

REFLECTIONS ON ADOPTION REUNION – FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO SATISFACTORY OR UNSATISFACTORY OUTCOMES IN POST REUNION RELATIONSHIPS FOR NATURAL MOTHERS

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Introduction

The mythology of motherhood suggests that the very word “mother” resonates with permanence, intimacy and care. The bonds between the woman and the child she carried within her body seem inviolable (Inglis, 1984) In our culture, the women who bear children generally care for them, to be a mother means to be available to your child in the *role* of a mother and as a result to know what is happening for them. In this context, the surrender of a child to strangers through the process of closed adoption seems a strange and somewhat incomprehensible practice. Yet this system of closed adoption is what has been, both in Ireland and in countries which have practiced adoption as a form of alternative care, the experience of most mothers who have relinquished a child.

The main themes of this paper are an examination of the factors which contribute to satisfactory or unsatisfactory outcomes in the on-going post reunion relationships for natural mothers. In order to place these relationships in context however, I shall give a brief historical outline of some the facts and experiences which permeated and influenced the experience of women in Ireland who had to relinquish children for adoption. I will describe some of the early the experiences of these mothers have subsequently been through an adoption reunion and who are now involved in post reunion relationships with their children.

After much public debate in which stakeholder groups, the Catholic Church and the Irish state were key players, legal adoption was introduced into Ireland in 1952. A key characteristic of Irish society of this time was the very close relationship between the Catholic Church and the institutions of the state (Corcoran, 1996). Specifically in relation to what became common adoption practice, the influence of Catholic moral teachings on the position of single pregnant women formed part of both the church and state policies and practices in relation to providing for their welfare. One particular solution for parents who had a daughter who became pregnant outside marriage was “to send her off” to a Mother and Baby Home, a state and Church sponsored home which “housed” single pregnant women, both for the duration of their pregnancy and for up to two years afterwards, until their child was either adopted or fostered. One woman in my study recounted her feelings about being sent to such an institution and how the reasons for this happening had much to do with society’s response:

“I was put there because of the neighbours, because of what neighbours’ thought, you know you were evil, you were wrong, you know Litany of Saints was put on you as well” (res 2)

Such attitudes, as described by this mother, permeated Irish society and the time and in the main they stemmed from the moral teaching of the Catholic Church which was particularly unforgiving towards women who had offended the moral code in relation to sexual conduct. To become pregnant outside marriage was an offence against the then current moral agenda. To consider becoming a single parent in Ireland was an anathema and a further

challenge to the prevailing ethos of the time. These moral agendas and the resultant stigma which attached to non-compliance became the ethos of families and neighbourhoods. Ultimately it became a particularly sad and disturbing legacy because of the life long stigma which in many cases became the ethos of the single pregnant women themselves. As one mother pointed out:

“An unmarried mother was somebody who, you know, she was kind of easy to get, that was the attitude, and they were kind of looked down on”. (Res. 11)

This ethos also filtered through to the state and voluntary agencies from which the women in this study sought assistance. The ethos of the state, church and agencies became that adoption must be the solution to non-marital pregnancy. Just *how* prevalent this solution was are shown in the figures for adoption as a percentage of non-marital births in a number of years in the 1960's and 1970s:

Adoption Trends in Ireland in the 1960s and 1970:

YEAR	No. Of Adoptions	Adoptions as a percentage of non-marital births
1964	1003	77.63%
1966	1178	82.03%
1967	1493	96.95%
1973	1402	64.70%
1975	1443	57.38%

Source : Adoption Board, Ireland, Annual Reports (various)

As can be seen from the above figures therefore, adoption became the preferred societal solution to non-marital pregnancy. Closed adoption by its very nature would take care of the welfare of the child, just as it would also take care of silencing the motherhood of the natural mother. As stated earlier, this ethos permeated both society and agencies and one woman summarised it thus:

“I remember saying to the social worker, “I don’t know about this adoption” and she saying to me, “well do you have any more money today than you had yesterday?” I said, “I don’t” and she said, “well what can you do for a child?” So you see, no matter where I turned....”(res 9)

Post Relinquishment

In the aftermath of relinquishment, and in order for mothers to preserve their status as a woman who had never given birth, the process of ensuring her motherhood was silenced became an important part of the ongoing management of both the practical and emotional sides of post adoption life for these mothers. In an Irish context it was necessary for this silencing to be successful to have the “co-operation” of all the parties who had known about the pregnancy and adoption. Mothers in this study described how families colluded in the continuing silencing by, for example, never again mentioning the birth or existence of the child. As one women recounted:

