Birth Mothers in Adoption Reunion Stories: The Complicated Status of Women Who Place Their Children for Adoption

A Thesis in Sociology

By

Anna Walker

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor in Arts with Specialized Honors in Sociology

May 2020

Abstract

This thesis aims to answer the question of how birth mothers who place their children for adoption are constructed through a content analysis of the television show *Long Lost Family*. Adoption trends generally are discussed, followed by a discussion of how mothers are socially constructed and the ways in which they are expected to behave. Following an overview of the literature on adoption reunion, the findings of the content analysis are discussed. Mothers are expected to be morally upright and to place their children before themselves. Given that birth mothers who have placed their children for adoption are not raising their children, their status as a mother is complicated. *Long Lost Family*, however, ultimately positions them as good mothers because they often act in ways that are in line with intensive mothering (Hays 1996), such as rationalizing their decisions as being in the child's best interest and continuing to think of and care about the adoptee. This construction is important because it allows viewers to feel good about the supposedly inherent bond between a birth mother and child, and allays fears about deviant mothers by allowing those who may otherwise have been labeled as a bad mother to be viewed positively. The media's role in disseminating views to those watching is also important, because this can then impact the ways viewers think about birth mothers.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Motherhood is an identity that has many cultural associations and expectations, and it is not uncommon to hear specific phrases in regard to mothers, such as the idea that mothers have eyes in the back of their head, or that someone has a face that only a mother could love. These kinds of phrases, while often made jokingly, are indicative of the fact that there are many ideas surrounding what a mother should be, such as that a mother unconditionally loves her children regardless of what they look like or do, or that they are omnipotent and all-seeing thanks to the eyes in the back of their heads. Society has a vested interest in maintaining proper motherhood, as it is often claimed that mothers are a primary source of socialization for children and are often the ones primarily responsible for their children's well-being and day-to-day care. Given this, society uses many tactics, such as the media, to promote proper mothering practices.

There are many situations, however, in which the motherhood identity can become complicated, such as the role of mothers who place their children for adoption for various reasons. Even though they are not raising the children they birthed, these women can provide an interesting lens through which motherhood can be examined, especially in the cases of adoption reunion in which they meet and possibly have a relationship with the child whom they placed for adoption. How are these mothers constructed? Are they viewed as bad mothers for leaving their children or as good mothers who gave their babies up because they knew adoption would give them a better life?

The television show *Long Lost Family* provides the opportunity of attempting to answer this question, as it facilitates adoption reunions between birth parents, often the birth mother, and adoptees. This thesis analyzes two seasons of this show in order to analyze the depictions and portrayals of birth mothers found in the cases it includes, and how the birth mothers do, or do not, engage in proper mothering behaviors and whether or not they fulfill cultural expectations of motherhood. These depictions are then connected to the literature surrounding the motherhood identity, such as studies on intensive mothering, and the ways in which mothers are portrayed in the media. This thesis ultimately argues that while these birth mothers are in an interesting position regarding motherhood status, they do engage in and reinforce dominant modes of mothering and are portrayed as being good mothers, which provide a reinforcing of dominant expectations of mothers.

Chapter 1 will discuss adoption generally, including trends both over time and across cultures in order to give a basic understanding of the different factors involved in adoption, such as who is more likely to adopt, who is less likely to be adopted, as well as various issues faced by those involved such as barriers to LGBT+ adoptions. There is also a discussion of some issues in adoption such as white parents facing struggles in transracial adoptions and socializing their children, and the problematic trend of removing Native American children from their families and placing them in boarding schools or with white families. There is also a discussion of rates of disruption and dissolution to give a broad idea of the rates of success in adoption and rates of adoption

not working out. This chapter aims to give a broad review of adoption generally to offer a basic understanding of the various factors involved in adoption.

Chapter 2 looks at the expectations of mothers. It opens with a look at motherhood over time, particularly motherhood over the past two centuries, and then describes the ideal of intensive mothering, which is the current dominant model of mothering in the United States. This chapter looks at how mothers are expected to always put their children before themselves and engage in a child-focused style of mothering. There is also a discussion of the different ways that this expectation affects stay-at-home mothers and mothers in the workplace, and how their methods of mothering, even as they differ, ultimately reinforce this ideal of intensive mothering. There is also a discussion of the ways in which mothers manage their self-image and the image they project to the world, as well as a discussion of studies regarding mothers and custody, another avenue in which expectations of mothers can arise. Finally, the chapter offers a brief discussion of the ways in which mothers are portrayed in the media, the ways that this enforces and broadcasts expectations of appropriate mothering through television shows aimed at preschoolers and cartoon shows aimed at adults such as *Family Guy*, and the ways in which motherhood is policed by the media. These media depictions are especially important as they portray appropriate mothering and, due to media's impact on viewers' opinions, can influence how people expect mothers to behave.

Chapter 3 offers an overview of the literature on adoption reunion to set up the discussion of depictions of birth mothers in adoption reunions. It starts with a brief discussion of the laws regarding adoption records and the information that can be

accessed by adoptees and birth families regarding the adoption. There is then a discussion of the media and adoption reunion and broader social support for reunion and the beliefs of what information (identifying vs. non-identifying, etc.) should be available, and to whom (adoptee vs. birth parent). Academic studies of reunion are then brought in, which discuss the outcomes of adoption reunion, the process of searching and reasons adoptees and birth mothers decide to initiate a search. The results of these reunions are often positive and result in successful relationships, which often look different for each case. This chapter also discusses the questions and struggles that can come as a result of reunion, such as adoptees and birth parents having to navigate a relationship without having guidelines or previous experience to go on. This chapter serves to set up basic information on adoption reunion to provide background information for the following chapter, which analyzes a television show that facilitates adoption reunion.

Chapter 4 provides the results of a content analysis of two seasons of the television show *Long Lost Family*. It describes the methodology used, provides a brief description of the show and its set up, and the highlights ways in which the data provided by the show needs to be qualified. There is then a description of the results and categories in which the reunion cases fit, with a summary table included in the appendix. A discussion of individual cases and trends found ensues. This is followed by a discussion of how the show portrays birth mothers and the ways in which the birth mothers engage in larger cultural ideals of motherhood such as intensive mothering. The conclusion following Chapter 4 provides further analysis of the data obtained from the television show and connects it to previous chapters, specifically Chapter 2, and analyzes how birth

mothers in *Long Lost Family* fit in with intensive mothering and ideals of appropriate mothering, how this identity navigates cultural expectations, and why these portrayals are significant.

Chapter 1- Adoption

Introduction

There are many ways of having children, whether it is a woman having a child biologically, using in vitro fertilization, using a surrogate, or receiving fertility treatment if the couple is infertile. Another way that parents can add to their family is through adoption. 119,514 children were adopted in 2012 in the United States (Trends in U.S. Adoptions 2016). Also in 2012, "there were nearly 400,000 children in [the U.S.] foster-care system and 102,000 of these children were available for adoption" (Khanna and Killian 2015:570). Adoption has been prevalent in society, both in the United States and in other cultures, throughout history. It has, of course, not stayed constant, and the way that it is viewed has changed significantly and is, like many other things, not consistent cross-culturally.

Definitions

It is important when discussing adoption to first understand the different types of adoption, as they are not all the same and each can present different challenges. Stranger adoptions, or unrelated adoptions, involve a couple, or a single parent, adopting a child who is not biologically related to them. This particular type of adoption is "substantially more common among white, well-educated, and high-income individuals" (Bachrach et al. 1991:707). Stepparent adoptions are when a stepparent or relative adopts the child, and are "more common among those who are black, poor, or poorly educated" (Bachrach et al. 1991:707). Adoptions are occasionally informal, meaning that there is no legal

documentation, simply an agreement between the birth parents and the parents adopting the child; this agreement can be permanent or temporary. A stronger type of adoption is the formal adoption, which involves a legal transfer of parental rights (Riley and Van Vleet 2012). Finally, there are private adoptions, in which an agency is not involved in the adoption process, something that is legal in most of the states in the U.S., and is more likely to involve a baby being put up for adoption immediately or close to after birth. In contrast, public adoptions, such as the foster care system, are more likely to involve older children. Some of these adoptions are more common than others. Brabender and Fallon cite a statistic that claims that 25% of adoptions are transnational, meaning they involve a child from another country, 38% are private adoptions, 37% involve children from the foster care system, and 40% are stepparent or relative adoptions, which can be either formal or informal (2013:3).

Trends in U.S. Adoption

There is also variation in who, exactly, is giving children up for adoption. While it was previously the case that married women were primarily the ones giving up children for adoption, Riley and Van Vleet (2012) claim that this changed by the 1950s when 90% of the mothers giving children up for adoption were single mothers. Adoptions most often, but not always, involve a child moving to a 'better' social status, such as being removed from a poor, black family, or form a disadvantaged country, and placed in a white, middle-class family.

As previously mentioned, public adoptions are more likely to involve older children as opposed to infants. Many families prefer to adopt babies as they can avoid the feelings of loss associated with not having a shared history with the adopted child that can occur in adoptions with older children (Brabender et al. 2013:63). However, this has not always been the case. Riley and Van Vleet (2012) state that it used to be that parents adopting a child preferred to adopt older children, as they were able to immediately begin making economic contributions to the family in ways that an infant could not, such as by doing housework or working in a factory. Another reason that families preferred adopting older children is because society previously believed that personalities were inherent, and that the environment a child was raised in had no effect on how a child behaved, which made adopting a baby a potential issue if they had a poor personality. Babies would go to places referred to as baby farms, where someone would take the unwanted baby in exchange for money, and where the babies likely would not survive if a home was not found for them.

The shift to what is seen today, parents preferring babies, occurred along with a shift in how society viewed children. People began to believe that a child's nature and personality was not entirely inherent, and that the parents, the community, and other environmental factors had an impact on how the child developed. Additionally, children began taking on a new meaning after they were not able to work in factories and provide economic resources, and began to take on emotional significance (Riley and Van Vleet 2012:43). When children died prior to the nineteenth century, parents did not mourn, and frequently did not attend funerals for their children (Zelizer 1985:24). Parents were not

excessively attached to children, and when one died, it was “a common practice to name newborns after a sibling who had recently died” (Zelizer 1985:25). However, this had changed by the nineteenth century when parents became much more attached to their children and began to mourn their death greatly. This shift is evident in the way parents addressed death. Where previously parents, even the rich, had their children placed in cheap shrouds and buried in common graves, in the mid-1850s it became common for children to be buried in specially designed coffins (Zelizer 1985:26). This change in the way parents handled death clearly indicates a shift in the way children were valued, and shows how much more children were valued after the shift in sentiment.

Race also plays a factor in adoption, and will be discussed in greater detail further on. According to Riley and Van Vleet (2012), until the 1960s, agencies were very careful to place children in homes only with parents that looked and were like them. These distinctions included religion, race, and ethnic groups. Children were placed in homes with parents that were of the same religion and race as them, as those were two things that were seen as very important and inherent characteristics at the time. Not only were children of different races only allowed to be adopted by parents of the same race, which, depending on the resources available, was unlikely and at times impossible, as was the case of black families to whom adoption services were not offered until the 1970s, but children of different ethnic groups such as Italian and Irish were also kept separate.

Variation in Adoption

Riley and Van Vleet (2012) also outline changes in the adoption process, which they state began in the mid nineteenth century. In 1851, Massachusetts passed 'An Act to Provide for the Adoption of Children,' which required that adoptive parents be thoroughly screened and found to be suitable, birth parents to consent to the adoption, and that legal ties between the adoptive parent and child(ren) be created. This is still the case in Massachusetts, as they are one of the states in which private adoption is not legal. Another change occurred in the 1970s, with the increasing use of birth control. This meant that women had more control over when and if they would have children, and led to an increase in acceptance of sex without marriage. This meant that there was a decrease in the number of babies being put up for adoption, as evidenced by the fact that there was a 45% drop in the number of children being placed for adoption between 1971-1974. This decrease led many agencies and families to look outside the U.S. for adoptable children, leading to "a 33% increase in the number of foreign children admitted to the United States for adoption between 1972-1973" (Riley and Van Vleet 2012:52).

Who Adopts?

Not only is there variation in the types of adoptions in the United States, those who adopt also have a range of characteristics. According to Brabender and Fallon, "adoptive parents tend to be older than biological parents, …better educated[,] and more affluent" (Brabender and Fallon 2013:4). More educated women are more likely to marry later, and may be more likely to adopt as the risk of infertility increases as women age.

This may mean that they have more time to acquire the resource necessary to adopt a child as they have spent longer in the work force (Riley and Van Vleet 2012). In a study of 34 adoptive parents, only two parents were younger than 40, with the majority being in their 40s or 50s, and one who was 67 (Killian and Khanna 2019:263). Adoptive parents tend to be of higher socioeconomic status, and this is not surprising considering the potentially prohibitive costs of adoption. This was also supported by the previous study mentioned, in which the majority of the 34 respondents claimed to be middle or upper-middle class (Killian and Khanna 2019:263). Adoption can cost anywhere from $5,000-$40,000, and while the cost of an adoption through the foster care system can occasionally be subsidized by the federal government, most adoptions are expensive (Riley and Van Vleet 2012:57). Thus, it makes sense that families that adopt have more money, as they have to have the necessary resources to pay for it.

It is ironic that adoption is so expensive, given the shift in sentiment about children. In the nineteenth century, when someone was sued for the death of a child, the court determined how much the plaintiff was owed by what the child would have been able to contribute economically to the family (Zelizer 1985). This has changed, however, and the money owed has begun to be determined by "the subjective emotional value of a particular child" (Zelizer 1985:158). Children are described as "priceless" (Zelizer 1985:165), and yet there are often high sums paid out for their deaths. Given this shift in pricing the death of children, it is not surprising that adoptions are expensive. Unwanted babies that were previously able to be sold to baby farms for ten dollars (Zelizer 1985:169) were, if they were white, able to be sold for $10,000 in the 1950s, a significant

increase due largely to the shift in the sentimental value of children in the 1900s (Zelizer 1985:170). It is interesting to note that the price for children changes depending on race, as adopting a black child is cheaper even than a child that is half black, half Asian, half Latinx, etc., but especially cheaper than white babies (Berkowitz 2011:111).

Many LGBT+ families choose adoption as a way to have children, and it has been found that LGBT+ couples with children are approximately four times more likely to have adopted (Gates 2013:1). Additionally, adoption is one of the only viable options for gay men to expand their family, the other option being surrogacy. It has been estimated that 22,000 adoptees are being raised in same-sex households in the U.S. (Gates et al. 2007:7). Adoption is not a possibility all gay men think about, however, as many gay men felt that being gay meant that having children was not an option for them, as they are not able to have children on their own (Berkowitz 2011:118). This is not surprising, given that there has been significant stigma surrounding the LGBT+ community, and the fact that many U.S. states barred it in the past (Berkowitz 2011:112). Even heterosexual couples may have difficulty accessing information on adoption, as doctors may provide inaccurate information, such as indicating that adoption is not a viable option, and that there are poor results in adopted children (Bartholet 1994:185). There often is a shift in gay men prior to adoption that allows them to see that they can "integrate gayness with fatherhood" (Berkowitz 2011:118).

Given that there may be issues gay parents face in adoption, it is often necessary to make use of informal network to get information on adoption, as evidenced by the conversation one man had with a woman in a store, who lowered her voice and was

discreet about giving him the information on an adoption group (Berkowitz 2011:118). This need to be discreet is also found in many adoption agencies, where it is not uncommon for there to be a policy of assuming heterosexuality in their clients, which can lead to parents keeping silent about their sexual orientation even where gay couples can adopt, and/or only one parent having a legal relationship to the child (Berkowitz 2011:112), which can present an issue should the couple ever break up. Before gay parents could legally adopt in all U.S. states, gay couples looking to adopt often had to find ways to circumvent laws preventing them from adoption. This could involve going to another state, which could require renting an apartment to receive residency, or only one parent being listed on the birth certificate, and thus being the only parent legally recognized by the state (Berkowitz 2011:121). The option of going out of state to adopt can be costly, which can also support the data stating that adoptive parents tend to be of higher SES, meaning they have the resources to do so (Brabender and Fallon 2013:4). Although gay couples can now adopt in all states, laws on adoption vary by state which can lead to issues for gay parents, including the fact that unmarried gay partners may encounter problems regarding their marriage status and legal recognition as parents when traveling (Harris 2017). Another issue that comes up in adoption for LGBT+ individuals is the fact that some states have religious exemption laws that allow agencies to reject LGBT+ people (Moreau 2018). In one study of LGBT+ individuals, 63.2% of respondents were worried they would face discrimination because of their sexual orientation, 8.3% because of their gender identity, and 9.8% because of their gender expression (Goldberg et al. 2019: 5). Further, the authors claim that the ways that

prejudice appears in LGBT+ adoptions can either be explicit or can be subtle, and have varied ramifications such as increased disruption rates or prospective LGBT+ adopters giving up (Goldberg et al. 2019:9). Clearly, even though the laws technically allow LGBT+ individuals to adopt, the reality of adoption is quite different for them.

Not only can it be more difficult for gay parents to adopt, there are also different patterns in who they adopt. There is evidence that gay couples are more likely to adopt a child that is not the same race as them or children of color than straight couples (Gates 2013:1), and gay men are more likely to adopt children with disabilities (Berkowitz 2011:112). Given the social stigma surrounding the LGBT+ community, and the racism evident in what children do and do not get adopted, it is not surprising that "in an attempt to match the least desirable applicants with the least desirable children, gay men (and lesbian women) were often matched with hard-to-place and special-needs children" (Berkowitz 2011:111).

