issue that occurred was when the adoptee decided they did not want to speak to their birth parents anymore, due to the adoptee being angry at their birth parent; the adoptive parents did not know what to do.
An adoptive father in this predicament sated, “Am I disloyal to my daughter if I continue my relationship with her birth mother? Or am I holding a space for my daughter to have her feelings if I am maintaining the connection” (Siegel, 2012: 7). This father’s statement illuminates a new light on the feelings behind open adoption. Yes, the child will at times feel caught in the middle but so will the parents. This is why establishing a boundary between the adoptive parents and the birth parents is a crucial foundation for open adoption.

Overall, open adoption is beneficial. The main goal of any kind of adoption is to do what is best for the child. Open adoption is one of the best options for a child. There are no secrets and no curiosity of biological ties. An adoptee involved in an open adoption will not feel forgotten by their birth mother, but will be able to understand why the mother gave their child up for adoption, due to their communication on this subject. As long as both parents do not stand in the way of one another’s time with the adoptee, establish boundaries, and respect the child’s wishes, open adoption has positive outcomes.

Moving forward, I would like to examine a new aspect to semi-open adoption, reunions. Many people may not agree, but I believe that reunions are a form of semi-open adoption. My reasoning is that once an adoptee meets their birth parents, he or she stays in contact, usually through the Internet or by phone. Sometimes reunions lead to an even more open adoption in which birth parents attend birthday parties and weddings. Before going more in depth about reunions, shedding light onto why adoptees search for their parents in the first place is of great importance.
In today’s society biological ties are culturally significant. Society has made the definition of parenting extremely narrow: a biological mother and a biological father. This type of expectation causes an immense amount of discomfort for an adoptee. Adoptee’s feel as though they are missing out on something they do not have—a biological tie—a sense of agency. Due to society’s narrow mindedness of kinship, adoptees feel “othered.” With this feeling of “otherness” adoptees seek to fill this void. Adult adoptees feel stagnant with their life and cannot move on until they understand where they have come from. They are seeking “A past and a future in the present” (Carsten, 2000:21). Besides wanting to find agency and biological ties, adoptees sometimes search for their birth parents for medical reasons. Knowing one’s genetic heritage is extremely important, especially when you can find out early if you carry a certain gene that causes a disease, such as breast cancer. Due to the sealed records, adoptees do not have free access to this sort of medical information, so finding their birth parent is the only option. When an adoptee finally decides to search for his or her biological parents, it can be a very stressful and unnerving time. The adoptees feel a sense of disloyalty to their caring adoptive parents; they are afraid of hurting their adoptive parents’ feelings by searching for their birth parents. The adoptees feel stressed about being rejected. Romanticism worsens the fear of rejection because for so long the adoptee has had a positive image of their birth parents, and if the birth parents reject them, then this optimistic image quickly fades away. There are countless stories of adoptees that finally attain their birth parents contact information, but never call because they fear rejection.
Findings one’s birth parents is not an easy feat. It sometimes takes years to discover the birth parents, which, again, is all due to the sealed records. Adoptees currently find their birth parents predominantly on the internet. There are hundreds of sites and pages on social media that help adoptees find their parents. Adoptees can also petition for their records, but it is an extremely long process and the court usually does not grant it.