“My father said, “I do not want to hear about you or your bastard ever again...it will not be discussed and you will not be asked about it””. (res 18)

As a consequence, the mothers, who had been shamed and stigmatised throughout the process of pregnancy and relinquishment, erected their own status shields around their

history which ensured them protection from this past shameful event. One mother described how she had done this:

You had a mask on the whole time, you were the happiest person in this world, and your heart was breaking, but what could you do” (Res 5)

In some cases, subsequent to relinquishment, mothers sought to check, through the agencies as to whether their child was “ok” or progressing well, but here again they were thwarted with the silence of the agency contributing to the silence about the child’s existence.

“So I wrote to the agency ten years ago, and I heard nothing. So I wrote again, just to make sure that the letter had not gone astray, and finally, after a long time, they wrote back to say it had not” (res 13)

Research has shown that at all times it is essential to remember that the lives of a natural mothers are forever influenced by the act, circumstances and losses of relinquishment. Further evidence in relation to this extremely emotional and traumatic time has been documented by Howe and Feast (2005); Howe, Sawbridge & Hinnings (1992); Silverman, (1988); Slaytor, (1988); Cotton and Parish, (1987); Inglis, K (1984) and Winkler and Van Keppel (1984)

However, despite the shame, stigma and the institutional condemnation with which these mothers had to contend, the wish to know what happened to their child never seemed to go away. Mothers in my own and other studies have recounted the fact that they had never forgotten their child, that the denial of the existence of their child has over time become increasingly difficult for them, and in many cases have longed for the day when they could reunite.

Changing times and attitudes

In Ireland in the early to mid- 90’s, adoption agencies, due to pressure from adopted people, natural mothers and adoptive parents, began looking at their own past policies on closed adoption. Natural mothers’ expressed a need to “know about the whereabouts of their child and their wish to tell them the reasons for relinquishment”; adopted people desired “to know who they were in order to have a complete sense of identity” and adoptive parents sought to have more information to share with their children about their backgrounds. Pressure was mounted on the Irish Government to change legislation to facilitate the reunion process (though nothing happened in this sphere until the introduction of very welcome passive Contact Register in 2005). In the meantime, however, adoption agencies took the initiative of beginning to facilitate reunions, since though there was no legislation to support the right to an adoption reunion, neither was there any legislation to prohibit it.

Adoption Reunions and the emergence of post reunion relationships.

A primary focus of this paper is to record the concentrated and often difficult emotional work which has had to be undertaken by mothers in order to travel the road of an adoption reunion. An integral part of the post reunion relationships is an ongoing commitment to this emotional work and adjustment and there are invariably many different stages and tasks to be undertaken by natural mothers.

The accounts of the mothers in my study make credible the fact that adoption reunions are both a process and an event which is extremely emotional and traumatic. From the time

contact is established between mother and child to the actual meeting has been described by mothers as a time of many mixed emotions, ranging from great excitement about the forthcoming meeting, to real pain when the loss and guilt of the adoption has had to be confronted:

“It was pure elation, I just couldn’t sleep. I was just on a high, my head was going mad. I was full of emotional energy, and it lasted for months” (Res 5)

“A lot of pain, a lot of anger, a lot of hurt came through, you know after 21 years you had found him. The anger, the hurt, everything just kept flowing through” (Res 2)

Any actual reunion meeting will, by its very nature, be enormously complex and highly charged. It is, as McColm (1993) says: “a launch into uncharted waters”, and though it may be something which mothers have always wished for, it is a meeting about which there are no guarantees.

Mothers in my study were extremely concerned about the first and also about the lasting impressions they were going to create for their child. According to Goffman (1959) when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of him and these mothers had many motives for wanting their child to have a good impression of them. At the meetings, mothers spoke of the main tasks which they hoped to achieve. These were:

1. wanting to ensure their child to believe and understand *their* story about the relinquishment process;
2. wanting their child to forgive them for what they had done; and
3. wanting to fulfill their wish for their child to *like* them sufficiently to want to have a relationship with them.