Who Is (Or Is Not) Adopted?

Similarly, there have been changes in the statistics of what children get adopted, and the characteristics are not equally distributed. Black children are heavily overrepresented in the national foster care system (Roberts 2002:8). Not only that, but African American children are also twice as likely to remain in care as they are to be adopted (Barth 1997:294). While black children are overrepresented, Latinx and Asian children are underrepresented (Riley and Van Vleet 2012:84). Older children also struggle, and it has been found that for every year that a child remains in foster care their

chances of being adopted decrease by 16%, or 1/6 (Barth 1997:289). When people think of older children in the foster care system, the image of a troubled teenager may come to mind, however this is not the demographic to which this description applies. Older children, in the way that they will be here referred to, can also be toddlers. It has been found that "one and a half as many [toddlers] remain in care as are adopted" (Barth 1997:289). Also facing significant struggles in adoption are children with disabilities. In 2015, 81.3%, by far the majority, of children in the foster care system had special needs, which meant that they had been "diagnosed with emotional, mental, or physical disabilities" (Buckles and Pomeranz 2017:25). Not only were they the majority of children in foster care, once adopted they faced significant challenges in having the adoption last.

Why Adopt?

There are many reasons to adopt, among them the desire to have children, having the resources, and being unable to have children biologically (Bachrach et al. 1991:706). Adoption is often preceded by infertility (Brabender and Fallon 2013:3), which can lead to many different things. First, adoption is rarely the first choice for parents seeking to have children, and is typically only considered and pursued as an option once all other avenues have been investigated. Eighty-seven percent of women who looked into adoption claimed that they had first investigated the possibility of fertility treatment. More educated women are more likely to have children later due to delaying marriage and potentially aging out of fertility (Riley and Van Vleet 2012:58). Many women first seek fertility treatment before adopting, and this may also be a reason that older women

are more likely to adopt, as they first took the time to explore other options. Another factor in delaying adoption is the fact that many adoption agencies require "that applicants demonstrate that they have 'resolved' their feelings about infertility" (Bartholet 1994:186).

Adoption Disruption and Dissolution

As great an option as adoption can be, it does not always work out for a variety of reasons. While 59% of parents with adopted children between the ages of 13 and 18 were satisfied with the adoption, and 80% of parents with adopted children over 19 were similarly happy according to one study (Barth 2000:447), there is a 10-25% rate of disruption in adoptions, with the variation being due to the context and sample sizes of the studies looked at (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012:2). There are two ways for an adoption to fail, and the difference depends on the timing of the decision that it is not working being made. An adoption disrupts when the adoption is terminated after the child has been placed in a home but before the placement has been legally finalized, and dissolves when the adoption is terminated after it has been legally finalized (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012:1). For the purpose of this paper disruption and dissolution will be used interchangeably.

There are many factors that affect whether an adoption will dissolve or disrupt. Children who are older, are still attached to their birth families, or have a history of sexual abuse have higher disruption rates, as do children with physical disabilities, as was mentioned previously. Parents who lack social support, have unrealistic expectations, and

mothers that are well-educated also have higher disruption rates (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012:4). Agencies that have lacking histories of the children in their care, provide inadequate training for parents, and offer insufficient post-adoption services also contribute to higher rates of adoptions terminating (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012:4). Children with insecure attachments to adults are also at higher risk of disrupted adoptions. Insecure attachments lead to punishment seeking behavior, which can result in negative feelings in the adoptive parents, who may then withdraw and give up, in turn contributing to the child's perception of insecure attachment to the parent, perpetuating a cycle of negativity (Sack and Dale 1982:448).

It is also important to understand public opinions of adoption; social support is a factor in adoption success. Parents may be either stigmatized or supported based on the decisions that they make. In a study of 1,554 United States adults, 32% of respondents supported adoptions without qualification, but 25-30% were worried about the mental health of adopted children (Wegar 2000:363). Many adopted children experience society questioning their place in the family, and whether or not they belong (March 1995:654). Some adoptees, including those in March's study reported family members expecting them to be grateful for having been adopted, being excluded and singled out by family members, and occasionally receiving no inheritance (March 2000:657). Outside questioning of adoptive families can result in uncertainty in adopted children, leading them to potentially question their place in the family. Additionally, social support is a factor in disrupted and dissolved adoptions, and if society does not support adoption, those that adopt may struggle.

However, the impact of social stigma may also be a benefit. Fifty-eight percent of respondents in a survey believed that it is not acceptable to a return a child even if they present significant problems, and 23% believed that it was alright. Age and education were two factors that influenced these statistics. Twenty-one percent of respondents who were aged 18-29 years old believed that it was acceptable, and 35% of 30-44 year olds believed similarly. It was also found that the higher level of education a respondent had achieved the more acceptable they believed it is for a parent to change their mind about an adoption (Hollingsworth 2003:162). Hollingsworth puts forth the expectancy value model, which asserts that attitudes change and form as individuals gain new information and experience new things as a potential reason for why older and more educated people are more accepting towards disrupted adoptions (2003:164). While older and more educated people are more likely to support returning the child, accepting this outcome is still not the majority, as 42% of the respondents had some reservations about returning the child (Hollingsworth 2003:162). Given the fact that society does not, as a whole, support returning the child, parents contemplating disrupting or dissolving the adoption may be less likely to go through with it or may explore other options to avoid facing the stigma of having returned the child.

Is Adoption Problematic?

Not only does adoption not always work out the way we want it to, it is also important to note the ways in which it can be problematic. Riley and Van Vleet (2012) state that adoption typically involves a child being taken from a family or country that is viewed as disadvantaged and less valued and then adopted by a family that is 'better,'

leading to adoption often involving children being taken from lower status families and being adopted into families with a higher. Given the fact that it is also often the case that children are adopted out of families of color and by white families, this leads to potential problems as the children are raised.

White parents often struggle, and do not always succeed, to properly socialize children of color. Parents may distance themselves from this issue, meaning they may not address the fact that their child is from a different culture, or only address it in passing, or claim that they are allowing the child to choose whether or not to maintain a connection to their culture (Quiroz 2015:432-433). Another strategy adoptive parents might take is to 'keep' the child's culture by "retaining the child's birth name, learning about their child's country and culture of origin, learning their child's native language, visiting the sending country, and engaging in cultural activities such as ethnic celebrations" (Quiroz 2015:433). Finally, parents may 'purchase' culture, meaning they buy objects, food, or experiences from their child's culture (Quiroz 2015:434). Many parents feel that doing these things is maintaining "a sustained link to [their children's] family origin and that through other efforts [their] culture [is] being honored" (Quiroz 2015:435). These three categories of tactics, however, can ignore some important nuances in the reasons why a parent adopts a certain strategy. A study of 34 parents of children adopted transracially found six ways of categorizing how parents addressed race in their children. Among parents who did not focus on race as significant, one group downplayed race because they felt it was not important, and another group did so because they did not believe that it should be important, while a third group deemphasized race due to lack of time or

interest. Some parents tried to handle race in fun ways while not actually addressing it in a significant way, some made race socialization a focus and attempted to thoroughly socialize their children. Finally, some parents had their view of race socialization change significantly after they had adopted. This study also notes that these views are not stable, and some parents shifted between them (Killian and Khanna 2019:265).

White parents may also struggle to socialize their children to be able to navigate racial discrimination, as they do not have the same adaptive strategies employed by parents of color. According to Harrison et al., adaptive strategies are "observable behavioral cultural patterns that are interpreted as socially adaptive or maladaptive within the social nexus" (Harrison et al. 1990:347). This means that adaptive strategies are those that allow minority populations to function among the dominant society (Harrison et al. 1990:347-348). One example of this is extended families that allow minority families to shift resources around and provide families with a sense of group identity (Harrison et al. 1990:351). Another is socializing them to have positive feelings about their ethnic group, and to think in ways that are focused on group cooperation (Harrison et al. 1990:355).

Not only might white parents struggle to raise nonwhite children, there are also differences in what races they are willing to adopt. It has been found that white parents prefer white babies, but even among those parents who "might be willing to adopt a non-white child, most prefer that these children are not black" (Berkowitz 2011:111). For instance, some parents would prefer to adopt an Asian child than a black child (Khanna and Killian 2015). This is supported by the fact that "white Americans who adopt transracially are five times more likely to adopt a non-African-American child than an

African-American child" (Berkowitz 2011:111). This could be for a variety of reasons, including lack of biases towards Asian culture or a lack of exposure and perception that Asian children are not as difficult to raise (Kim 2008). One parent adopted an Asian child because they wanted a child that was light skinned (Killian and Khanna 2019:265). Some perceive Asian children as being "easier to raise than their African American counterparts" (Khanna and Killian 2015:572). Asian children are also seen as being smarter, and have more sought after physical traits. In addition, some that adopted children from China felt that they wanted to save the children, which is "contrasted with stereotypes of unhealthy, black crack babies or abused black children who, by comparison, cannot be saved" (Khanna and Killian 2015:572).

The different types of families that have their children removed from their care is also an issue when it comes to adoption. Children are often removed from homes due to neglect, or failure to properly feed, clothe, and shelter children, but is often difficult to tell where poverty ends and neglect begins (Burroughs 2008). After all, how does an agency determine whether a parent is not taking their child to the doctor because they are being neglectful or because the clinic is far away, they do not have transportation, healthcare, or the resources to pay the fee out of pocket? There have been cases where a mother called social services to get her landlord to fix the abhorrent conditions in her apartment as she was concerned for her children's health. However, when social services arrived they took away her children because she had not been able to pay her electric bill that month, but could in a few weeks. The children were placed in foster care despite the mother's request for assistance (Burroughs 2008:43). Another case of children being

taken away from mothers who are doing their best while in poverty is that of Monique. Monique had left her baby with a sitter while she was looking for a job, but the baby was taken away when the sitter left him alone, even though it was not neglect by the mother that caused him being alone; she had done all she could to make proper arrangements (Burroughs 2008:43).

It is important to not ignore the racial component of this as well. Many people believe that African Americans prefer welfare to working and being financially independent, and are depicted as making up the majority of those on welfare (Neubeck 2001:4). This perception influences how people view welfare, and it has been found that when white people are receiving welfare they are viewed compassionately while when it is black people receiving assistance they are looked down on (Neubeck 2001:4). This is supported by Roberts (2002), who shows that white families have more options when facing financial struggles while black families are more likely to lose their children, which contributes to the overrepresentation of black children in foster care. Because we look down on black families on welfare, and are more likely to take their children away when they are unable to provide for them, this further perpetuates racist images of black families.

A discussion of the deficit model is not inappropriate in regards to adoption. The deficit model posits that when agencies are evaluating families and people in cultures or situations that are different from their own they are termed deficient and wrong (Salkind 2008:217), which is another factor in certain demographics, i.e. children of color, are overrepresented in foster care. This was evident when it was recognized that many Native

American homes were being judged based on what was expected of white, middle class families. This ignored the structural factors that played into why these homes were 'deficient,' such as the historical denial of Native rights, culture, land, and autonomy, which impacted these communities' economic status (Riley and Van Vleet 2012:89).

Another problematic aspect of adoption that has been mentioned but not thoroughly discussed is the racism inherent in taking nonwhite children and bringing them to 'better,' i.e. white and middle-class, families. This is strongly evidenced by the United States' history with taking Native American children and placing them in white homes to socialize them in white culture and erase their own. Stark and Stark (2006) state that prior to the 1940s, boarding schools for Native American children were used to institutionalize and assimilate Native children to white culture. These eventually closed, however, this was due to a shift to believing that institutions such as boarding schools and institutional living was not what was best for children rather than a shift in the belief that it was acceptable to remove children from their culture and destroy their connection to it. Instead, these children were placed for transracial adoption. It was found that 89% of Native American children who were in foster care in 1969 were adopted by a non-Native family, and that 25-35% of Native American children were removed from their families (Stark and Stark 2006:131). These statistics are troubling, as is the evidence that the attitudes surrounding the deficit model and removing children of color from their families has not seemed to change. While it has been recognized that the systematic removal of Native children from their families is wrong as evidenced by the Indian Child Welfare

Act being passed in 1978, the attitudes surrounding their removal are still used to justify removing children from their families.

Adoption is a multifaceted issue in society that is not always easy to discuss. On the one hand, adoption is a good thing because it is often taking children from situations that may be less than optimal and aiming to place them in homes that will treat them well and raise them to be fully functioning adults. On the other hand, however, it is important to be critical of the way adoption is handled in our society. There are many issues that come about in discussions of adoption: who is able to adopt, who is able to be adopted, and from what kind of homes are the children being taken, are three of the more salient questions that need to be answered. Can a white parent properly socialize a child of color? Why did the white parent adopt a child of that race? Did they prefer an Asian baby to a black baby? Why? When a child is taken from a home, is it because the home was deemed deficient by white standards, and could have been helped by government intervention and assistance, or was the child being abused and/or neglected? Are all prospective parents able to adopt equally, or are there different barriers for different types of parents? These are all very important questions to think about and answer when discussing adoption, and this chapter has aimed to do just that. There are clearly inequities in adoption that need to be addressed, issues that could have implications for how well an adoption will succeed. For instance, if a child is unhappy with how they are being socialized in regards to race, is it a happy adoption?

Adoption is an important issue in society, as it is far from uncommon. Additionally, it is an issue that is impacted by a variety of factors, from the adoptee, the

agency, the adoptive parents, among others. An important aspect of adoption that is especially salient is how mothers are expected to behave, both adoptive mothers and birth mothers. Given that there are often very narrow beliefs of what a good mother is and how they can behave, it is important to understand the expectations of mothers, which will be discussed in the next chapter, and how this relates to adoption and how it is viewed.

Chapter 2- Constructions of Mothers

Motherhood is an identity that has many associations, and many people have very specific ideas about what makes a good mother. These ideas and expectations, however, are constructed differently in different countries as well as over time. Intensive mothering is one construction of motherhood that has gained dominance in the United States currently, and as such is important to explore. Motherhood is an identity in which there is a vested interest in maintaining the ideal due to the expected role of the mother in socializing children. One way in which these expectations are transmitted is through media, both the news and television programs aimed at children. This chapter aims to outline the way that motherhood has been constructed over time, with a brief mention of motherhood in early Europe, the ideal of intensive mothering, adoptive mothers, and motherhood as depicted by the media to give an idea of how motherhood is viewed and the expectations it invokes.

The Construction of Motherhood Over Time

In Europe in the Middle Ages, childcare was often outsourced to wet nurses, or children were boarded elsewhere, and it was often the case that aristocratic children were primarily cared for by men. Less valued children were primarily cared for by women, but this was not because of any believed talent; it was largely due to women's low status (Hays 1996:23). During the 17th and 18th century in New England, fathers were largely in charge of child rearing as women were often believed to be too emotional to properly discipline children. Additionally, the manuals on child rearing that were available at the

time were largely Puritanical in origin and primarily written by men (Hays 1996:27). Although this view of child rearing was certainly not universal across the United States, Hays makes the claim that it was the dominant view (1996:28).

Starting in the 19th century in the U.S., motherhood began to be constructed as important, which coincided with the growing belief that children are innocent, that motherly affection is beneficial, and the change in methods of discipline from physical punishment to psychological (Hays 1996:29). During this time the home, women, and children were increasingly portrayed and constructed as being the moral opposite of the public life of men, which was seen as corrupt. Women were held responsible for maintaining and spreading virtue and morality to their husbands and children (Hays 1996:30). Mothers were held responsible for both the good and bad, both in their children and in society (Hays 1996:48). Social groups for mothers, such as reform groups, and child rearing manuals made for consumption by mothers were also increasingly popular during this period.

The public world of male wage labor and the private world of female domestic work correspond with capitalist expansion in the second half of the 19th century, as well as the fact that with the increasing use of factories, women's economic work lost much of its value. As a result, many women benefited from this new emphasis on women's domestic value (Hays 1996:33). The ideal of the domestic mother was not completely held by everyone in the U.S., as many middle class mothers did not follow it, choosing to still outsource childcare, often with considerable oversight over the paid caregivers (Hays 1996:36). Additionally, child rearing practices varied across location and class. Rural

families, for example, often made use of children's labor (Hays 1996:35), as did many working class families. These families often relied on strict discipline in order to instill obligation and obedience in their children so that they would stay and support the family rather than striking off on their own (Hays 1996:37).

At the end of the 19th century child rearing began to be viewed as a science, and mothers' contributions to and knowledge of child rearing were once again downplayed while expert and scientific advice became more valued (Hays 19969:39). Mothers were viewed as untrained, and were told to follow specific techniques to successfully raise a child, such as scheduled feeding and sleeping, as well as not picking up a crying baby and instead letting it cry itself out and learn to self soothe (Hays 1996:40). Affection and maternal overindulgence were once again vilified (Hays 1996:39).

What Hays refers to as the "permissive era" began in the 1930s, and saw the change in which child rearing became focused on the child and how they would best be served by parenting practices rather than how the child would benefit the family. This led to parenting and child rearing becoming much more centered on the needs and wants of children (Hays 1996:45). Another feature of this change is that there is a belief that children are valuable because they are inherently good not because of any reward the parent may receive (Hays 1996:125) and that child rearing is an important and meaningful activity (Hays 1996:126). This was accompanied by the beginning of studies and experts on child development (Hays 1996:46). There were many childcare manuals being produced at this time, and, with the diminishment of assistance from family due to

the increasing ideal of the nuclear family and geographic distance, they became the main source of childcare advice (Hays 1996:47).