Once the adoptee has finished their search and found their birth parent, they can set up a reunion. Reunions are filled with anticipation from the triad (adoptive parents, birth parents, adoptee) prospectus. The adoptive parents are nervous for their child and worried about rejection, the adoptee is both excited and hesitant for the unknown outcome of their reunion. The birth parent is anxious to finally see her child and is fearful of rejection. From the research I have conducted, reunions are very black and white; they either end up being wonderful or end up being terrible. Janet Carsten, an anthropologist, studied reunions between adult adoptees and birth parents. In her study many reunion outcomes ended tragically. One woman searched for her birth father and found him, but he refused the fact that she was his child. After attaining a D.N.A sample from her sister, the woman had proof that she was in fact his child. When the woman went to show her father the proof; he had deceased (Carsten, 2000: 4). Death was a common outcome for adoptee’s reunion searches, which leads me to believe the adoptees lose much hope when this happens. The adoptees will never be able to fill in the time gap and find out where they came from. Therefore, a sense of agency in an adoptee’s life can never be attained when death is the outcome of a reunion. Another common outcome for a reunion is an overall dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction is caused by adoptee’s romanticism of the
birth parent. The adoptee romanticizes about two things “desire for physical resemblance and immediate connection” (Scharp, 2013:12). The desire for physical resemblance explains the search for biological ties, and the immediate connection refers to the fantasy that the adoptee will have this incredible reunion, and it will be because of the instant biological connection. Physical resemblance is important to adoptees but what they soon find out is that having a phenotypic connection means nothing without an emotional connection. When adoptees have this romanticized expectation, they almost always leave the reunion disappointed. Sharing someone’s biological traits does not automatically mean you will have an instant connection. It takes time to develop a close relationship and it takes time to open up to someone and allow your emotions to be heard. One adoptee stated after his reunion (that was influenced by romanticism), “There’s definitely no ‘ting’, connection like that, because this is somebody you don’t know. You don’t know this person, it is a total stranger” (Carsten, 2000: 6). When adoptees romanticize the reunion and base connections off of physical traits, the reunions usually end up with dissatisfaction, and the contact between the birth parent and the adoptee after the reunion is very minimal.

In contrast, reunions can have positive outcomes. “I still had her in my heart. I got a second chance with her and I’m lucky for that. I don’t want to lose her again” (March, 1997: 5). This quote from a birth mother beautifully illuminates how reunions do have positive outcomes. Reunions allow the birth mothers a second chance at being involved in their child’s life. Studies have shown that after reunions, birth mothers stress and anxiety levels decrease due to the fact they now know adoption was a good decision (March, 1997: 1). The birth mothers realize adoption was a good decision because they
are able to meet their child and see how well they were taken care of by the adoptive parents. This realization is important because for many birth mothers they feel ashamed that they gave up their child for adoption, but once she accepts that adoption was the best thing for her child, she is able to alleviate her guilt.

Another positive outcome of reunions is the relationship that evolves from it. In the first meeting or reunion the bond between the birth parent and adoptee is a bit held back. The reason being is because both the adoptee and birth parent have so much time to regain, and knowing where to start is difficult. Also, “The strain of the first meetings is due to the uncertainty over entitlement to a reunion and the lack of social rules for adoptee-birth mother contact” (March, 1997: 4). What has been made evident is that the more willingly a birth mother is to answer questions about the adoptee’s life (conception, why birth mother decided upon adoption, etc.), the easier the transition to an emotional connection is for the adoptee. Likewise, it can also be refreshing for the birth mothers to have her child understand and accept the reason why she chose to put her child up for adoption. These two factors, which make an emotional connection easier to attain, have something in common: understanding. The mother wants to be understood and not judged for choosing adoption, and the adoptee wants to understand their past. Once this level of respect and understanding has been established, meetings start occurring more often. After every meeting, the bond between the birth parent and adoptee gets more natural and the emotional connection starts to grow. Once there has been a sufficient amount of meetings, the adoptee sometimes will feel comfortable enough to talk to their birth parent on the phone frequently or invite them to a birthday party. Simple gestures like these
reassure both sides that there will not be rejection—only acceptance and bonding from this point on.