After reunion meetings, mothers recounted they were exhausted and happy, but also fearful and apprehensive about the future. All their adult lives they had been practicing emotional restraint, through denial and silence and as a result they had developed a shield to protect themselves against further pain and hurt. The reunion meeting re-opened the emotional floodgates but they were still required to engage in concentrated management of their emotions in order to give their child the best possible impression of themselves. Despite all this work, both during and in the aftermath of the meeting they still had no way of knowing if their child believed their version of events or whether they had lived up to their child’s expectations of them. Mothers reflected:

“I have never been more terrified in my life. I saw her sitting there and I just wanted to turn around and walk out. I don’t really know what I felt, there wasn’t really anything” (Res 6)

“When he was leaving and saying goodbye, I looked at him and I thought, well it is your turn to leave me now, to leave me standing here, like what I did to you all those years previously.” (Res 3)

Developing and Sustaining Post Reunion Relationships

As has been recorded in this and previous research referred to above, having “survived” a reunion meeting, the development of a satisfactory and happy post reunion relationship was most often the long term wish of mothers.

At the time of interview for my study, a majority of 10 mothers reported a “satisfactory” relationship with their child in the aftermath of reunion. Six mothers reported an “unsatisfactory” relationship, and 2 relationships had ceased. Periods of between one and nine years had elapsed since the reunion meetings.

Status of Relationship and Length of Time since Reunion

Years since Reunion	Relationship Satisfactory	Relationship Unsatisfactory	Relationship Ceased
1	4	2	1
2	4	2	-
4	-	1	-
5	1	1	-
6	-	-	1
9	1	-	-

Satisfactory Relationships

From the point of view of mothers in my study, **four** specific factors were identified as contributing to post-reunion relationships working satisfactorily. Though some of these factors may seem both simple and obvious to any relationship, a post adoption reunion relationship has invariably had as its foundation profound loss which has consequences for any relationship. These feelings of loss were often compounded by feelings of guilt, fear, anger, terror, sadness, happiness and elation which were also very real emotions the mothers described as bringing to their fragile and emerging relationships.

The first of these factors was leading to a satisfactory was that there was ***a patterned and predictable structure attached to how the relationship functioned between mother and child.*** This structure afforded mothers the ability to be able to have trust in the relationship and to rely on how it might proceed.

According to Giddens (1991), what matters in the building of trust in a relationship is that “one can rely on what the other says and does”, and also that when relationships are satisfactory it is likely that “one is able to rely on regularly eliciting certain sorts of desired responses from the other”. When describing their ongoing relationships with their children the mothers identified how, through knowing they could rely on having contact with their child at regular intervals, and feeling sufficiently certain that the response to letters and phone calls would be positive, they were empowered to become confident in the developing relationship. Through accepting that once their child’s initial curiosity had been satisfied, their child still wanted to be involved in a relationship with them, the mothers became more confident in themselves. They also believed their self-esteem had been enhanced. They believed that their own increasing self-confidence and their more positive sense of self worth, which and come about as a result of the reunion, was positively influencing the relationship. One mother, who was nine years post reunion reported:

“Oh it has worked out, definitely it has worked out, for both parties. We meet up, he visits, I visit. He meet me and he leaves me back again, whatever the arrangements would be, we’re in touch to arrange by phone.” (Res 10)

A second factor which was influential was described by mothers as ***when their relationship with their child closely resembled a friendship***. Mothers said they had worked on creating a relationship that was based on friendship rather than one figured around the roles of mother and child. The development of these friendships involved both losses and gains for the mothers and they also depended on an acceptance by the mothers of what the adoptee was willing or able to offer.

A friend is defined specifically as someone with whom one had a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that the relationship provides (Giddens, 1991). Through being aware of their own expectations and as a result of not making demands for rewards that their child could not provide, a relationship which was satisfactory for mothers developed between them.

“It is going well. Absolutely. I mean I certainly would not take over and try and step in and act as his mother, and in actual fact as it turns out now he and I are the best of friends. We talk about everything.”(res 12)

A third important factor which led to mothers believing that their relationships were satisfactory was ***the acceptance that they could not and never would be the kind of mother they might have wished to be to their child***.

Part of this realisation involved accepting the child’s adoptive status, and coming to terms with the fact that as a result of adoption, the child *belonged* to another set of parents to whom most likely there was a significant allegiance and attachment. They recognised their child had strong links to their adoptive family. What was on offer from the child was a friendship (as described above), a friendship which was based on mutual respect and acceptance of the other’s circumstances and situation.