While previously this ideal of motherhood had not been universal to the U.S. and that working class families often had other methods of child rearing (Hays 1996:34), they began to face pressures to subscribe to domesticity and intensive mothering during the Progressive Era. This was through societal reforms enforced by the state, such as mandatory education and laws regulating child labor (Hays 1996:42). This led to changes in the work patterns of working class mothers leaving the labor force once their children were old enough to enter into wage labor to leaving the work force when the children were young and reentering once the children were old enough to start school (Hays 1996:42-43).

In Hays' study, over half the mothers were responsible for all of the required tasks in child rearing while fathers helped out or shared responsibility for some tasks but were not solely responsible for any tasks. Women also spent four times as much time on child care than men (Hays 1996:99), and were responsible for seventy-four percent of all time spent on child care (Hays 1996:100). The mothers in the study often did not ask the fathers to take more responsibility due to viewing them as incompetent at child care (Hays 1996:101); the mothers stated that men do not pay enough attention to kids, often do not clean up messes, and often require specific directions when helping (Hays 1996:102). Even though these mothers often want more help from their partners, they do not ask due to worry that the men will not do it right whether due to not knowing how, being incapable of doing it, or not caring (Hays 1996:104). Mothers often rationalize not

asking for more help or not expecting more by saying that they should appreciate what little help they do get (Hays 1996:105). Similarly, mothers often take primary responsibility for child care because they, as a family member, are suited for child rearing because they are close to the child and have a vested interest in seeing the child do well, and of the two parents, mothers are viewed as better suited to raising a child due to their supposed nurturing nature and proclivity for multi-tasking and attention to detail (Hays 1996:129).

Expectations of Mothers

Sharon Hays, in the foundational text *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, discusses the mode of child rearing known as intensive mothering, and explores the way that it impacts mothers' view of themselves and other mothers. Hays also looks into how intensive mothering influences both stay-at-home and paid working mothers. According to Hays, at its simplest level appropriate child rearing is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (1996:8). Intensive mothering furthers this definition by claiming that children are priceless, and that these are the appropriate features of child rearing because they are "what children need and deserve" (Hays 1996:21).

Hays claims that the model of intensive mothering is either accepted or at least recognized by the majority of mothers (1996:72). Even if a mother does not subscribe to intensive mothering for whatever reason, she at least understands what it is and justifies why she does not participate in it. Hays also discusses the fact that appropriate mothering

is socially constructed, and that what a mother believes is best is influenced by class, race, religion, politics, education level (1996:76). Like many other things, motherhood is culturally and socially constructed, meaning it is not the same cross-culturally, or even historically. Following this vein of logic, Hays discusses the existence of class differences in mothering beliefs. She finds that working-class and poor mothers focus more on educating their children so that they have better opportunities later on, while middle-class mothers are more invested in developing self-esteem in their children (Hays 1996:86). Hays further hypothesizes that one of the reasons middle-class mothers can focus more on self-esteem is because it is assumed that they will have a quality education (1996:91). Ultimately, Hays concludes that class differences "do not pose a serious challenge to the dominance of the ideology of intensive mothering" (1996:95), as many mothers believe that they are doing what is best for their children, and follow intensive mothering as much as their circumstances and beliefs allow.

Mothers, according to Hays, are shown contradictory images of what mothers should be and this exposes them to significant strain. Mothers are expected to either devote all of their time to their children by staying at home or work but perfectly handle the demands of home and work (Hays 1996:131-132). Additionally, while this strain can be different for working mothers than for stay-at-home mothers, they do share some similarities. Many employed mothers cite worries of getting bored and going crazy, never getting to engage in intellectual pursuits, and loss of identity as reasons that they choose employed work (Hays 1996:135). Many stay-at-home mothers also recognize these fears, and this causes problems for them. Hays claims that women recognize loss of identity as

a result of the devaluation of mothers' work in society (1996:137). Stay-at-home mothers want to be the one primarily responsible for childcare, and in their ideological work they make themselves feel content with the decision to stay home by emphasizing how important it is to prioritize their children and use mothers that they perceive as failing to do that as examples of why staying at home is valid (Hays 1996:139).

Mothers who work also face many difficulties and, much like stay-at-home mothers, focus on prioritizing their children's needs. Many employed mothers worry that they are not spending enough time with their children, and that the time they do spend is not good enough (Hays 1996:141). Many working mothers justify working by claiming that their paid work is for the benefit of their children, both because it provides needed financial resources (Hays 1996:146) and because it increases the quality of time spent with children because mothers are excited to see their kids when they get home (Hays 1996:147). Some mothers also cite paid caregiving as increasing children's development (Hays 1996:147). Both mothers who work and those who stay at home rationalize their decisions by reifying their commitment to intensive mothering.

Many mothers also engage in impression management in order to strengthen and reinforce their public image as being congruent with their identity (Collett 2005:330). This often entails using their child to reinforce their image, and this is especially effective with young children. Given that children are seen as reflective of their parents, mothers in particular (Collett 2005:331), their use as a prop to strengthen the motherhood identity is unsurprising. One way in which mothers use their children as props is buying brand name clothing, although some mothers cite the comfort and quality of the clothes as the reasons

for purchase despite the fact that children outgrow clothes quickly. This phenomenon is found even in mothers who are concerned about money, who will purchase name brands for their children but will strategically choose when to purchase them so that the purchase coincides with important events where the child will be visible, or will purchase them at thrift stores or during sales to save money (Collett 2005:335). The times mothers most often dress up their children are for school and church, and mothers are more likely to be concerned about appearances when the audience is unknown or unfamiliar (Collett 2005:336).

All of the mothers interviewed, with the exception of one, believed that the way they dress their child and the child's appearance is a reflection more of the mother than of the child. Bathing and the cleanliness of the child is also important, possibly more so that the clothing label (Collett 2005:338). Some of the mothers noted a difference between when a child seems to have started the day clean and has gotten messy due to food or other messes and when a child seems to have not been bathed properly. This is a way for mothers to differentiate between themselves and those who they see as bad mothers who are blamed for their dirty children (Collett 2005:339). It is interesting to note that the author found that many mothers also tried to soften their initial judgment of these mothers as part of their impression management, as they did not want to be seen as judgmental. Many of the mothers also claim that they dress their children better than they dress themselves (Collett 2005:340), and spend more money on their children than they do on themselves (Collett 2005:341). This finding is in line with the ideal of intensive mothering, as the majority of the time and care these women expend is on their children,

and they sacrifice spending money on themselves and caring for their personal appearance in order to make sure their children are clean and well-dressed, so that they can be publicly viewed as a good mother.

It is also interesting to look at custody decisions in cases of divorce. During the colonial era fathers typically got custody of children, but mothers were preferred by the end of the nineteenth century due to the belief that women are more nurturing and therefore should get custody, especially during early childhood. By the late 1990s, most states had no explicit preference for which parent gets custody, although there is some debate (Mason and Quirk 1997:216). Some argue that only 10% of cases result in fathers receiving sole custody and that this is an indication of a preference for mothers while others claim that this statistic is due to fathers often not seeking sole custody (Mason and Quirk 1997:216-217). Custody decisions are often made with best interests of the child cited as the reason a certain parent was chosen, with the amount of time a parent spends with the child being a significant factor in these decisions (Mason and Quirk 1997:224). If mothers do get custody more often than men this could be a reason, as women often spend significantly more time on childcare than men. There is also a preference for choosing the parent who is most likely to allow the other parent a continued relationship with the child (Mason and Quirk 1997:226). While it was previously more common for a third party to gain custody, this is no longer the case (Mason and Quirk 1997:227-228), and this change could reflect beliefs about the importance of biology in parenting (Mason and Quirk 1997:228).

In a study of 517 mothers who did not have custody, Greif finds that 14.3% of these mothers paid at least some child support (Greif 1986:89), and these mothers made more money, were unlikely to be living with any of their children, and felt that they had more input in the child's life than mothers who did not. The women who did pay child support also paid a similar percent of their wages as men who pay child support (Greif 1986:90). The mothers who did pay child support cited legal requirements, feeling that it was fair, and wanting involvement with their children as reasons for paying child support, (Greif 1986:91), while women who did not pay child support cite financial struggles, the fact that it was not required or asked for by the father, and the fact that when they had custody of the child the father did not pay child support as reasons for not paying (Greif 1986:91-92). A small proportion of the mothers in this study paid child support, but of those who did some paid support so that they could be more involved in their children's lives, which is in line with the ideal that mothers are involved in their children's lives and care about them.

Adoptive Mothers

Brabender et al. (2013) claim that there are different types of loss in adoption, such as the loss of biologically related family continuity, loss of the ability to predict what the child will look like and how they will behave, the potential loss of parental rights in the case of LGBT+ parents adopting, and, if adopting an older child, the loss of experiencing their young childhood, among others (Brabender et al. 2013:62-63). There is also, according to Brabender et al., a misconception that these feelings go away post-adoption when, in fact, they can come about at any time (Brabender et al. 2013:63).

The authors claim that mothers adopting children they have fostered have a different experience than mothers adopting children they do not know, because they already know the child and can focus on real problems rather than worry about problems that may happen. It is also different, according to Brabender et al., because foster parents undergo training that can help increase their confidence in their ability to parent, while parents adopting outside of the foster system may not have this confidence (Brabender et al. 2013:66). Mothers adopting unknown children may also experience a perceived discrepancy between the expectations they have from the photograph that they are shown of the child and the actual child, and this can interfere with the mothers' ability to form positive attachments with the child quickly (Brabender et al. 2013:68). Another barrier to forming attachments within the adoption is hypervigilance about connection, or focusing so much on connecting with the child that it becomes difficult to actually connect (Brabender et al. 2013:70).

Additionally, womanhood is culturally linked to motherhood, specifically biological motherhood, thus being an adoptive mother may have a discrediting stigma attached to it. There are three themes found in stigma. Firstly, biological ties are assumed to be important for bonding and love, which leaves adoptive families to be considered second best. Second, due to their sometimes unknown genetic past, adopted children are viewed as second rate. Thirdly, adoptive parents are often not considered to be real parents due to their lack of a biological relationship to their children (Wegar 2000:364).

Brabender et al. also cite a common belief that concerning behavior in the child will cease to exist once placed in a home, but when this is not the case, or does not

happen as quickly as expected/desired, it can negatively impact the well-being of both parents and the child(ren) (Brabender et al. 2013:69-70). Mothers, post-adoption, may even have feelings of resentment, anxiety, restlessness, or confusion due to a perceived loss of freedom if their schedule or routine has been significantly changed due to the addition to the family, even if it was strongly desired ((Brabender et al. 2013:71), and may feel a loss of resources and confidence if there is destabilization in the family due to the adoption (Brabender et al. 2013:72).

Adoptive mothers also may experience something similar to post-partum depression known as postadoption depression syndrome. One study has found that 15% of adoptive mothers showed depressive signs 6 weeks after the adoption was finalized, while another found that 26% of adoptive mothers had these symptoms 5-12 weeks after the adoption and cited family environment as a key factor (Brabender et al. 2013:73).

The authors also discuss the fact that the effects of abuse and instability often persist even after the child has been placed in a stable home, and that concerning behaviors can return at any time, especially under stressful situations (Brabender et al. 2013:76). Brabender et al. claim that the way that parents define and understand a problem impacts the way they decide to handle/treat it, and that class status has a big impact on how people understand a problem (Brabender et al. 2013:77). This could be a reason that more educated parents, mothers in particular, have higher rates of disruption/dissolution, as they have higher education and more information and so may understand problems differently than parents with less education.

Mothers in the Media

Media plays a significant role in reproducing cultural norms, and can be an important tool for teaching social mores. Given this, it is also important to look at how mothers are portrayed in the media. Stephanie Wardrop, in an analysis of television shows aimed at preschoolers, draws on D. W. Winnicott's "good enough mother", and argues that this conception is at stake in the question of what a good mother looks like and how mothers can be competent as both a mother and a worker (Wardrop 2012:35). She cites the common belief that caretakers, specifically the mother, are vital for infant development of an independent self, and that maternal involvement with outside people is a vital step to this, as Winnicott argues, due to its influence on the infant's ability to develop a sense of other while keeping the continuity of the mother. This theory does recognize multiple caretakers in the infant's life and their value, but does assume the primacy of maternal care (Wardrop 2012:39).

Wardrop then looks at television shows for preschoolers and their portrayals of mothers due to their influence on children's view of mothers and their ability to then compare their own mother to those they see on TV, reproducing cultural ideals of mothering in those watching them (Wardrop 2012:40). Television impacts children's opinions of the world, and the family that is modeled on television can construct the ideal family for children even if their own family does not mirror this construction. Given that many children watch a significant amount of television, this construction and its dissemination is significant (Wardrop 2012:40). Wardrop does cite television shows that have begun to introduce working mothers, but with some qualifications. As examples

Wardrop lists *Ready! Set! Learn!*, a show on Discovery Kids, which includes a mother working as an architect but who does not leave the home. Wardrop also mentions the mother on *The Wild Thornberries*, who works, but as the cameraman and producer of her husband's documentaries, and in a capacity that allows her to stay with her family as they travel (Wardrop 2012:42).

Wardrop cites *Arthur* as the only television show that portrays working mothers whose work is outside of the home, although Arthur's mother's work is only part-time and largely done at home. When she does leave, according to Wardrop, it is at the expense of the family (Wardrop 2012:42). Regardless, it is significant that the working mothers in *Arthur* are not depicted negatively, and instead are shown to be competent and caring mothers, just as stay-at-home mothers are portrayed in other television shows (Wardrop 2012:43). When Arthur's mother does work outside the home on a full-time basis, his mother is shown to enjoy working in the office and getting to be in the professional world without having to worry about the home, but the children are not happy with this arrangement, feeling that they have been abandoned. The mother, however, does find ways to make both her outside the home job and taking care of her kids work. She does eventually give up her outside the home job and goes back to working part-time at home, and is shown to be relieved (Wardrop 2012:44).

Wardrop also addresses shows that portray the ideal, perfect mother who can effortlessly fulfill her children's needs in the absence of conflict and a father during work hours, regardless of whether this family form is possible or common (Wardrop 2012:44). One example of this type of family form is the family in *Little Bear*. Mother Bear is

shown to be a good mother who believes being a mother is her main job, and changes as necessary as Little Bear grows up to both satisfy his needs but also allow him to grow (Wardrop 2012:45).

According to Wardrop, some television shows do not actually show a mother but instead have a family member take on the role while still showing appropriate parenting (Wardrop 2012:46). She also complicates this role by discussing *Curious George* and the Man with the Yellow Hat, who is shown to be caring and competently responsible for George, while his female friend, a professor, is shown to be incapable of competently parenting George like the Man with the Yellow Hat does (Wardrop 2012:47). Wardrop concludes that while some television shows aimed at preschoolers reinforce the ideal of the perfect, stay-at-home mothers, shows that portray other caregivers such as the Man with the Yellow Hat may actually subvert the idea that mothers are best suited for childcare as these other caretakers are perfectly competent at parenting and childcare (Wardrop 2012:49).

Jo Johnson similarly examines mothers in popular animated television shows in the nineties. Johnson, in a study of *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, and *Family Guy*, looks at the effect of portrayals of mothers in these modern shows to determine how they reinforce or subvert them. She claims that animated mothers are often very attractive, kind, and capable of taking care of the house effortlessly, and are fulfilled by their caretaking role. If she does try to work outside the home her efforts often do not work (Johnson 2012:53). While the Flintstones, a popular cartoon in the 1960s (Johnson 2012:54), portrayed Wilma, the mother, as perfectly performing maternal expectations

while also maintaining the ideal of the sexually appealing woman, some of the animated shows that followed it and that Johnson examines, which aired in the nineties, offer a more rebellious conception of mothering (Johnson 2012:55).

Marge, the mother in *The Simpsons*, continues in the vein of Wilma; indeed, she is portrayed as the perfect mother, reserved, clad in pearls, and sacrificing her own needs for the family (Johnson 2012:56). Johnson even compares Marge, and other fictional mothers like her, with the holy mother, noting the similarities in their sacrificing their own needs, while also pointing out that the way they are built, with anatomically impossible waists, would not permit natural conception, another similarity with the holy mother. Their anatomy also maintains their sexual appeal (Johnson 2012:57). Marge is also the perfect mother because she is knowledgeable about her family's needs and is well able to fill them. Marge's construction as the perfect mother was certainly effective given that, in a UK Poll in 2004, she was voted as the best maternal role model (Johnson 2012:58).

Unlike Marge, the mother in *Family Guy*, Lois, is portrayed as notoriously sexual and is never shown to be a competent or sufficient mother, instead consistently ignoring the needs of her family. Johnson argues that it is Lois's behavior that produced Meg, the teenage daughter who is shown to act out for attention. Lois's motherhood is certainly subversive to the norm, not only in act but in form, as Lois is significantly curvier than Marge, and is without the pearls Wilma wears that protects her from sexual immorality (Johnson 2012:60). Lois's character rejects the idea of the perfect mother, and is shown to, in some ways, outright reject motherhood (Johnson 2012:62). The question is whether

her character is punished or rewarded in the show for her behavior, which is not fully here addressed.