After frequent reunions, labeling birth parents as “mom” or “dad” is a subject that is contemplated. This is a sensitive subject and there is no single right answer for every relationship is different. “I feel I have to keep watching what I am saying all the time. I knew I couldn’t be her mother. I had to settle for friends. But, it seems so phony” (March, 1997: 6). This is a common dilemma that occurs after reunions for the adoptees have grown up knowing that their adoptive mother is their ‘mom’ but their birth mother has always known that the adoptee is her ‘daughter.’ Is labeling your birth mother as a “friend” good enough? Most adoptees do not believe that the label “friend” for their birth mother gives enough justification. Instead, adoptees normally will call their adoptive parents mom and dad, while their birth mother is either called ‘other mom’, birth mother’, or ‘biological mom’. This I find incredibly intriguing because if you compare the naming of adult adoptees after reunions with the naming of adoptees brought up in an open adoption, they are completely different. Why is this? As I said before, reunions that lead to ongoing relationships is a form of open adoption. Therefore, what is the difference? My hypothesis is that the longer time goes without a relationship between the adoptee and birth mother, the more an adoptee evaluates their role and position in the relationship. This is entirely reasonable since as you mature, you see things more clearly and realistically. If you were to ask a young child what they call their birth mother, most likely they would say “mom”. As a child, the adoptee is not so serious and truly focuses on simply the relationship he or she has with their birth mother. As the adoptee matures and decides on their own to find their birth parent, things are much more structured. Birth
mom becomes this almost sci-fi super hero “Bio-Mom”. Adult adoptees, even once they have created a solid relationship with their birth parents, have a hard time bringing their walls down and calling their birth mom, ‘mom’. Much can be said by what we call a person. Names display our affections towards a person and the amount of comfort and safety we have with them. Hence, “mom” to a child in a open adoption may be a normal and natural word to call their birth mothers, but for adult adoptees ‘mom’ has much more meaning, and it will take a lot of time until he or she is ready to change the ‘Bio-Mom’ to ‘mom’.

The last aspect of reunions I would like to discuss is how the relationship between adoptee and adoptive parents is affected. This is when I developed my second hypothesis in my research. I believe that once an adoptee has met their birth parent, their relationship with their adoptive parent becomes stronger. A big part of this is due to society. Society is always giving adoptees these illusions of biological parents and their connection. Adoptees are socialized to believe in this and in some ways feel like they never had this internal connection with their adoptive parents. However, once the adoptee finally meets the adoptive parent, he or she realizes blood is not thicker than water, and that what makes a parent is not the blood you share but the time and love you share. This truth makes the adoptee realize they have had this internal connection they thought they did not have. The adoptee can admire and appreciate all the love and care their adoptive parents have given to them. An adoptive parent, when asked about his relationship since his child has met their birth parents, responded, “Being able to process the reunion with my daughter made us closer” (Siegel, 2012: 6). The adoptee also feels a closer bond to their adoptive parents due to the support they gave them to find their birth parent.
Helping an adoptee find their agency and biological ties is beneficial for the child, and it entails a lot of support and encouragement. If the adoptee knows that their adoptive parents are right by their side during the whole process of the reunion, he or she will feel much more comfortable with meeting their birth parents and will be able to attain a better emotional connection with their birth parent.

All in all, reunions are beneficial to the adoptees. Yes, sometimes they do not end well, but the chance to find one’s history and biological ties is worth the risk. Reunions are positive for every member of the adoption triad. The birth mother can finally rest assured that her child has been taken care of, which then results to her alleviating her guilt of choosing adoption. The adoptive parents are able to support their child through the searching and reunion process, which makes them closer. The adoptee finally attains a sense of agency and can move on with their life; the adoptees also are aware of the false ideologies of society and knows that blood is not thicker than water, and that he or she has not missed out on anything for they have always had a ‘real parent’ in their lives.

Reflecting back on all that I have discussed, one might wonder how all these topics relate to one another. If it were not for sealed records, open adoption would have never been established, for an adoptee would always know who their birth parents were. The only aspect of open adoption that has not contributed from sealed records is having the birth mother choose who will be the adoptive parents. Open adoption and semi-open adoption are two separate spheres but are in the best interest of the child. Reunions end this cycle by bringing in a new prospectus on semi-open adoption, for the birth parent usually remains in contact with the adoptee.
To conclude, open adoptions illuminate how important it is for a child to know where they have come from and have a sense of agency. Reunions occur when adoptees have not been able to have a chance of an open adoption, and they are so desperately searching for a sense of agency. Sealed records bring reunions to a standstill. One’s personal information should not be regulated—especially once you are a legal adult. Reunions tell a lot about the adoptee. Reunions illuminate the integral role of the adoptive parents, and also how meaningless biological traits truly are. Reunions and open adoptions afford every member of the adoption triad something beneficial. Both reunions and open adoption allow every member of the triad to feel included and wanted. This feeling alleviates stress and internal conflict. Lastly, from this research it has been made evident that the word “parent” cannot be such a narrow definition. There are many forms of parenting and all are beautiful and unique. Furthermore, instead of focusing on biological ties, society needs to focus on the best interest of the child.
Works Cited