A further influence on the stability of this acceptance was the existence of a good relationship between the natural mother and the adoptive parents. When natural mothers had had an opportunity to meet the adoptive parents and in doing so accept them as a reality in their child’s life, it appeared to enhance the relationships between natural mothers and their child. In their study of the experience of children who were adopted, Howe and Feast (2000) also found that “in reunions which had the most rewarding outcomes, adoptive parents and birth parents met, and they too established a friendly relationship, much to the delight and pleasure of the adopted person”. For natural mothers, the fact that they were able to offer their child the comfort of knowing there was an acceptance, on their part, of the adoptive parents, appeared to add positively to the relationship.

Mothers described their acceptance of their child’s adoptive status in different ways. For some it was an appreciation of the care their child had received:

“After all she was the person who was there for him, the person who fed him, and I would never want him to turn his back on her in any shape or form.”(res 10)

For others it was a wish to say “thank you” to the adoptive parents, which they did when they met the parents:

"I said to her that I really admire her because he has really turned out marvelous, and he is a credit to her, and I told her that. I acknowledged the fact that he is my birth son, but she raised him and I certainly don't deny her that credit." (res 12)

A fourth and significant influence on relationships which were working well was when **a good relationship had developed between the child who had been adopted and other children born to the mother post relinquishment**. Mothers in this study had often worried about telling their other children that they had given birth to another child who had been placed for adoption. As it turned out, however, in all cases where mothers had had other children, the mothers' other children were accepting and happy to hear the news that they had an older sibling. The fact that the children became friends and enjoyed spending time together was an extra bonus. McMillan and Irving (1997) state that "whilst sibling relationships can be difficult, they seem to have a different flavour, they are less loaded with meaning". As with the siblings involved in all reunions, the siblings in this study were free to initiate and develop their relationships based on what Mc Millan and Irving (1997) describe as "compatibility and relatedness". Whatever the attraction, the establishment of relationships between siblings appeared to bring great satisfaction to the siblings and immense joy to the mothers. Both sides seemed to show a willingness to work hard at acceptance and to accommodate the adopted person. One mother summed it up thus:

"The first weekend she came down we went for a spin and the three of them were playing football together. I was sitting on this little mound and I had tears running down my eyes and I was thinking, 'God the three of them are really together'.....it was just the four of us and it was a lovely feeling, it was really a lovely feeling."
(res 7)

In order for post reunion relationships to work therefore, they would appear to need what Giddens (1991) describes as "anchoring features" which give the relationship sufficient predictability and stability for it to be satisfactory, especially for mothers. As stated earlier, post reunion relationships are invariably going to be complex and have many uncertainties, but the features identified above, which were in fact contributing to satisfactory relationships between mothers and children would appear to be features which will go a long way towards making these relationships function well and bring a great degree of happiness to the mothers involved. The existence of these features would also appear to be what gave the natural mothers the strength to develop and move forward.

Unsatisfactory Relationships

At the time of interview for this study, six mothers stated that there were problems in their relationships with their children, and so their experience of these relationships was that they were unsatisfactory.

In the first instance, just as a patterned and predictable structure was important to stability and trust which led to a satisfactory relationship, for the relationships which were unsatisfactory the absence of such a structure led to instability, difficulties and dissatisfaction. **Erratic contact and unpredictable contact patterns made the development of a relationship between mother and child difficult**, especially as it made it difficult for mothers to develop trust in the relationship. In each case where there were unpredictable contact patters, the difficulties which arose did so for different reasons. When meetings were infrequent, mothers often failed to negotiate the circumstances and occasion of their next meeting. As a result, in the aftermath of meetings, mothers were uncertain as to

when or what the next contact would be and because they did not feel confident in the relationship they felt unable to take the initiative to instigate the next contact themselves.

“Well I have had only one meeting since the reunion, there was eleven months between the reunion and the next meeting.” (res 3)

In other instances, broken promises by the adoptee in relation to previously negotiated contact arrangement also led to natural mothers having little faith in the structure or functioning of the relationship. Giddens (1991) suggests that a successful relationship “depends on mutual trust between partners...but such trust cannot be taken as ‘given’: like other aspects of the relationship it has to be worked at – the trust of the other person has to be won”. In a number of the relationships the opportunity to “work” on trust was undermined. As a result, one of the essential anchoring features for relationship building was absent and this led to problems in the relationships.

A second fact in relationships which were experienced as unsatisfactory appeared to be **when mothers had unrealistic expectations of the type of relationship that would develop, or indeed how their child would be within the relationship**. Mothers in this category appeared not to have truly accepted the adoptive status of their child, and this was demonstrated by and expressed and continuing wish that their child might, for instance, “move back home”, i.e. that the child might leave their adoptive home and return to live with their birth mother.