Peggy, the mother in *King of the Hill*, has a design that is significantly more anatomically possible than Marge and other animated mothers such as Wilma, and even works outside the home as a substitute teacher. This construction goes against the ideal of the mother who works only inside the home, but Peggy is still shown to competently perform the role of mother at the same time (Johnson 2012:63). In one episode, Peggy gives up her job after feeling bad about her son's ADD diagnosis. She decides to take guitar lessons to keep busy, and eventually writes a song about a turtle that is "stuck in her shell" (Johnson 2012:65). Her husband does not like the song and encourages her to rewrite it, which she does, and he tells her he feels she needs to go back to work (Johnson 2012:65). She is here, in a way, getting permission to participate in the workforce from her husband, thus justifying her paid labor. Peggy, while she can be read as a feminist, does not consider herself one, and verbally denies this attribution. While she is not a feminist in her own view, Johnson claims that her character is significant, as she is a paid worker in the labor market while also being a mother, something that has not always been common, although it is increasingly so now (Johnson 2012:65).

Elizabeth Podnieks offers an analysis of the ways that celebrity mothers are policed by media and the way that they are constructed and viewed as a result of this policing. Podnieks claims that while celebrity mothers are often portrayed as being the perfect mother and subscribing to the ideals of intensive mothering and contributing to the ideal of the perfect mother (Podnieks 2012:90). While this is true, Podnieks also

argues that the media also consistently attempts to prove that these mothers are not perfect, and often attempt to show that they are in fact incompetent or even dangerous (Podnieks 2012:90-91). This policing is aided by media technology and journalists' ability to now analyze and publicize celebrities' lives in order to police and monitor their behavior (Podnieks 2012:91).

Podnieks specifically analyzes the ways in which the media portray Angelina Jolie and Britney Spears in different ways, with one being constructed as the ideal mom while the other is shown as a dangerous mother. Angelina is frequently depicted as being the perfect mother, and the media focuses significant attention on her role as a mother. She is shown to be a very competent mother who cares for her children and is capable of doing so while also looking glamorous (Podnieks 2012:92). Podnieks cites that fans often mimic the behavior of the celebrities they look up to, and thus Jolie serves the important function of supporting and spreading the ideal of intensive mothering. In interviews she maintains her devotion to her family and claims to love being a mother even as she expends time and effort in her career (Podnieks 2012:94).

Unlike Jolie, who also was a controversial figure prior to motherhood, Spears has had significantly more difficulty in escaping this construction. Spears has two children, and was frequently shamed in the media for bad mothering (Podnieks 2012:94). After a series of incidents involving rehab, the paparazzi, and shaving her head, Spears lost custody of her children. The way the media portrayed these incidents and her loss of custody was such that it made it seem as though the family desperately needs outside intervention, and calling on consumers of media to join in on judging her life. The fact

that many of the reports cite that there are inside informants also provides evidence of the constant surveillance to which celebrity mothers are subjected (Podnieks 2012:95). Spears, after the loss of custody, was required to be regularly tested for substances and use a parenting coach, which the media pounced on (Podnieks 2012:96).

The construction of these two is complicated, however, as Podnieks cites, as she mentions previously, the media's inclination to simultaneously dethrone the perfect celebrity mothers they enthrone. Jolie has also been constructed negatively with the media referencing her failure to fulfill her promise to focus solely on the domestic, and citing the nanny's accounts of her bad mothering. These media portrayals occur simultaneously with depictions of Spears on the mend after successfully healing and gaining increased visitation rights. She is shown to be spending time with her sons, and finally gaining the status of 'good' mother (Podnieks 2012:99). These contradicting portrayals are a reversal of those constructing Jolie as good and Spears as good, such as the cover of a *US* magazine in which Jolie is depicted as the good mother, holding one of her children as she looks beautiful while Spears, in a sidebar, is scantily clad during a performance and is shamed for missing her son's birthday for an unsuccessful attempt at a comeback (Podnieks 2012:96).

Politicians are also subject to having their motherhood closely examined as part of their role. Jennifer Bell argues that being defined as a mother can help female politicians gain office as it may humanize her and soften her in a way that still allows her to be tough. Bell claims that this can be problematic however, as thus positioning female politicians can reinforce the ideals of "conventional restrictive notions of motherhood"

(Bell 2012:116). She also cites the dilemma that many female politicians face: if they do not have children their position is challenged by questions of their ability to be a good politician, a criticism one female politician without children faced as it was claimed that she was not sufficiently invested due to her lack of children (Bell 2012:117). Politicians who are mothers also face challenges, as many choose not to run for office until their children are older, which limits their ability to get very far and make meaningful changes (Bell 2012:118). Thus, due to their status as a public figure, politicians are just as susceptible to having their motherhood, or its absence, policed by the media, which affects peoples' views and the ways in which mothers are represented in the media (Bell 2012:120).

Motherhood is a very important social role, and as such is surrounded by many expectations and is often thoroughly policed. The media plays an important role in this policing, as well as disseminating views of motherhood. These views have changed over time, and are even still inconsistent both in different countries and across different parts of the country and different income levels. These views of motherhood also impact adoptive mothers and birth mothers, which later chapters will discuss in more detail. These ideals of motherhood are important to keep in mind in regards to how they influence adoption and adoption reunion, which is the topic of the next chapter. The expectations of appropriate mothering are salient in many ways here, but especially in the ways that it is viewed in relation to adoption.

Chapter 3- Adoption Reunion

Adoption reunion is an interesting phenomenon, as it is very important for many adoptees and birth parents, and provides a lens through which we can examine how notions of motherhood are constructed, specifically women who have placed their children for adoption. Reunion, or an adoptee or birth parent seeking reunion, is a common enough occurrence to warrant some adoptions to have a department dedicated to assisting in these searches, as well as the existence of adoption registries in which people can register to find whomever they are looking for, whether it be their adoptive parent or the child they placed. In a personal communication with Maria, the Director of Search and Reunion at a private adoption agency, I was told a very interesting story about a man searching for his adopted mother. This man, upon finding out that his birth mother did not want contact but would give updated medical history, did not accept this. He went to the school where his birth mother taught and pretended to be the parent of one of her students just to see her, without introducing himself. He then found her sister, a therapist, and attempted to make an appointment with her until she agreed to one meeting. He informed the sister about his birth mother placing him for adoption, and requested that she help him meet his birth mother. The sister agreed, and facilitated a meeting with the birth mother, who finally agreed to contact. The adoption worker I spoke with told me that the last thing she had heard was that the birth mother had traveled to meet his newborn child. Maria framed this story as being very positive, and offered the narrative in response to being asked what her best adoption story was. While it is nice that he and his birth mother were able to have a relationship, it does create some interesting

complications considering the questionable legality of some of the adoptee's actions in attempting to meet his birth mother. It is also interesting to note that the birth mother had not told any of her family about the adoption, and initially resisted contact. How does not wanting contact construct her as a mother? Are all women who place babies for adoption expected to wait by the phone to be found? Adoption reunion, and those seeking it, bring up interesting questions about motherhood and what is expected of 'good' mothers.

In order to initiate a search, it is first important to understand the laws. As of 2016, approximately half of the states in the U.S. allow adoptive parents to access non-identifying information about the birth family while the rest do not, and almost all states allow adoptees to access non-identifying information, but typically only once the adoptee has turned 18. Non-identifying information typically includes information about health records, information about the child, and about the birth family when the adoption took place. Identifying information, on the other hand, is information that could lead to the identification of the person being searched for, and as such has more restrictions regarding access. Release of this information is allowed in almost all states when consent has been given, but without consent a court order is required (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016a:2), and the person searching must be able to prove that there is a good reason that validates removing the confidentiality of the other party. Some states have further restrictions, such as requiring adoptees to attend counseling regarding the search before they are allowed access to any information, and in Connecticut, access to this information is not allowed if the agency who holds the records decides that giving access

to the information would cause harm to the other party (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016a:3).

Other ways of searching involve mutual consent registries in which those involved in an adoption can register their consent for releasing identifying information; these have been established in roughly 30 states. There are also procedures in some states that allow a third party, "called a confidential intermediary" (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016a:3), access to this information so that they then search for the other party and attempt to get consent to be contacted (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016a:3). Typically, after an adoption, the original birth certificate is sealed by the state after a new birth certificate has been issued. Historically it has been necessary to get a court order to access this birth certificate, as it could give identifying information, but many states are now changing the laws to make access easier (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016a:4). New York is one such state that has changed the law regarding access to original birth certificates, and as of January, 2020, adoptees are no longer required to get a court order to access their original birth certificate. This change is the result of extensive lobbying and campaigning to make it easier for adoptees to search for their birth families (Villeneuve 2020).

Adoption Reunion in the Media

Kline et al., in a study of news stories depicting adoption that aired between 2001 and 2004 (Kline et al. 2006:490), found that reunions were portrayed in only 18% of the news stories, and often included discussions of the motivations (Kline et al. 2006:493) and

results of searches for birth families. Open adoption was also mentioned in 58 stories, while 24% of the sample included recommendations to those thinking about adopting and families that had adopted. These inclusions led the authors to indicate a possibility that the news stories include ideas of a family ideology that is undergoing changes (Kline et al. 2006:494). These portrayals also may help increase social acceptance surrounding new and different definitions of family (489). Some of the depictions of reunions include adoptees claiming to have always wondered about their birth family, and positive results of reunion (494).

They also find the news coverage of adoption to be significant because the media can be an effective source in reproducing stigma surrounding adoption. News depictions of stigma often occurred when reporting on societal views such as those given by interviewees, and the authors site the importance of including claims that refute the stigma. Media depictions of adoption, specifically problematic portrayals, may lead to people considering adoption having incorrect or negative opinions of adoptees. There is also the possibility of these prospective adopters misunderstanding the reality of birth parents, open adoptions, and issues surrounding search and reunion (Kline et al. 2006:495). Ultimately, news coverage adoption is an important issue, as it can perpetuate and reproduce stigma surrounding adoption, which then influences both how people generally think about adoption and how those considering adoption for themselves think about, and perhaps misunderstand, adoption and those involved.

In a study of 706 telephone interviews in Canada, Miall and March investigate societal opinions of issues surrounding adoption. The sample was largely white, middle

class, well educated, older, and married with children (Miall and March 2005:84). The interviews were done between May and June of 2000, and had a 56% response rate. The issues addressed by this study are single parent, LGBT+, open adoptions, the confidentiality of adoption records, the release of identifying information to those involved in adoption, and adult reunions. The majority of respondents favored married couples over common-law couples (Miall and March 2005:85), and the majority also found single parent adoptions to be favorable. The majority of men did not find LGBT+ couples as favorable for adoption, although roughly half of the respondents claimed they were at least somewhat suitable for adoption. Positive evaluations of these couples were more likely among younger and better educated respondents (Miall and March 2005:86), and higher incomes were associated with higher support for LGBT+ and common-law adoptions (Miall and March 2005:87).

In regards to open adoptions, the support for correspondence prior to the adoption and contact through a mediator after, meetings between the birth and adoptive parents before and correspondence after the adoption, and an ongoing relationship between the parents were investigated. The majority of respondents (77%) approve at least somewhat of the different parents exchanging letters, with the most people somewhat approving of this arrangement. The majority also supported meetings and continued correspondence, while only 62% support a continued relationship and complete openness, with only 21% strongly approving and 15% strongly disapproving, the highest rate of disapproval of the three options. The vast majority supported reunions between birth parents and adopted children (Miall and March 2005:88).

The confidentiality of adoption records was another issue for which support was assessed. The majority of the sample (85%) supported confidential adoptions being available (Miall and March 2005:88). The majority supported adult adoptees' access to finding their biological parents without getting permission from their parents, while 77% believed they should also not need permission from the biological parents. This was not the case, however, for birth parents accessing information on the children they placed for adoption. Unconditional access to this information, without the adoptee's permission, by the birth parents was disapproved of by 55% of respondents, while 55% of the sample supported the release of this information without the parents' permission. The respondents most likely to disapprove of allowing the birth parent access to the adoptee's information without their permission were married, higher educated respondents, and those with higher incomes (Miall and March 2005: 89).

Reunion Outcomes

Ayers-Lopez et al. conducted a study on the influence of the relationship between the adoptee and the birth mother and nature of contact with the adopted child on the intention and expectations of searching of birth mothers. The arrangements studied are those that have had sustained relationships with the adoptee, those who had continued mediated contact, stopped mediated contact, and those with absolutely no contact. The sample in this study was Wave 2 of a study began in 1987, interviewed over the phone in 1995. One-hundred and twenty-seven birth mothers were involved in this sample, and were 35.42 years old on average, had an average income of $33,000, and on average completed 2-3 years of college. They were predominantly white and married, with 25

divorced and 18 single birth mothers. Five of the birth mothers had 2 children they had placed for adoption, and 91 had at least one other biological child that they were raising, and 16 had adopted children or had stepchildren (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008:554).

One-hundred and twenty-five birth mothers provided responses on their intentions to search for the children they had placed for adoption, and 41 claimed no intention to search, 63 did intend to search, and 21 either claimed they may or hoped to search. A relationship was found between the nature of contact with the adoptive family and the birth mother and the intention to initiate a search. Roughly half of the birth mothers with no contact claimed they would not search, in addition to 13 who had contact that had since stopped, 10 who had continued mediated contact, and 1 who had a continued, unmediated contact (Ayers Lopez et al. 2008:555). Many of these birth mothers cited the belief that it if the child wants to find them that it is their right to be the one to seek contact (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008-556), and also claimed respect for the privacy of the child and a desire to avoid disruptions to the lives of their children. Others cited a belief that their searching was a right that they relinquished upon placing the child for adoption. Only 4 birth mothers claimed a desire to maintain the confidentiality of the adoption, 4 did not think the child would want contact, 3 had no desire to search, and 2 did not think searching would be fair. There were also birth mothers who cited fear of rejection, a promise to the adoptive mother, and fear of pain that searching might cause (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008-557).

Eleven of the birth mothers with completely confidential adoptions intended to search, along with 8 with stopped contact, 8 with continued contact, and an

overwhelming 36 with completely open adoptions (Ayers-Lopez 2008:555). The most common reason given for the desire to search is that they wanted a relationship, or at least to meet or see, the child they had placed for adoption, as well as wanting to be able to support them, wanting them in her life, claiming affection for the child, or wanting to know, in cases where there had previously been contact, why it had ended (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008:556).

Some birth mothers claimed that they may search, with 3 in confidential arrangements, 8 in stopped contact, 5 in continued contact, and 5 with open adoptions and a continued relationship citing the possibility or hope of a search (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008:555). Some of these mothers felt that it was up to the child to search, and a belief that the absence of a search was an indication that they did not want contact. Others claimed that there was a period after which they would search if the child had not, or that they may wait until the child is a certain age. Other reasons there was only a possibility include reservations about disruption to the child's life, and the influence of factors such as events in the birth mother's life and financial costs, the reaction of children she has raised, her health, and the fact that they did not think they would lose contact with the child. It is also interesting to note that pressure from people in the birth mothers' lives was not found in any of the responses (Ayers-Lopez 2008:558).

A belief in the possibility that the child would search for them was found in 78% of the birth mothers, with varying reactions to this outcome. The vast majority felt positive, with 78 claiming positivity and 46 feeling very positive. Five were neutral, and fifteen were ambivalent, and none had negative feelings about their birth children trying

to find them. There was also variance in the types of roles the birth mothers expected or wanted to have in the lives of the children they had put up for adoption. 81 birth mothers had either confidential or mediated contact, and 36 cited a desire for a non-kin role (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008:558), which the authors operationalize as a relationship such as a friend or godmother (Ayers-Lopez et al. 2008:555). Thirteen claimed they would be content with whatever relationship the child would be happy with, five desired a kinship role, and 2 desired no contact (Ayers-Lopez 2008:558).

Birth mothers were more likely to have positive feelings surrounding searching for the adopted child with greater openness in the adoption. Reasons the authors give as hypotheses include the fact that birth mothers in confidential arrangements do not know the feelings of the adoptive parents, and that those with completely open adoptions have less fear of rejection or harm to the children due to the fact that they have already had in-person interactions that were positive. It was found that the child's feelings and the affects they would feel in the case of contact were significant factors in birth mothers' intention of searching for them (Ayers-Lopez 2008:559).

Harris et al. conducted a qualitative analysis of narratives given by four people involved in an adoption reunion in Texas (Harris et al. 2019: 25). The birth mother, Jennifer, got pregnant when she was a teenager, and already had one child when she became pregnant with the baby she placed for adoption. Upon realizing she was pregnant, Jennifer claims that she was scared and ashamed, and could not have cared for two children. She initially considered abortion, but was convinced by the negative reaction of her mother and step-father to instead pursue adoption. She felt relief at the prospect of

adoption, and felt that she was permitted by God to pursue it (Harris et al. 2019:26). Jennifer cites memories of frequent contemplation about the adoptive mother. The birth mother reported remembering the nurses encouraging her to nurse the baby, whom she had sent to the nursery so that she could "create some emotional space" (Harris et al. 2019:27), even though she very much wanted to care for the baby. She felt that this was a difficult experience, and felt that the nurses judged her for not caring for her baby. As time passed Jennifer still remembered the baby she placed for adoption, and felt that although others made allowances for her grief over the adoption she felt that people expected her to be able to quickly resolve the grief, an expectation she even had for herself. She claims that the pain never went away, but eventually she was contacted by the social worker that facilitated the adoption on social media and learned that the baby she had placed for adoption was interested in meeting her (Harris et al. 2019:27).

Jennifer was first spoken to by Helen, the adoptive mother, and Jennifer expresses gratitude for Helen's "giant capacity to love the child of another woman's womb" (Harris et al. 2019:27). Jennifer claims that her family became whole when she met with Beth, the adoptee (Harris et al. 2019:27), and that her identity as a mother was reinforced by meeting Beth as she realized that placing Beth for adoption allowed her to better parent Caiti, the biological sister. Jennifer cites the immediate willingness to include Jennifer at Beth's graduation, and her inclusion in the proposal of Beth's boyfriend, and her presence in the delivery room when Beth gave birth (Harris et al. 2019:28). She cites a hesitance in the relationship when Beth was giving birth due to fear of hurting Helen, who had no knowledge of childbirth and pregnancy, and a desire to help Beth. Helen and

Jennifer had a discussion to resolve the matter, and both were present in the delivery room. Jennifer and Beth have an ongoing relationship (Harris et al. 2019:29).

Caiti, the biological sister, explains Beth's birth as her mother making the decision to improve both their lives and the lives of the family that adopted Beth (Harris et al. 2019:29), and cites a belief that she and her mother were reunited with Beth so that their families could be whole. She also cites the fact that when she learned of Beth's pregnancy she had a special feeling about the fact that the baby would share DNA with her family (Harris et al. 2019:30).

Beth has always had positive feelings regarding her adoption, but did experience stigma from others who referred to her birth mother as her actual mother. Helen was always very positive about her birth mother, and reinforced with her that Jennifer wanted the best for her. When she was a teenager, however, Beth felt that she could not move forward and understand herself without knowing her origins (Harris et al. 2019:31). She felt complete for the first time when she met Jennifer, and felt that the reunion was perfect. When she got engaged her fiancé asked both her adoptive parents for permission but also asked Jennifer. Beth felt uncomfortable discussing her pregnancy with Helen because she did not want to hurt her (Harris et al. 2019:32).

Harris et al. connect these narratives with adoption reunion literature, citing similar issues that are brought up such as stigma, the need for openness in adoptive families, and the different issues that may come up in a reunion and relationships between adoptees and their birth parents (Harris et al. 2019:35). The authors assert that

these narratives are in line with many other reunion relationships that are successful, and believe that the narratives offer adoptees the possibility of integrating the different aspects of their life, their adoptive families, and the birth parent(s). The authors also cite the idea of birth certificates including the names of both adoptive parents and adoptive parents (Harris et al. 2019:36).

Kristina Scharp uses Relational Dialectics Theory (Scharp 2013:306), and a contrapuntal analysis, or an "intertextual analysis" (Scharp 2013:309) to analyze online adoptee narratives of reunion. Scharp found two main ways of framing reunion stories- romanticized reconnection (Scharp 2013:312) and pragmatic reconnection (Scharp 2013:315). Romanticized reconnection often involved either desire for people that looked like them and having an immediate connection with the birth parents (Scharp 2013:312). Given that society often places an emphasis on biological family, and that physical resemblance among family is something that is often remarked upon by adoptees, it is not surprising that many adoptees feel a need to search for their biological family. The other emphasis in the romanticized narratives is that when the adoptee met their birth family there was an immediate connection which, according to Scharp, "privileg[es] the biogenetic" (Scharp 2013:314). Scharp claims that this type of narrative reinforces stigmas surrounding adoptive families that they are not as good as biological families (Scharp 2013:314).

A second narrative that emerged in Scharp's study was that of pragmatic reconnection. Reasons given in these narratives are things such as a desire for health records, and those searching for these types of reasons are not expecting an immediate

connection. One such narrative stated that while it was nice to meet her biological family, it did not live up to her idealized conceptions of what it would be like (Scharp 2013:315). This narrative did attempt to qualify her statement, which Scharp claims is suggestive that this response is not what would be culturally expected. Other adoptees sought reconnection exclusively to learn about their medical history, and reinforce the strength and importance of their relationship with the family that raised them (Scharp 2013:316). Another adoptee's narrative discusses the fact that while she and her biological mother frequently met, there was not a strong connection, and that the conversations that they had were clinical, and her birth mother was not emotionally open with her (Scharp 2013:317). This emotional distance could be a sign that the biological mother may not have wanted contact or a strong relationship with the adoptee.

There was some overlap of the two narratives in some adoptee's accounts, with one recognizing a connection with her biological mother but also stressing her relationship with her family (Scharp 2013:318). The majority of narratives involved romanticized reconnection, which strengthens and supports the idea that adoptive families are inferior to biological families, and follows the research finding stigma surrounding adoptive families. There were cases, however, where narratives of pragmatic reconnection challenged this ideology, and the interplay of these narratives suggest ambivalence about meanings of family (Scharp 2013:319). Scharp also notes that scholarly definitions of family are important, and that more common understandings of family may actually resist these constructions, and calls for more attention to this to address a growing variety of family forms (Scharp 2013:320).

In Quebec, Canada, a search for birthparents or children placed for adoption must begin by contacting the agency through which the adoption was done through (Speirs et al. 2005:844). Once adoptees reach age 14 they can apply for a search, while birthparents cannot initiate a search until the child is 18 years old (Speirs et al. 2005:845). When a birthparent or child has been found the agency, with consent from the person who was found, facilitates contact. These intermediaries' job consists of making contact with the found person, obtaining consent, and making sure both parties are fully informed of the potential risks and problems that may result from contact (Speirs 2005:845). Birth-relatives who want to find an adopted child have to pay $450 Canadian dollars, or, with certain qualifications, $50 (Speirs et al. 2005:846). There is a list of prioritized cases in which medical problems, elderly birthparents, and cases where a birthparent and the child they placed for adoption initiate a search (Speirs et al. 846).

In this study, Speirs et al. (2005) conducted a mailed survey of those who had used an agency service in order to evaluate the success. The resulting sample was 142 individuals who had initiated a search between September of 1993 and March of 1994 (Speirs et al. 2005:851). Questionnaires consisted of 12 statements regarding satisfaction with responses recorded using a five-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from not at all satisfied to very satisfied. These questionnaires were customized to the situation, depending on the searcher, successful search, and whether or not there was a reunion. This was also supported by intermediary questionnaires (Speirs 2005:851).

There were 119 closed cases. Of these cases, 6 had an unsuccessful search, 24 had the sought person refuse contact, 82 had successful contact with the sought person, and 7

had contact with a relative other than the one sought (Speirs 2005:852). There were 89 cases where questionnaires were sent to both the adoptee and the birthparent, and of these 44 responded (Speirs et al. 2005:852-853). The study found that while in most cases sought persons had positive feelings about having been found and the desire for contact, there were some cases in which their being found brought up problems. Some birthparents, for example, had not disclosed the fact they had given a child up for adoption, and some adoptees worried about their adoptive parents' feelings if they made contact with their birthparent(s) (Speirs et al. 2005:857).

Other important findings include the fact that birthparents were more likely to be satisfied with the social worker assigned to their case whether or not the search was successful than adoptees (Speirs et al. 2005:858), and that birthparents whose sought person refused contact were more satisfied than adoptees who had contact refused, possibly because they had a lesser a sense of entitlement (Speirs et al. 2005:860). The authors also discuss the open records debate, and feel that it would solve many problems involved in search and reunion as it would reduce the time it takes as well as give those searching for a birthparent or a child more agency (Speirs et al. 2005:861).

Gary Clapton analyzes reunion satisfaction with contact and what that contact looked like. The sample focused on adults who have experienced a reunion, and the questions were written with the help of both a birth mother and an adoptee (Clapton 2018:7). 368 questionnaires were sent out, and 75 were returned. Three questions that were asked in the questionnaire were what the outcome of the initial contact was, what has occurred since, such as whether there was continued contact and if so what that

looked like, and whether contact stopped, and if so, why. 58 respondents indicated that they had continued the relationship, and 37 respondents claimed a continued relationship, with 18 citing involvement in family events. The remaining responses that did not indicate that the relationship had continued did not explicitly state whether or not contact was ceased (Clapton 2018:8).

These continued relationships had a variety of meanings, including kin relationships with members of the birth families and supporting them through loss (Clapton 2018:8) and struggling with having ill birthparents. Those who felt kinship through the reunion often cited other family members, such as the extended birth family (Clapton 2018:10). Some had contact that had stopped, and this, in one case, was due to struggling to get along with the biological sister. Even with reunions that went well there were still feelings of loss, such as mourning the potential life of growing up with the birth family. The adoptive parents and their importance were often stressed (Clapton 2018:9).

Satisfaction with contact was also assessed, with ten birth mothers claiming satisfaction, five having mixed feelings, and six who claimed they were unhappy with the contact and claimed it to be a negative experience. The authors attribute the mixed and unhappy feelings to be due to contact that had ceased when it had been unexpected (Clapton 2018:9). Even when relationships continued some still found the relationship to be awkward, with some birth mothers citing outside influences that caused struggles in the relationship, while others claimed that the history of adoption made it awkward. There were also cases where the adoptee and the birth mother did not especially get along, with differences in personality and opinions stunting the relationship. Birth

mothers claimed satisfaction with the relationship with the adoptee less than adoptees did (Clapton 2018:10).

March conducted a study of thirty-three Canadian birth mothers who had been involved in reunions, and posits that reality is socially constructed using information from society (March 2015:109). Three-quarters had placed daughters and the rest had placed sons, and the sample was entirely white (March 2015:110). March found that the birth mothers tended to believe that they would have a mother-child relationship with their placed child but were confronted by the fact that this was not the case (March 2015:111).

The majority of the birth mothers had not searched for their placed children, although approximately half had registered their information with a reunion agency in the event that their placed child decided to search for them. Those who did search found it difficult for a variety of reasons, including the fact that they are given no information on the placement, and some reasons birth mothers did not search included the belief that they did not have the right to (March 2015:111), had explicitly agreed that they would not search or try to make contact, or did not want to interfere with the child's life (March 2015:112).

Many of the birth mothers still felt a connection to their placed child, and expressed an essentialist view of motherhood, although they were also aware of the questions on their motherhood that placing a child for adoption brings. While mothers who place their children for adoption are sometimes characterized as bad mothers (March

2015:113), birth mothers' decision to not contact or search for their placed children can counter this view of birth mothers as they are placing "her child's needs and desires above her own" (March 2015:112-113).

Many of the birth mothers were overwhelmed when they first received contact, and found the experience to be emotional. Among these reactions and preparations were the fact that many described the possibility that their placed children would have feelings of anger, resentment, or rejection, and this fear is related to the characterization of birth mothers who place their children for adoption as bad mothers (March 2015:113). Many of the birth mothers experience shock upon meeting their placed child as an adult, and not as the baby she had placed, which challenges the essentialist view of motherhood many birth mothers had. The existence of physical commonalities often lessened this feeling of shock, although not all birth mothers were able to find similarities, and this led to them being more likely to focus on an essentialist view of motherhood in their relationship (March 2015:114). This view allowed the birth mothers to reconcile themselves with their role in the adoptees' lives (March 2015:119).

The majority of respondents claimed that they had a relationship that resembled friendship, while five felt distance in their relationship, nine only had occasional contact, and only two claimed that they had a relationship with their placed child like that of a mother (March 2015:115). Of the two who felt they had a motherly relationship with the placed child, in one case the adoptive mother had already passed away, eliminating some of the role confusion, and the other had twelve years of contact and as such had had an extended period of time in which to grow close (March 2015:116). Those who claimed

friendship with their placed children often cited this definition as due to the confusion surrounding their role and the lack of defined rules for reunion. Some felt difficulty with the fact that they did not have a motherly role with the adoptee, while others distanced themselves in order to avoid interfering in the adoptee's life (March 2015:115). Birth mothers' desire to not interfere with their placed children's lives and wanting to follow what the adoptee wanted led to many birth mothers avoiding questioning or challenging the adoptee's odd behavior or attempts at distancing themselves from contact (March 2015:116). The relationships with placed children were often defined in relation to the adoptive mother (March 2015:117), and prioritized the act of taking care of and raising the child over the biological motherhood (March 2015:118).

The mothers who accepted the role of birth mother as opposed to full mother often found ways to be comfortable with this definition of their role as it allowed them access to their placed children's lives and allowed them to express motherhood in a different way, although three birth mothers withdrew from contact because they could not reconcile themselves with this definition (March 2015:118). The majority of birth mothers were satisfied with and grateful for their reunion, although they also recognized the complicated and delicate nature of their contact with the adoptee, noting that it could be lost at any time for a variety of reasons (March 2015:119), and were fearful of the potential loss. This led to many of the birth mothers looking to the adoptee to initiate (March 2015:120) and set the rules of the relationship in order to avoid conflict, which resulted in a sense of not having control in the relationship for many (March 2015:121).

Muller et al. conducted a lengthy survey that was completed by 90 adoptees who successfully found and made contact with their birth mothers. These adoptees had all been found through a Massachusetts agency that participated voluntarily. The authors then analyzed responses using "the inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (Muller et al. 2003:12). Of the forty respondents, seven were no longer in contact with their birth mother, sixteen had occasional contact with their birth mothers, twenty had frequent contact, and twenty-three had contact multiple times per month. Those who had terminated contact were more likely to feel that their birth mother was a stranger, while those who had the most frequent contact with their birth mother were most likely to feel that they had a mother-child relationship with her. The authors found a significant relationship between how close the relationship with the birth mother is and how frequent, important, and satisfactory contact is. Unsurprisingly, those who felt they had a mother-child relationship felt that they had a closer relationship with their birth mother than those who felt they only had a friendship with her (Muller et al. 2003:16). It was also found that respondents were more likely to feel that their relationship with the birth mother is close when they had an adoptive mother who was uncomfortable discussing their adoption (Muller et al. 2003:19).

Sixty-seven percent of respondents were at least partially satisfied with their relationship with their birth mother (Muller et al. 2003: 17), and of these respondents sixty-two percent claimed satisfaction because they had a good relationship with their birth mother and because they had similar lifestyles and values. Those who were unsatisfied with their relationship often cited their birth mother's disinterest in a

relationship, having different lifestyles and values, and secrecy in explaining their dissatisfaction. Forty percent of the sample claimed that having a good relationship with their birth mother was the most satisfying part of having contact (Muller et al. 2003:19), while thirty-seven percent felt that just making contact was rewarding, twenty percent found satisfaction in that they know knew more about their adoption, and sixteen percent found a reward in finding similarities between them and their birth mother. Regarding stress in contact, eighteen percent felt that encountering differences in lifestyle and values was stressful, eighteen percent experienced stress surrounding secrecy, and thirteen percent felt stress when their birth mother was disinterested. Respondents were more likely to report satisfaction when they felt that their relationship with their birth mother was close (Muller et al. 2003:20).

The authors found that while there was no direct relationship between relationship satisfaction and adoptee's expectations prior to contact (Muller et al. 2003:22), the fact that roughly twenty-five percent felt that their birth mother was a stranger when they first met, eight percent felt the birth mother was dissimilar to them, and that birth mother's disinterest was given as a reason for dissatisfaction demonstrates that there may indicate that there were expectations prior to contact (Muller et al. 2003:23). The authors did find that respondents were more likely to be satisfied with contact with a biological sibling than their birth mother (Muller et al. 2003:20), and claim that this may be because they find it simpler to add a sibling to their family than an additional parent (Muller et al. 2003:24).

Pacheco and Eme, in 1993, conducted 72 phone interviews using a sample drawn from members of Truthseekers in Adoption (TSIA) in Chicago, IL who had found and met their birthparents in the past five years (Pacheco and Eme 1993:54). The authors believe that due to the fact that some refused to participate and there were known cases where the relationship with the birth parent was bad among the potential participants that could not be contacted it is possible that the findings of largely positive results in reunion would be different. The authors also cite two other factors that may have influenced the result of the reunion: whether or not the adoptee initiated the search, which may have increased the likelihood of a positive evaluation by the adoptee (Pacheco and Eme 1993:55) and that the sample was drawn from a group with an advocacy orientation (Pacheco and Eme 1993:56).

The sample is predominantly married, with the majority of women also being married and a large number being between the ages of 25 and 34. The authors cite a finding that adoptees commonly cited initiating the search for their birth parent after pregnancy or having a child (Pacheco and Eme 1993:56). Slightly over half of the sample cited concerns about their adoptive parents' reactions to their search and that they would have otherwise wanted to search sooner. The adoptive parents had passed away in nineteen percent of the sample (Pacheco and Eme 1993:57). The majority of respondents cited a good relationship with their adoptive parents, and sixty-one percent felt a sense of belonging, and the authors claim that it was not due to a poor relationship with the adoptive parents that motivated adoptees to search for their birth family (Pacheco and Eme 1993:58).

Reunions were mostly reported to be positive, and the majority of the sample felt that their lives and feelings about themselves had improved as a result of reunion (Pacheco and Eme 1993:58). The majority felt satisfied in their desire for knowledge, and many also claimed cited the importance of having someone with physical similarities. The authors find that simply having contact was a positive experience regardless of the outcome, although 14% had mixed feelings and thirty-two percent had negative emotions surrounding their reunion. The authors cite expectations surrounding contact as the biggest influence in negative reports of reunion (Pacheco and Eme 1993:60).