Such lack of acceptance of the adoptive status was also expressed through an obvious and expressed yearning for a mothering relationship of the type that might have been only if the child had not been relinquished. One mother said:

“At the end of the day you want to be their Mam, because that is what you are.” (res 18)

When it became obvious that the child did not relate to such a mothering relationship and that neither were they going to return to live with the natural mother, mothers expressed disappointment and regret that this could never be so. They also found it difficult to come to terms with infrequent meetings, and in some cases resented it when their child brought a sibling or boyfriend to the meeting. Mothers appeared to believe that as a result of not being able to have the “conditions” that were important to them met within the relationship, it was never going to be satisfactory. Though these mothers could identify and relate to the reasons why such conditions could not be met, they found it hard if not impossible to accept that what they had wanted for so long from their child was not on offer.

On the other hand, a third factor which was contributing to unsatisfactory relationships was that in two cases where the relationships were faltering, the mothers believed that it was their **child who had unrealistic expectations of what could be offered by the natural mother within the relationship**. These unrealistic expectations led to problems within the post-reunion relationship. Demands by the adoptee for a high level of unpredictable and intense contact which took no account of the natural mother’s needs, commitments and wishes was a condition that mothers could not meet.

“And I know myself that he would be just killing time, his friend wouldn’t be home from work, so he would come in here killing a few hours,” (res 14)

In the aftermath of relinquishment, these mothers had moved on and now had responsibilities and commitments to other children and partners. The renewed contact and

resulting relationship with their child in the aftermath of reunion was a relationship which they believed had to find a place within their present family and life structure. A child who was making unreasonable and unpredictable demands on their natural mother within the new post reunion relationship had an extremely negative impact on other relationships. That their child acted in such a way was upsetting and created confusion for another who was trying to balance all of her responsibilities. At the time of interview for this study, mothers were still searching for solutions to these issues in order to make their relationships with their child more satisfactory.

The final factor which appears to be a feature of unsatisfactory relationships was the existence of **a considerable imbalance of power between the natural mother and the child within the relationship**. Robinson (2000) suggests that “many natural mothers have lived with low self-esteem since giving up their children and it is difficult for them to become assertive”. Mothers in this study appeared to be lacking in confidence in relation to what they believed they *could* demand of the relationship. When an adoptee did not contact, respond or react within the relationship in the way that might have been expected, the self confidence of the mother was often not sufficient to take the risk of confronting the problem. This assertiveness in some instances stretched to not believing they had a right to make a phone call or to ask for a phone number so that they might initiate contact with their child. Instead, when the child, for instance, did not make contact when they had said they would, natural mothers often berated and blamed themselves for their child’s actions or lack of action.

“But what you are actually feeling is, ‘what did you do, what did you say, you’ve said something, he has found some fault in you and that is reeling around in your head for months and months’.” (res 2)

These kinds of reactions were similar to those identified by McColm (1993) who suggested that some mothers never overcome feelings of self-imposed blame and guilt about how others treat them. As a result of this significant imbalance of power within the relationships, and the inability of the natural mothers to act as they might have done in other situations, the post reunion relationship with their child often experienced problems and was therefore unsatisfactory to the mothers.

In relation to mothers who were experiencing unsatisfactory relationships there is one further interesting point of note. When this research was due to be published, all of the mothers were contacted to elicit their views on being included in a published piece of research as opposed to a piece which was undertaken for purposes of an academic qualification. Conversations obviously took place with the mothers in relation to how their reunions were progressing (which was now three years after the interviews). Two of the six mothers whose relationships had been unsatisfactory had now established satisfactory relationships with their children, which was, naturally a situation of great joy to the mothers.

Finally, in relation to the findings of this study, it is worth noting that two of the reunion relationships had ceased. In one instance the relationship did not develop past the reunion meeting, despite the adopted person assuring the mother and the social worker that they would be interested in continued contact. In fact the child “disappeared” and did not answer to any contacts made of them in the year/s after the meeting.

In the other case, a relationship developed between the mother and child which lasted for about four years. On reflection, the mother identified difficulties which had developed as the relationship progressed. In her opinion, at times during the relationship contact had been too intense, and at times there had been conflict between her child who had been adopted and her other child. There were differences in social class and financial status and throughout the four years there had nearly always been an erratic and haphazard contact pattern.