Roughly half of the sample felt that their emotional needs were met by reunion, and thirty percent felt more satisfied with contact with a biological sibling than a parent. The birth parents' opinions of contact and reunion were largely positive, and the most frequent pattern of contact structure was either monthly, bimonthly, or on holidays (Pacheco and Eme 1993:61). Fifteen percent of the sample ceased contact after the first meeting, and 14% only had contact once a year or less (Pacheco and Eme 1993:62).

Campbell et al. conducted a study using a mailed questionnaire about adult adoptees' experience of reunions, and obtained a sample of 114 respondents who had met at least one birth parent in person. 101 respondents were adoptees who had searched and the remaining 13 had been found by their birth parent (Campbell et al. 1991:329). The sample was predominantly white women, with an average age of 35. The authors found that the adoptees who searched for their birth parents were, on average, older than those who were found, with searchers being on average 32 years old and those who were found 22 (Campbell et al. 1991:330).

The authors postulate that adoptees may find searching for their birth families to be easier when their adoptive family is open with them about their adoption. They also find that regardless about the information shared with the adoptee about the birth parent they were still present within the family. Thirty-nine respondents felt that they "needed to search" while another thirty felt that it "now seemed possible" (Campbell et al. 1991:331). Some motivations found for initiating a search were a big life change, such as having a baby, wanting information, wanting a relationship, or hoping to understand themselves (Campbell et al. 1991:332).

Upon finding information about the person they are looking for the majority of respondents acted immediately, and half of the respondents sought counseling prior to contact. Seventy-four respondents met their birth mother, four met their birth father, and there were nine cases where the birth parents were married (Campbell et al. 1991:332). Seventy-five birth parents were open and accepting of contact, twenty-two started out being nervous and uncertain, and three were described as having a negative response. Most planned the reunion at the earliest possibility, frequently within a month of making contact, and the reunions were often described as a very emotional experience. When asked how reunion impacted their lives, there were very few negative effects reported, with many citing improvements in their self-esteem and fifty-five percent claiming that their marriage experienced positive effects. The majority of respondents felt that they would keep the reunion process the same, although some felt that they might initiate a search sooner (Campbell et al. 1991:333). When asked whether they would search or not if they had to start the process over again, and all of those who searched said they would

do it again and eighty-one percent of those who did not initiate a search said that they would search (Campbell et al. 1991:333-334). The authors claim that the adoptees who searched were not looking to replace or change their adoptive family but that they instead seemed to be attempting to expand their family outside of the nuclear (Campbell et al. 1991:334).

Adoption reunions often have a variety of outcomes, but are often positive. Many are satisfied with outcome of their search, and are happy with the relationship they have formed as a result. Family forms are in some ways evolving, and this is reflected in the phenomenon of adoption reunion. There are many factors involved in reunion, such as who is searching, who wants to be found, and expectations surrounding reunion, among many others. Reunion also gives an interesting angle from which to examine mothers, which the next chapter will aim to do, in how they handle reunion, as well as why they placed their baby for adoption.

This chapter has outlined adoption reunion coverage in the media as well as in academia, and has provided the basis for further discussion of adoption reunion in the next chapter. Adoption reunion is an interesting phenomenon to study because it involves many different factors, such as expectations of mothers, definitions of family, and can have a variety of outcomes. It is also important to understand how these relationships are portrayed in the media which is the focus of the next chapter. These depictions have implications both for the way that people view adoption and reunion as well as for the definitions, expectations, and portrayals of mothers.

Chapter 4- Adoption Reunion in *Long Lost Family*

Methodology

This honors thesis involves a content analysis of two seasons of the show *Long Lost Family*, a show that airs on TLC. The first season, which aired in 2016, and the most resent season, season six, that aired in 2019 are the focus of this analysis, with the purpose of having a sample that was large enough to warrant analysis and that also could potentially give insight into change over time, although the interval between the seasons is only three years. Seventeen episodes in total were watched, nine of which were the first season and the remaining eight in season six. Thorough notes on the details of the case and the reactions of those involved were taken, which were then coded into twenty-one categories such as whether the birth mother was searching or the adoptee was searching, whether or not the birth mother was forced into the adoption. Some categories include the birth mother thinking adoption was the best option for the baby, whether or not the birth mother held and cared for the baby prior to adoption, the adoptee not having anger or negative feelings towards the birth mother, and whether the birth mother was depicted positively and in a redeeming light, among others. Cases included in the category of reunions that were positively portrayed were those in which there was a continued relationship and both parties were happy to be found. Positive portrayals of birth mothers involved cases where the birth mother was found to consistently think of the adoptee, felt that there was a part of her missing because of the adoption, the adoptee thanked the birth mother for her decision and believes the decision she made was the correct one, and the birth mother states that she placed the baby for adoption because it was in the baby's best

interest. The specific categories of findings can be found in Table 1, which is located in the appendix.

28 cases out of 33 (approximately 84%) involved and discussed a birth mother in some capacity, with 6 cases omitted. These six cases are scenarios in which the birth mother was not significantly discussed, had died, there was no successful contact, or it was the birth father that was searched for specifically, not the birth mother. There was also one case of babies that were switched at the hospital and all biological parents were deceased at the time of discovery, and one case where the biological mother raised the woman who was searching for her biological father with another man. There was only one case where it was the birth father that was searching, and the birth mother was not significantly discussed aside from the fact that she was forced to place the baby for adoption by her parents. One case that has been included involves a birth father as the only one found, but it involves enough mention of the birth mother and opinions on her decision to warrant inclusion.

The structure of the show is also important to note. The show is hosted by Lisa Joyner and Chris Jacobs, both of whom were themselves adopted and searched for, found, and made contact with their birth families. Each episode, with the exception of one, involves two reunion cases, with one being investigated by Chris and the other by Lisa, that are shown simultaneously. The person searching for a family member, either a birth parent or a placed child, explains the circumstances surrounding the adoption, in the case of the birth parent, and what they know about their adoption, the life they have lived, and what they know about their birth parent in the case of the adoptee. A letter is

frequently written to the sought person introducing the person that is searching, frequently including personal details and feelings about the adoption. Lisa and Chris then search for either the birth parent or the placed child, and, if contact is made, go and meet the person they found. In the cases where a birth parent or a biological sibling is found, they explain the process of placing the baby for adoption and what they felt about that, and when an adoptee is found they discuss what type of life they had. The found person is shown a picture of the person searching, and are given the letter that they wrote. Chris and Lisa then go back to the person who was searching and tell them what they have found, show them a picture of either the birth parent or the adoptee, and give them a letter that the found person wrote to them. After this, a meeting between the two parties is organized and shown. In the first season there was, at the end of the episode, end credits that tell what the relationship between the adoptee and birth parent has been like after first contacted, but such an explanation is not given in Season 6, and this may be because Season 6 was filmed in 2019, but it may have also been a deliberate choice.

It is also important to note that it is necessary to apply to be on the show, and that there is an interview process as advertised on their Facebook page. The fact that this is a television show indicates that the showrunners have a vested interest in having stories that will draw attention to the show and make the people who watch them want to continue watching. As such, it is possible that they do not accept cases that end badly, or too many that they think will not result in contact. The adoptees who are searching for the birth parents may also be more likely to have resolved their feelings surrounding their adoption enough to not hold many negative feelings towards their birth parents.

Additionally, the birth parents who are searching are possibly less likely to have left their baby outside or in a public place to be found rather than go through an adoption because they may not want the knowledge that they did that to become public. These facts are all important to point out and understand because they may affect the sample here analyzed through the selection of cases that are aired on the television show.

Results

Of the twenty-eight cases in the sample, adoptees sought their birth parents, but often specifically birth mothers, in 20, or 71%, cases. Some of the reasons adoptees give for this search are wanting to tell their birth mother that they are alright and alleviate any worry she may have (Case 2), curiosity and a desire for someone who looks like them (Case 6), and unresolved feelings about their adoption (Case 24), among others. The remaining 29% of cases were birth mothers searching for the children they had placed for adoption, although two cases involved both birth parents (Case 5, 12) and two were cases where the birth parents had stayed together but the birth father had died, leaving the birth mother to search (Case 17, 27). A birth mother was present, alive, and spoken with in 20 cases, or 71% of the sample.

The birth mother was alive and contact was successfully made in thirteen, or sixty-five percent, of the cases in which the adoptee searched for the birth mother. All but one of these birth mothers who were successfully located and contacted agreed to meet the adoptee, were happy to have been contacted, and were willing to build a relationship. Only one birth mother refused contact (Case 16). There was only one case where the birth

mother was not located at all but was discussed enough to warrant analysis (Case 22). Four birth mothers had died and contact was made with another family member (Case 3, 8, 20, 26), and there are two cases in which the birth mother was still alive but contact is made with the adoptee's biological sister rather than the mother, with whom attempts at contact are not mentioned (Case 15, 28) with one of the mothers experiencing heart failure (Case 28).

Three of the birth mothers were pregnant due to sexual assault (Case 10, 13, 23), and five did not have any more children after the adoption (Case 2, 19, 21, 23, 25), whether by choice or due to cervical cancer as was the case for two birth mothers (Case 2, 19), and one birth mother explicitly stated her infertility was a punishment for putting the baby up for adoption (Case 2). In nineteen of the cases it was claimed, either by the birth mother or someone who knew her, that the decision to adopt was in the best interest of the baby, and many also stated that they wanted the baby to have a better life than they could give them. To that end, four birth mothers chose not to hold the baby because they felt if they did it would be too difficult for them to then place the baby for adoption (Case 2, 9, 10, 24), while one held the baby only once because they felt it would be too difficult to hold them more (Case 12). Two of the birth mothers were not allowed to hold their baby (Case 4, 7), one of which was also not allowed to see the baby and says she was knocked out during the birth (Case 4).

Eight of the birth mothers in the sample felt that they were forced or pressured to place their baby for adoption, either by their parents, their lack of support, or the home for unwed mothers to which they were sent (Case 1, 2, 4, 7, 15, 17, 19, 21), with one

birth mother having been manipulated by a man involved in a baby selling scheme (Case 19). Anne Fessler argues that many women placed their children for adoption because of societal and familial pressure (Fessler 2007), which has certainly been the case for some of the birth mothers in this sample. Four birth mothers kept the adoption a secret, with one citing not thinking they would have support (25), one not thinking it was safe to tell anyone (Case 6), one because they were explicitly told by their parents to keep it a secret (Case 1), and one case in which the birth mother did not tell the biological siblings until much later but no reason was given as the birth mother was not spoken with (Case 28).

10 of the adoptees, whether they were the one searching or the one who was found, expressed that they had no ill will towards their birth mothers and were not angry or upset by their decision to place them for adoption (Case 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 17, 19, 23, 24, 25). Five adoptees explicitly thanked their birth mothers for placing them for adoption and trying to give them a better life, while others expressed gratitude either for searching (Case 17), one thanking the birth mother for agreeing to meet her (Case 25), and one thanking the birth mother with no specified reason (Case 24). Six reassured the birth mother that she had done the right thing in deciding to place them for adoption, and that it had given them a better life as she had hoped (Case 1, 6, 7, 10, 12, 18).

The majority of adoptions were claimed to have been in the best interest of the placed child; in cases where the birth mother had passed away or contact was not mentioned this claim was made by the family member with whom contact was successfully made (Case 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28). In nine cases the birth mother claimed that they felt as though there was a hole or

something missing after the adoption, or that they were upset to have to give up their child for adoption (Case 2, ,4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 18, 21, 25). There was also one case in which contact was not made with the birth mother, but the biological sister that was found claims that the birth mother struggled with the decision to place the child and was described as being "a shell of a person" (Case 28). Seventeen of the birth mothers often thought about the children they placed, and eighteen even celebrated the adoptee's birthday (Case 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27). In one of these cases this claim was made by the biological siblings as the birth mother had died (Case 8). In another case, the birth mother had pretended that the adoption had not happened to cope while she was struggling with addiction but thought about the adoptee every day after she got her life back together (Case 14). Overall, the majority (86%) of the cases involved portrayals of birth mothers that were positive, with many of the birth mothers feeling that the reunion with the adoptee will help them heal or has made them whole again.

Many of the birth mothers felt that their decision to place their baby for adoption was in the best interest of the baby even if it was a difficult decision for them or if they had really wanted to keep the baby. Their reasons are framed as a sacrifice of their feelings and desire to keep the baby in order to give the baby the opportunity to have a better life, which is in line with the expectation that mothers are supposed to put their child's needs above their own. These are mothers who have placed their children for adoption and as such were not involved in their lives, but are still fitting the logic of intensive mothering by sacrificing their ability to raise their baby so that the child can

have a better life than the one they could provide. This is in line with the expectation Hays cites that mothering is child-centered putting the child's needs before the mother (Hays 1996:8), and is also in line with other studies of mothers included in Chapter 2, such as the mothers who spent more money on their children than on themselves (Collett 2005:341). Even though these mothers are not raising the babies they place for adoption themselves they are still managing to engage in intensive mothering and trying to give their babies a good life by placing them for adoption.

Some of the mothers felt that they had to place the baby for adoption to protect them, as was the case for Janice, who never told anyone about the pregnancy, delivered the baby on her own, and felt that both the decision for secrecy and to place the baby for adoption was to protect the baby from her unstable and abusive family (Case 6). Similarly, both Deborah (Case 11) and Darlene (Case 13), felt that they had to protect the child from people in their life. Deborah did not feel that the birth father was a good man and did not want him to have access to Benjamin, the child she placed for adoption, and so she decided to give him up (Case 11). Darlene was herself trying to gain distance from the people in her life, and did not feel that they were people that a child should be around, and this influenced her decision (Case 13). Others felt that they could not take care of the baby and that it was best they placed them for adoption. Theresa was fourteen years old and did not feel that she was capable of taking care of the baby (Case 9), and both Mary (Case 25) and Lisa, who was young and in college (Case 27), mirror this sentiment. These motivations to place their babies for adoption cast these birth mothers in a positive

light because they claim a desire to give the baby a better life than they themselves are able to, and thus give up their desire to raise the baby so that their child can thrive.

This positive construction of birth mothers is furthered by the birth mothers who feel that there was something missing, either in them or in their family, after the adoption. Nita, for example, felt that because of the adoption there was an empty place in her heart (Case 4), and Ouida cites a horrible feeling that has stayed with her since she placed her baby for adoption and a feeling of having something incomplete in her life (Case 7). Mary felt that she lost something that died when she placed Marnie up for adoption, and that there was a whole in her life (Case 25). Patrice's birth mother had died at the time of contact, but the biological sister who was found claims that the birth mother was "a shell of a person" (Case 28) after leaving Patrice at the mall. Similarly, Gusty and Teri feel that there is something missing in their family without the child that they placed for adoption. These birth mothers were not able to simply move on with their lives and forget about the baby they had placed for adoption; they felt the adoption very personally.

The majority of birth mothers who were contacted and spoken with claimed that they frequently thought about the children that they had placed. Rita kept things from the hospital, such as the baby's receiving blanket, in order to feel closer to the baby (Case 1), and Nita claims that she would think about the child she placed frequently, and that she missed her for forty years (case 4). Theresa has always thought about and loved the baby she placed (Case 9), and Kathleen, who had her son, Chris, taken away from her when he was six years old and struggled with addiction after his birth, says that now that she is clean, thinking about Chris every day is the reason she stays alive (Case 14). Some even

celebrate the adoptee's birthdays, such as Rita, who always has cake or a cupcake on her placed child's birthday (Case 1), or Evelyn, who used to cry on birthdays but then decided she should be celebrating life (Case 2). Theresa was found because she posted a message wishing the child she had placed for adoption happy birthday on social media (Case 9), and Norma would celebrate the birthday with her husband, who was the birth father, and the children they had after the adoption (Case 17). Karen would always give something to a charity to celebrate the birthday of the son she gave up for adoption (Case 24). These birth mothers constantly thought about and cared for the child they had placed, and are thus in line with the expectation that a mother's love in unconditional and constant, even when they do not know the child who they placed.

Five birth mothers did not have any more children after the adoption. Two were diagnosed with cervical cancer and as such could not have any more children (Case 2, Case 19). One of these women explicitly stated that she felt that her infertility as a result of this was a punishment for choosing to place the baby for adoption (Case 2). Heidi felt that the fact that she never married or had more children was related to the fact that she gave her baby up for adoption and that the birth father died soon after, and the result of these losses was that she avoids getting close to people for fear of getting hurt, which is directly related to the fact that her parents made her put the baby up for adoption (Case 21). Marcia, who became pregnant due to two men breaking into her house and assaulting her, also never had another child, and she feels that this decision is very much related to her history (Case 23). Mary, on the other hand, also did not have more children but no reason for this was given (Case 25). The fact that these birth mothers did not have more

children is interesting, especially as one explicitly believes that this was a punishment, while two others believe that it was a decision that was influenced by the adoption.

Many of the adoptees claim that they do not hold their birth mother's decision to place them for adoption and that they do not feel angry towards their birth mother. Kristin wants to find her birth mother because she does not want her birth mother to feel that she is a bad person or to feel pain because the birth mother placed her for adoption, and when she meets her birth mother, Evelyn, she tells her that she has only ever loved her (Case 2). Benjamin also wants to tell his birth mother that he is not angry with her and that he misses her (Case 11). Devin expresses sympathy for his birth mother, thinking that it is a heartbreaking decision to make, and that he has never felt angry or hurt because they placed him for adoption (Case 5). Amy similarly expresses sympathy over her birth mother's decision to place her for adoption, and says that her opinion of and feelings towards her birth mother are not changed when she learns that she was conceived through assault (Case 23). Howard also was not angry with his birth mother, who was manipulated into placing him for adoption by a man involved in a baby selling scheme, and he did not judge her decision (Case 19).