Reflections on reunion and post reunion relationships

Overall, the mothers in this study were reflective on reunion and on their post reunion relationships and what it all meant to them. Indeed, many communicated to me that the research interview gave them a chance to reflect on the totality of the adoption, reunion and post reunion experience for the first time. They found this process to be both difficult and rewarding.

Irrespective of whether relationships were going well, were unsatisfactory or had ceased, all mothers were glad they had been through the process. The greatest benefit identified by mothers was that they knew their child was alive and well, and they felt empowered as a result of having this information. The spoke of feeling “more fulfilled”, “more confident”, “complete”, and “proud of themselves”. They also reported how they “no longer felt inferior”. All of these emotional responses have been found to be the reality of mothers in other studies such as Sullivan and Groden (1995), Silverman (1988) and Cotton and Parish (1987)

It is important however to note that in the aftermath of reunion, mothers experienced a different kind of ongoing sadness and grief which was difficult for them. As relationships developed the impact of what had been missed through *not having had the opportunity* to take on a mothering role of rearing their own child hit forcibly. Throughout the intervening years, mothers had mourned for the infant they had relinquished. Now they were in contact with an adult they did not know and who had been nurtured and raised by another mother. No matter what happiness the reunion brought, they had missed their child's years as an infant, as a toddler, as a teen and in some instances the years of their twenties and beyond. Once adoption had taken place, the adoptive parents had been given an opportunity that was forever denied to the natural mother. In instances where natural mothers did not or could not have subsequent children, they were forever denied the opportunity of motherhood.

A further sadness for the majority of the mothers was that the name of their child had been changed. It was generally the policy of adoption practice to encourage adoptive parents to change a child's name, but whether it is or not, once the adoptive parents take on the rights and responsibilities for a child, it is their decision to name a child as they wish. Natural mothers however, wondered how it was they were asked to name the child if it was going to be changed or struck from the official record and one woman suggested that “it took away the bit of dignity” she had about her child.

And yet another factor with which these mothers have had to contend has been the complete change in social attitudes in Ireland towards women relinquishing children for adoption. The numbers are now extremely low, and whereas women in the study most often reported great support for their reunion journey, they also had been questioned as to how it was that “any mother could ever part with her baby?”. Even where these questions were not asked directly, the women themselves, living in a much changed society, often found it hard to reflect on their own actions at the time, despite having lived through it. One mother was particularly graphic in her memory:

“When I think of it, an animal would fight for its child but I didn't. I just did what I was told to do, and I thanked them for it.” (res 1)

Overall what emerges from the responses and descriptions of these mothers is that no matter how good the experience of reunion and the relationship post reunion, it they can only offer partial relief to a mother who relinquished a child. Reunion cannot change the past and give these mothers back their baby, and so some part of the disempowerment and

everlasting sadness which had been created by relinquishment remains. This ongoing reality of their lives was best summed up by the women themselves:

“You are never prepared for the fact that it was a child you handed up and what you got back was an adult”.(res 2)

“It is like when you meet her it was this tall blond slim young woman and I had left a six day old baby and there is more of me needed to hold the baby than the relationship with this young women” (res 1)

Conclusion

In a country like Ireland where changing trends, especially in the empowerment of women in relation to their sexuality and independence have become the norm, the practice of relinquishing a child for adoption has almost ceased. The demise of the power of the Catholic Church and the influence of European Union (social and equality legislation) have contributed considerably to this empowerment.

However, the Annual Reports of the Irish Adoption Board demonstrate that adoption as a way of forming a family today in Ireland is actually increasing significantly year on year. This is now happening through inter-country adoption. Since 1980 over 3,500 children have been adopted from many different countries into Irish families (1). Obviously, all of these adoptions involve a mother who gave birth, and who, for whatever reason, had to part with her child. Under current adoption practice in Ireland, these mothers still have no right or access to any information in relation to the family who have adopted her child, nor any information as to how her child is progressing and whether or not the adoption has been satisfactory.

We know now through this study, and from other research which has identified the emotional impact of adoption for natural mothers, that for at least a significant proportion of mothers who have relinquished their child, mothers never forget about their child. We also know that they would most often like to know how their child is progressing. It must surely be time to change current adoption practice and to establish systems within our state agencies to ensure that this starts to happen immediately.

(1) See also the poster presentation at this conference entitled :*Inter-Country Adoption in Ireland – A Study of Experiences, Outcomes and Service Needs*. Professor Sheila Greene, Ruth Kelly, Elizabeth Nixon, Zosia Borska, Aoife Daly and Greg Kelly, Childrens Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

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