Some adoptees even went so far as thanking their birth mother and expressing gratitude for the decision the birth mothers made that gave them a better life. John, the son that Rita placed for adoption, thanks her in the letter he wrote for choosing to place him for adoption and making such a difficult decision (Case 1). Leslie, the baby that Janice delivered by herself and never told her family about to protect her, thanks Janice for placing her for adoption so that she could be safe and have a good life (Case 6). Meg

wants to thank her birth mother, Sue, and tell her she is happy that she was placed for adoption and admires the bravery that decision required, and that because of Sue her adoptive parents were able to have a family. It is also significant to note in this case that the letters Sue wrote for her as a baby helped her in her fight against breast cancer (Case 18). In addition to thanking the birth mother, some adoptees also reassure the birth mother that placing them for adoption was the right thing to do. Emily, when she is first contacted, wants to tell Ouida that she had a great childhood and wants to reassure Ouida that she made the right choice in placing her for adoption (Case 7). Kristin also reassures her birth mother, Janette, whose kidnapping and assault by a career criminal resulted in her pregnancy, that she made a good decision and that Kristin never regretted the fact that she was adopted (Case 10). These cases in which the adoptee thank their birth mother and reassure her begin to redeem the birth mother by supporting the adoption, which may begin to relieve the guilt the birth mother may have felt.

The depiction of birth mothers in *Long Lost Family* is, overall, largely positive. Many of the mothers are shown to be redeemed in some way by reuniting with the child they placed for adoption. Evelyn, the woman who felt that her cervical cancer and resulting infertility were a punishment, felt "more like a mother today than [she has] ever felt in [her] life" (Case 2). Her sense of motherhood was reinforced by meeting Kristin. Nita claims that the empty part of her heart that she felt after the adoption has been filled by meeting Jenny, the baby she placed (Case 4). Ouida, who felt that there was a horrible feeling that stayed with her after the adoption, believes that this feeling has gone away now that she found Emily (Case 7). Janette feels that she has been forgiven by meeting

Kris, even though she recognizes that she did not do anything wrong by placing Kris for adoption, and by the fact that Kris has supported Janette's decision to place her for adoption as the right one (Case 10). Kathleen, who struggled with addiction and was able to become clean within the five to six years prior to her son making contact, also feels that she can start to forgive herself (Case 14). Marcia, who was manipulated and pressured into giving Howard up for adoption in a baby selling scheme, is happy when Chris calls her mom, and asks him what she can do to make things up to him, which he tells her is not necessary and that she already has (Case 19). Both Chris (Case 19) and Greg (Case 24) want to call their birth mothers Mom, although in Greg's case this is likely affected by the fact that his adoptive mother left him when he was nine years old (Case 24), and both of Howard's adoptive parents had died by the time he made contact (Case 19). These depictions were all very positive at the end, and the reunions were often very emotional. In the one case in which the birth mother was alive and found but declined contact, she was not depicted negatively. The fact that she did not want to meet the twins she had placed for adoption was expressed to the twins, who were disappointed, but immediately followed up with the fact that their birth father has been found, and contact with the birth mother is not mentioned again (Case 16).

Birth mothers were not blamed or condemned for placing their child for adoption in the vast majority of cases, whether it was by choice or by force. There were cases in which the depiction of the birth mother varied, however, and these depictions were interesting. Jennifer, for example, was left at a laundromat and found by police, who brought her to the hospital, after which she was placed in foster care, and was adopted by

her foster parents at eighteen months. A DNA test found a close relative but the relationship was not specified. This turned out to be a half-sister, who had also been adopted, but who had met the birth mother before she had died. Her description of the birth mother was that she was struggling, and when they met was unable to look at or hug MJ, the half-sister. According to MJ, the birth mother had self-medicated and struggled. She then showed Jennifer a photo of the birth mother, which caused her to be emotional (Case 26). Even though this was not overall the most positive depiction of a birth mother, there were no condemnations of the birth mother outside of the hurt and confusion Jennifer felt over having been left at the laundromat. It is also significant that MJ describes the birth mother as struggling, suggesting that she, like many of the other birth mothers in the sample, did not have an easy time with the decision to place a child for adoption, in MJ's case, and leaving another at the laundromat, in Jennifer's case (Case 19).

Patrice had a similar story surrounding her adoption, as she was placed in a cardboard box by a trash can at a mall. While Patrice expresses a desire to know the circumstances surrounding her birth and why she was left in that way, she does not actively express anger towards her birth mother. Instead she hypothesizes that her birth mother was scared and felt they maybe did not have an alternative. She is unsure as to whether or not she wants a relationship if her birth mother is found, but she does express in the letter she wrote that she is not angry about the fact that she was left. Contact is finally made with a biological sister, Sarah, who was told about Patrice when she was fifteen. Sarah explains that her mother delivered Patrice by herself, and left her because

she was incapable of taking care of her, as she already had two children, her mother was sick, and the baby's father was not in the picture. Sarah goes on to claim that she does not believe Patrice was just abandoned and uncared for, as she says that her mother dressed Patrice nicely in Sarah's clothes and watched the news closely until she could be sure that Patrice was safely found, indicating that she cared about the welfare and outcome of the baby. Sarah furthers the story by explaining that the birth mother struggled so much that within two years of Patrice's birth her other two children were placed in foster care. The birth mother was still alive at the time of contact, but was suffering from heart failure, and attempts at contact were not mentioned (Case 28). Even though contact was not made, and the case started with someone who had essentially been left in the trash, it still resulted in a somewhat sympathetic view of the birth mother as someone who was scared, felt she did not have another option, and who still cared enough about the baby to make sure that she was safely found.

There was only time in which a birth mother was portrayed negatively without much qualification, and this was in a case where the birth mother had left the baby on the steps of an orphanage in South Korea at eight months old. Lea, the adoptee searching for her birth family, feels that her birth mother was probably trying to give her a better life, and cites potential pressure from South Korea regarding the fact that she was also half-Caucasian. She also claims that she is grateful that she was placed for adoption because she did have a great life. Contact is not made with the birth mother in this case, however, the birth father was found and contacted. The birth father was bothered by the fact that the baby had been left on the steps and felt that Lea had been abandoned (Case 22). This

case involves a complicated depiction of the birth mother, because she is mentioned enough for an opinion to be expressed, one which is somewhat empathetic to the struggles she had faced, and one which was more negative towards the fact that the birth mother left the baby at the orphanage, without the birth mother or anyone who knew her being able to counter the narrative being offered.

Another factor that could be influencing the depiction and reception of birth mothers by adoptees is the age at which they gave birth. Of the eighteen cases in which age was specifically mentioned, twelve were teenagers, with the majority of them being younger than eighteen and one of them being twelve. The remaining six were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. Two birth mothers were in college, one of whom was a freshman, and can be assumed to have been eighteen if she went to college right after high school (Case 27), and the other did not specify which year (Case 18). Another birth mother was in high school but also did not specify what year of high school (Case 19). This leaves seven cases in which the birth mother's age was not mentioned or known. It is possible that the fact that the majority of the birth mothers were young, and many were still in high school, could influence the amount of sympathy the adoptees had for them. It may be that if a birth mother was older, and had a more stable life, adoptees may have not been as understanding of her decision to place them for adoption because she might have had the resources and ability to raise them. This cannot here be tested, as none of the birth mothers that discussed age were older than twenty-five. Even in the four cases in which the birth parents stayed together after the adoption the adoptees were still sympathetic and understanding (Case 5, 12, 17, 27) with two adoptees addressing the

birth parents still being together and saying they never felt bad because of it, and respected that they had remained together (Case 5, 12), while the other two adoptees did not directly mention their feelings on their birth parents staying together. Incidentally, the birth father had passed away prior to contact, which may have had an impact (Case 17, 27).

The reunion stories were largely a positive experience, but many also advanced a biological essentialist perspective in that they frequently depicted the reunited individuals as feeling an instant connection or having personality or personal trait characteristics in common before meeting. Kristin felt a strong connection with her birth mother before they even met, and feels that this is from the fact that childbirth is such an overwhelming experience (Case 2). Similarly, Jenny felt a connection to her birth mother when she also became a single, unwed, teen mother (Case 4). Susan, an adoptee whose birth mother was not alive but met with biological siblings, felt that she had a biological connection with her own daughter that tells her when she needs her (Case 8). Greg, when he met his birth mother Karen, said that he felt an instant connection with her and that it felt like he had known her his whole life (Case 24). These reunion cases all involved a sense of strong, almost immediate connection, which could suggest an innate connection between the birth mother and the adoptee even before they met.

Some cases also had coincidences that could be read as a biological connection or similarity between the two. For instance, Nita recognizes personality similarities with Jenny, the daughter she placed for adoption, in that they are both compassionate, and both work as nurses. When shown a picture of Jenny, Nita realizes that they had worked

together before (Case 4). Similarly, Darlene and Renee both worked as EMTs, and could bond over their shared field of work (Case 13). Another occupation coincidence occurred with Eric and his deceased birth father, both of whom work as a DJ, and also both carried handkerchiefs (Case 17). Teri remarks when she reads Devin's letter to his birth parents that he is a lot like the family she has with Gusty (Case 5), and Leslie finds that she and her birth mother Janice both use a similar phrase (Case 6). Theresa, when she was pregnant with Heidi, would play music to Heidi on her Walkman, and had hoped that she might play the piano when she was older due to her long fingers. When first introduced in the episode Heidi cites a passion for music, and plays Fur Elise on the piano for Theresa when they meet, a song they both feel a connection to (Case 9). When Tom and Elaine read the letter that Tom J, the son that they placed for adoption, wrote them, they are surprised to find out that the name that his adoptive family gave him is Thomas James, which is also the first and middle name of his birth father (Case 12). These cases exhibit many coincidences that could be argued are evidence of a connection beyond family, and could be used to support nature in the debate of nature versus nurture.

The birth mothers in this television show often fall in line with the ideals of good mothering. They sacrifice their desire to keep the baby, in the cases where they were not forced to give the child up for adoption, so that the baby could have a better life, putting the baby's needs before their own. The reunion stories included in this show also mirror other literature in that the reunions were largely positive, with every episode resulting in a reunion with someone from their biological family even if it was not the birth mother, with the reunions in Season 1 continuing the relationship beyond reunion and the

reunions in Season 6 citing a desire to continue the relationship. Some of the birth mothers felt redeemed and healed by the reunion, and had their identity as mothers reaffirmed. These portrayals are significant as media plays a significant role in reproducing cultural norms and beliefs, and this show is no exception. Depicting birth mothers in such a positive light as *Long Lost Family* does can help lessen the stigma surrounding placing a child for adoption, and can help normalize new and expanding ideas of family forms. It is also important to again note that there is also the added fact that as a television show *Long Lost Family* does have a vested interest in producing media that viewers will want to watch and will feel good about, and this also plays a role in the portrayal of these reunions. These portrayals are important to further analyze, as they have significance regarding the expectations of mothers and the fear of deviant mothers. The conclusion that follows will further address these portrayals and connect them with the greater expectations of mothers.

Conclusion

This television show and the way that it portrays birth mothers is important to understand. Because media plays such an important role in disseminating views, the fact that this show portrays a group of people whose status as mothers is problematized by the fact that they placed their children for adoption is significant because it offers a complicated motherhood that ultimately comes out on the side of cultural norms and expectations. Even though these mothers did not raise their babies themselves, they were still portrayed, for the most part, as good mothers. This was because they often framed their decision to place the baby for adoption as being for the baby's sake, thus putting the baby's needs before their own as Hays states is necessary in intensive mothering.

According to Hays, and current cultural views of motherhood, mothers sacrifice their own needs and devote considerable time and attention to the child. Given that mothers who place their children for adoption are not raising their children and are not able to traditionally fulfill this expectation, it would be expected that they would not be defined as good mothers because they left their children for whatever reason. They opted not to raise their children, are not providing them with the resources, time, and devotion that is expected of mothers, and as such cannot be good mothers. This, at least, would be the expectation, but is not what was found in analyzing the birth mothers in *Long Lost Family*. These birth mothers are portrayed positively, and warrant further analysis.

One way in which these birth mothers fall in line with the current expectations of mothers is the fact that so many of them claim to have always thought about the children

they placed, or felt that there was something missing after the adoption. This indicates that while they did not raise the child, they still cared greatly for them, and some birth mothers even celebrated the adoptee's birthday in various ways, be it a social media post, having a cake on the day, or donating something to a charity. This also supports the idea that a mother's love is unconditional; even though the birth mother placed them for adoption and did not know them, these birth mothers still loved the adoptees, and were often quick to express this when they were reunited. They are thus fulfilling one of the requirements Hays sets out as part of intensive mothering: that mothering is "emotionally absorbing" (Hays 1996:8). These birth mothers think about frequently and love the children they placed, but the fact that some of them felt something missing, like a hole, after the adoption also supports this idea of mothering as emotionally taxing, because they experienced a loss that stayed with them after the adoption as they thought about and loved the adoptee from afar.

Many of these birth mothers chose adoption because they felt that they could not give the adoptee a good life, were incapable of raising them, or even felt that the baby would not be safe if they stayed with them, as was the case in a few reunion stories. The fact that they were choosing to place the baby for adoption shows that they are sacrificing their own needs for their child, which is an important feature of appropriate mothering, both as outlined by Hays, as mothers are expected to prioritize the child's needs (Hays 1996:8), and by mothers who feel that they should spend more money and time on their children than they do on themselves (Collett 2005). Because they make this sacrifice, as

many of the birth mothers expressed a desire to keep the baby although they knew that it was not for the best, they qualify for good mothering.

Even the birth mothers who were expected to be labeled as bad mothers, such as the two women who left their baby in a public space, one in a laundromat and one next to the trash, were not outright labeled as bad mothers. The birth mother who left the baby near the trash dressed the baby warmly and watched the news until the baby was found. She cared about the baby enough to make sure that she was safe before she could relax, and was shown to struggle as a result of her decision. Even though this woman could have been labeled as a terrible mother for abandoning her child in the trash at a mall, she was still portrayed sympathetically, as was the birth mother who left the baby in the laundromat. This adoptee was unable to meet her birth mother as she had passed away, but was able to meet a biological half-sister, MJ, who had also been adopted. MJ, who had met the birth mother, claims that she really seemed to be struggling, and seemed to be depressed. Thus, even she was possibly participating in the emotionally intensive aspect of proper mothering, because she too struggled with the adoption and paid an emotional toll. Even these two mothers who by all accounts could have been labeled as terrible mothers and people were not, and this is a significant finding. Why are they portrayed so positively? I argue that these positive portrayals of birth mothers, and adoption reunion in general, ultimately provide a feel-good experience that both keeps viewers watching but also alleviates fears about deviant mothers.

We as a society have a vested interest in maintaining ‘good’ mothering because we believe that it plays an important role in socializing our children, as well as the belief

that, while it may not be as prevalent as it was in the 19th century, that mothers are responsible for the moral good of both their children and society (Hays 1996:48). This makes it important for mothers to behave appropriately, and for people to view mothers as good. *Long Lost Family*'s depictions of birth mothers facilitate this by portraying birth mothers as ultimately good, and bringing them back from the possibility of deviance and bad mothering. This is important because it allays cultural fears about mothering, as it is such an important cultural role. Because we believe the mother is such an important family figure, rehabilitating mothers who place their children for adoption allows fears about broken mother-child bonds to be assuaged, and reinforces the fact that mothers are meant to be good. As long as birth mothers who place their children for adoption frame the adoption in a certain way, i.e. as being in the child's best interest and that they still think about and love the adoptee, they too can be labeled as good mothers.

These feel-good reunions are also important because they can offer both those involved in and those thinking of adoption the possibility of lessened stigma. If we portray birth mothers positively and as good mothers, then there is the possibility that beliefs that adoptees were unwanted, or less than, for any reason may lessen. After all, if the birth mother only chose adoption because she felt it was best for the adoptee, or even because she was forced, then possibly the adoptee can feel a bit better about themselves and feel less stigma surrounding their adoption. Not only might it lessen stigma but it may also provide a template for those who are wanting to search for and meet their birth parents. This would provide them with a general idea of what might happen if they met their birth mother, and provide examples of successful reunions and continued

relationship from which both adoptees looking to meet birth parents and birth parents looking for the children they placed with references of how a relationship might look.

The positive portrayal of birth mothers in *Long Lost Family* serves an important purpose because it shows that there is a way for mothers who place their children for adoption, while possibly deviant, to be good mothers. They have sacrificed their right to raise their baby so that the adoptee can have a better life, which is in line with the expectations of the self-sacrificing mother, and have continued to care about and feel the loss of the adoptee, fulfilling the emotionally intensive part of mothering. They are shown to have not abandoned their children but have given them the opportunity for a better life, as mothers are expected to do. The fact that these birth mothers are allowed to be good mothers is important because it allows the mother-child relationship that we as a society hold to be so important to remain and be reinforced even where it would not have been expected to be. It allays fear of bad mothering, reinforces the ideal of mothering, and makes people feel good at the end of the episode. This allows those watching the show to feel as though all is right with the world now that this relationship has been reestablished, and that all is as it should be with the good mother restored. It reinforces the idea that mothers, specifically biological mothers, are important for identity as many adoptees feel something missing before they meet their birth mothers because they feel that there is such an unknown, as was the case for Beth (Harris et al. 2019).

It is also significant that some of the adoptees were seemingly able to truly establish a relationship that was more like a mother-child relationship rather than a friendship, which is often more common in adoption reunion (March 2015), and kinship

relationships (Clapton 2018). Also in line with March's (2015) findings is the fact that some of the birth mothers, and in one case the birth father, explicitly made attempts to follow the adoptee's lead and follow their wishes for a relationship (Case 6, 11, 20, 24). The cases in *Long Lost Family* are often shown to form relatively close relationships, with all of the cases in season 1 citing a continued relationship that involved frequent phone contact, visits, or even vacationing together. The outcomes past reunion were not offered in season 6, likely due to the fact as this season aired recently in 2019.

These positive portrayals are in line with the fact that many of the studies of adoption reunion found largely positive accounts. Campbell et al. (1991) found that many of their respondents have positively affected their lives, and Pacheco and Eme (1993) found that approximately half of their sample had their emotional needs met, as well as citing improved feelings about themselves. Mullet et al. (2003) similarly had a sample that was largely satisfied with the relationship they had with their birth mother after reunion, with sixty-seven percent citing at least partial satisfaction with the relationship (17). Pacheco and Eme (1993) also found that some adoptees had an easier time and felt more satisfied with connections made with biological siblings, which was found in a few cases in *Long Lost Family*. These were cases, however, in which the biological parents had passed away, were not contacted, or, in the one case, had left the baby in a cardboard box and was suffering from heart failure at the time of contact (Case 8, 20, 26, 28), although they do offer interesting insight into reunions with other family members. There was also one case in which the birth parents searched for the son they had placed, and when he wrote them a letter he largely focused on the biological sister (Case 27). While

these studies cite lower rates of satisfaction compared with the nearly one hundred percent satisfaction rate found in *Long Lost Family*, it was still the case that the majority of reunions were positive. It is also important to note that *Long Lost Family* has a vested interest in showing positive reunions, and this can partially account for the higher satisfaction rate. These positive reunions, as Harris et al. (2019) claim, can offer hope to those contemplating reunion, and provide birth mothers with the possibility of redemption.

The romanticized reconnection found by Scharp (2013) was not uncommon in the reunions in *Long Lost Family*, as many of the cases involved a sense of instant connection or joy at finding people who looked like them (Case 8). There were cases where adoptee had the same job, a DJ, as his birth father, and always carried a handkerchief just like his birth father, which was remarked upon by the birth family (Case 17), as well as a case where the birth mother had hoped the adoptee would share her passion for music, which was found to be the case (Case 9). These cases are important for both reifying and strengthening the biological connection that is believed to be vital for family, and functions to reassure viewers that there truly is something important in biological ties. It is also interesting to note that, as Pacheco and Eme (1993) found, some adoptees initiated or strengthened a search after having a child themselves and felt that their sense of connection with their birth mother increased after they became mothers (Case 2, Case 4). These cases also strengthen the idea of a real connection between the mother and adoptee, and connection through similar experiences, and further supports the importance of the motherhood relationship.

Motherhood is an important social role, and as such experiences a significant amount of social pressure and media coverage. This could be in the form of television shows aimed at preschoolers that show that good mothers stay at home (Wardrop 2012) or in portrayals of celebrity moms such as Britney Spears and Angeline Jolie (Podnieks 2012). Mothers who place their children could be defined as bad mothers who have abandoned their children, which would be a deviance in appropriate mothering, but *Long Lost Family* does not portray them this way. By portraying the birth mothers and framing the adoption in a certain way, such as doing it for the sake of the child, *Long Lost Family* offers birth mothers the opportunity to be good mothers and also relieves fear over the loss of the essential mother-child relationship, and in some ways reaffirms the idea that biological mothering is important (Wegar 2000). These portrayals are important, and offer both a complication and reaffirmation of cultural ideals of mothering.

Works Cited

Ayers-Lopez, Susan J., Susan M. Henney, Ruth G. McRoy, Michele D. Hanna, and Harold D. Grotevant. 2008. "Openness in Adoption and the Impact on Birth Mother Plans for Search and Reunion." *Families in Society* 89(4):551-651.

Bachrach, Christine A. 1986. "Adoption Plans, Adopted Children, and Adoptive Mothers." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 48(2):243-253.

Bachrach, Christine A., Kathryn A. London, and Penelope Maza. 1991. "On the Path to Adoption: Adoption Seeking in the United States, 1988." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 53(3): 705-718.

Barth, Richard P. 1997. "Effects of Age and Race on the Odds of Adoption versus Remaining in Long-Term Out-of-Home Care." *Child Welfare* 76(2): 285-308.

Barth, Richard P. and Julie M. Miller. 2000. "Building Effective Post-Adoption Services: What is the Empirical Foundation?" *Family Relations* 49(4):447-455.

Bartholet, Elizabeth. 1994. "Adoption Rights and Reproductive Wrongs." *Power & Decision: The Social Control of Reproduction.* 177-203.

Bell, Jennifer. 2012. "Are You a Politician or a Mother?" Pp. 108-124 in *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, edited by E. Podnieks. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press.

Berkowitz, Dana. 2011. ""It Was the Cadillac of Adoption Agencies": Intersections of Social Class, Race, and Sexuality in Gay Men's Adoption Narratives." *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 7(1-2):109-131.

Brabender, Virginia M., Amanda Swartz, Mary Winzinger, and April E. Fallon. 2013. "The Adoptive Mother." Pp. 61-85 in *Working with Adoptive Parents: Research, Theory, and Therapeutic Interventions,* edited by V. M. Brabender and A. E. Fallon. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Brabender, Virginia M. and April E. Fallon. 2013. "Setting the Stage: The Adoptive Parent in Context." Pp. 1-22 in *Working with Adoptive Parents: Research, Theory, and Therapeutic Interventions,* edited by V. M. Brabender and A. E. Fallon. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Brabender, Virginia M., Amanda Swartz, Mary Winzinger, and April E. Fallon. 2013. "The Adoptive Mother." Pp. 61-85 in *Working with Adoptive Parents: Research, Theory, and Therapeutic Interventions,* edited by V. M. Brabender and A. E. Fallon. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Buckles, Vicky and Jamie L. Pomeranz. 2017. "Exploring Special Needs Adoptions and the Applicability of Life Care Plans." *Journal of Life Care Planning* 15(1): 25-33.

Burroughs, Gaylynn. 2008. "Too Poor to Parent?" *Ms. Magazine*, pp. 43-45.

Campbell, Lee H., Phyllis R. Silverman, and Patricia B. Patti. 1991. "Reunions between Adoptees and Birth Parents: The Adoptees' Experience." *Social Work* 36(1):329 335.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2012. "Adoption, Disruption, and Dissolution." *Numbers and Trends.*

Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2016a. *Access to Adoption Records.* Washington, DC.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. 2016b. "Trends in U.S. Adoptions: 2008-2012." *Numbers and Trends*.

Clapton, Gary. 2018. "Close Relations? The Long-Term Outcomes of Adoption Reunions." *Genealogy* 2(41):1-14.

Collett, Jessica L. 2005. "What Kind of Mother Am I? Impression Management and the Social Construction of Motherhood." *Symbolic Interaction* 28(3):327-347.

Fessler, Ann. 2007. *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*. London: Penguin Books.

Gates, Gary, M. V. Lee Badgett, Jennifer Ehrle Macomber, and Kate Chambers. 2007. *Adoption and Foster Care by Gay and Lesbian Parents in the United States*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

Gates, Gary. 2013. *LGBT Parenting in the United States*. The Williams Institute. Retrieved May 4, 2020 (https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9xs6g8xx).

Goldberg, Abbie E., Reihonna L. Frost, Liam Miranda, and Ellen Kahn. 2019. "LGBTQ Individuals' Experiences with Delays and Disruptions in the Foster and Adoption Process." *Children and Youth Services Review* 106:1-11. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104466.

Greif, Geoffrey L. 1986. "Mothers Without Custody and Child Support." *Family Relations* 35:87-93.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Harris, Elizabeth A. 2017. "Same-Sex Parents Still Face Legal Complications," *New York Times*. Retrieved April 2, 2020 (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/us/gay pride-lgbtq-same-sex-parents.html).

Harris, Helen W., Jennifer Hale, Beth H. Oldham, and Caitlin Powell. 2019. "Four Narratives & a Baby: An Adoption Reunion Story." *Social Work & Christianity* 46(2):21-39.

Harrison, Algea O., Melvin N. Wilson, Charles J. Pine, Samuel Q. Chan, and Raymond Buriel. 1990. "Family Ecologies of Ethnic Minority Children." *Child Development* 61:347-362.

Hollingsworth, Leslie Doty. 2003. "When an Adoption Disrupts: A Study of Public Attitudes." *Family Relations* 52(2):161-166.

Johnson, Jo. 2012. "'Won't Somebody Think of the Children?" The Nineties Subversion of the Animated Mother." Pp. 53-68 in *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture,* edited by E. Podnieks. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Khanna, Nikki and Caitlin Killian. 2015. ""We Didn't Even Think About Adopting Domestically": The Role of Race and Other Factors in Shaping Parents' Decisions to Adopt Abroad." *Sociological Perspectives* 58(4):570-594).

Killian, Caitlin and Nikki Khanna. 2019. "Beyond Color-Blind and Color-Conscious: Approaches to Racial Socialization Among Parents of Transracially Adopted Children." *Family Relations* 68:260-274.

Kim, Katherin. 2008. "Out of Sorts: Adoption and (Un)desirable Children." Pp. 393-406 in *Mapping the Social Landscape,* edited by S. Ferguson. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.

Kline, Susan L., Amanda I. Karel, and Karishma Chatterjee. 2006. "Covering Adoption: General Depictions in Broadcast News." *Family Relations* 55(4):487-498.

March, Karen. 1995. "Perception of Adoption as Social Stigma: Motivation for Search and: Reunion." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 57(3):653-660.

March, Karen. 2015. "Finding My Place: Birth Mothers Manage the Boundary Ambiguity of Adoption Reunion Contact." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 11(3):106-122.

Mason, Mary Ann and Ann Quirk. 1997. "Are Mothers Losing Custody? Read My Lips: Trends in Judicial Decision-Making in Custody Disputes- 1920, 1960, 1990, and 1995." *Family Law Quarterly* 31(2):215-236.

Miall, Charlene E. and Karen March. 2005. "Social Support for Changes in Adoption Practice: Gay Adoption, Open Adoption, Birth Reunions, and the Release of Confidential Identifying Information." *Families in Society* 86(1):83-92.

Moreau, Julie. 2018. "Religious Exemption Laws Exacerbating Foster and Adoption 'Crisis,' Report Finds." Retrieved May 4, 2020 (https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/ religious-exemption-laws-exacerbating-foster-adoption-crisisreport finds-n939326).

Muller, Ulrich, Peter Gibbs, and Sumi Gupta. 2003. "Adults Who Were Adopted Contacting Their Birthmothers." *Adoption Quarterly* 7(1):7-25.

Neubeck, Kenneth J. 2001. "Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America's Poor." New York: Routledge.

Pacheco, Frances and Robert Eme. 1993. "An Outcome Study of the Reunion between Adoptees and Biological Parents." *Child Welfare League of America* 72(1):53-64.

Personal communication. 2020. Director of Search and Reunion. Private Adoption Agency.

Podnieks, Elizabeth. 2012. ""The Bump is Back" Celebrity Moms, Entertainment Journalism, and the "Media Mother Police"." Pp. 87-107 in *Mediating Moms:*

Mothers in Popular Culture, edited by E. Podnieks. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Riley, Nancy E. and Krista E. Van Vleet. 2012. "Making Families Through Adoption." Edited by S. J. Ferguson. Los Angeles: Pine Forge.

Roberts, Dorothy. 2002. *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. New York: Basic Books.

Sack, William H. and D. Duane Dale. 1982. "Abuse and Deprivation in Failing Adoptions." *Child Abuse and Neglect* 6: 443-451.

Salkind, Neil J. 2008. "Cultural Deficit Model." Pp. 217 in *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology* edited by N. J. Salkind. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.

Scharp, Kristina M. 2013. "Making Meaning of Domestic Adoption Reunion in Online Narratives: A Dialogic Perspective." *Qualitative Communication Research* 2(3):301-325.

Speirs, Carol Cumming, Sydney Duder, Richard Sullivan, Silvia Kirstein, Mona Propst, and Dolores Meade. 2005. "Mediated Reunions in Adoption: Findings from an Evaluation Study." *Child Welfare League of America* 84(6):843-866.

Stack, Carol. B. 1974. "All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community." New York: Harper & Row.

Stark, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik and Kekek Jason Todd Stark. 2006. "Flying the Coop: ICWA and the Welfare of Indian Children." Pp. 125-138 in *Outsiders Within:*

Writing on Transracial Adoption, edited by J. J. Trenka, J. C. Oparah, and S. Y. Sin. Cambridge, MA: South End.

TLC. 2016. "I've Waited for This Call for 45 Years." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Cases 1 and 2).

TLC. 2016. "Your Mom's Been Here the Whole Time." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Cases 3 and 4).

TLC. 2016. "Nobody Knew I Existed." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Cases 5 and 6).

TLC. 2016. "I Should've Fought Harder to Keep Her." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Case 7).

TLC. 2016. "Am I Who I Think I Am?" *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Case 8).

TLC. 2016. "Why Did You Leave Me?" *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Case 9).

TLC. 2016. "Everything Your Parents Told You Was a Lie." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Cases 10 and 11).

TLC. 2016. "Alone in a Crowded Room." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Cases 12 and 13).

TLC. 2016. "I Knew I'd Never See My Mom Again." *Long Lost Family* Season 1. Shed Media. (Cases 14 and 15).

TLC. 2019. “Why Couldn’t They Raise Us?” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Cases 16 and 17).

TLC. 2019. “I’m the Only One Left.” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Cases 18 and 19).

TLC. 2019. “Are They Looking for Me?” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Case 20).

TLC. 2019. “Not My Child to Keep.” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Cases 21 and 22).

TLC. 2019. “An Adult Orphan.” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Cases 23 and 24).

TLC. 2019. “What Family Feels Like.” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Case 25).

TLC. 2019. TLC. 2019. “The Missing Piece.” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Cases 26 and 27).

TLC. 2019. “Switched in the Hospital.” *Long Lost Family* Season 6. Shed Media. (Case 28).

Quiroz, Pamela Anne. 2015. “Adoptive Parents Raising Neoethnics.” Pp. 426-440 in *Families as They Really Are Second Edition*, edited by B. J. Risman and V. E. Rutter. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company.

Villeneuve, Maria. 2020. "Adoptees Can Now Access Birth Certificates Under New NY Law." Retrieved March 20, 2020 (https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/adoptees-can-now-access-birth-certificates-under-new-ny-law/2260303/).

Wardrop, Stephanie. 2012. "Mommy Nearest: TV for Preschoolers and the Search for the Good Enough (Working) Mother." Pp. 35-52 in *Mediating Moms: Mothers in Popular Culture*, edited by E. Podnieks. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Wegar, Katarina. 1997. "In Search of Bad Mothers: Social Constructions of Birth and Adoptive Motherhood." *Women's Studies International Forum* 20(1):77-86.

Wegar, Katarina. 2000. "Adoption, Family Ideology, and Social Stigma: Bias in Community Attitudes, Adoption Research, and Practice." *Family Relations* 49(4):363-370.

Zelizer, Viviana A. 1985. "Pricing the Priceless Child." New York: Basic Books, Inc. Publishers.

Appendix

Table 1

Category	Case Number	Total
Birth mother was found but no contact was made	Case 3, 8, 15, 16, 20 ,26, 28	7
Birth mother was alive and spoken with	Case 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27	20
Birth mother did not want contact	Case 16	1
Adoptee initiated the search	Case 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10,11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28	19
Birth parents initiated the search	Case 1, 5, 7, 12, 17, 21, 23, 27	8
Birth mother did not have more children	Case 2, 19, 21, 23, 25	5
Birth mother pregnant due to rape	Case 10, 13, 23	3
Adoption explicitly stated to have been chosen in adoptee's best interest	Case 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28	19
Birth mother happy to have been found and wants a relationship	Case 2, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 18, 19, 24, 25	12
Birth mother cared for (held and/or fed) baby before the adoption	Case 1, 3, 5, 6, 13, 18, 19, 25, 27, 28	10
Birth mother felt they could not place the baby for adoption if they held the baby	Case 2, 9, 10, 24	4
Birth mother was not allowed to hold the baby	Case 4, 7	2
Adoption was kept a secret	Case 1, 6, 25, 28	4

Adoptee says the birth mother made the right decision	Case 6, 7, 10, 12, 18	5
Adoptee explicitly thanks the birth mother for the adoption	Case 1, 6, 7, 18, 23	5
Adoptee explicitly says they are not angry or resentful	Case 2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 17, 19, 23, 24, 25	10
Birth parent felt a hole or that something was missing after the adoption	Case 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 18, 21, 25, 28	10
Birth mother is portrayed positively or in a redeeming light	Case 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28	24
Explicitly stated that birth mother thinks about placed child often/always	Case 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27	19
Birth mother was forced or pressured to place the baby for adoption	Case 14, 20	2
Birth mother celebrates adoptee's birthday	Case 1, 2, 7, 9, 17, 24, 27	7