

Acknowledgment or Rejection of Differences?

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In our family, adoption was a joke. We older cousins would tease the younger ones by pretending to let slip the fact that they were adopted. In reality, no one was; it was simply a way of saying, "You're different; you'll never fit in." We inherited the joke from our mothers, who have been recycling it on their baby sister for nearly 60 years. Since I have come to know adoptive families, the humor has been lost on me.

For the past quarter-century, an untested hypothesis has pervaded the clinical literature about adoption. The hypothesis concerns parents' (and, as a consequence, children's) "acknowledgment versus rejection" of the differences between adoptive and biological parenthood, and of the fact that being adopted colors a child's life and identity. There are indications that some parents impose on themselves and their children an implicit eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt insist that adoption is no different from the biological parent-child relationship." Many social workers, child psychologists, and family therapists regard such a rule as tantamount to denial. If obeyed, it forces children to repress their normal curiosity about roots, leading to "genealogical bewilderment" (Brinich, 1980; Sants, 1964; Stone, 1972). Virtually all authors—clinicians (e.g., Kent & Richie, 1976; Sorosky et al., 1978) as well as researchers and personal chroniclers (e.g., Kirk, 1964; Lifton, 1975)—agree that honoring such a prohibition leaves adoptees no room to express grief, anger, and fears about loss, abandonment, or rejection; nor to work through their doubts about the adequacy of their bonds with the adoptive family. In effect, the literature sees some adoptive parents, left to their own denial mechanisms, as unreceptive to their children's tentative expressions of feeling "different" (or worse) about being adopted. This deprives the children of opportunities to resolve inevitable questions about their bonds, thus impairing their sense of security and self-esteem. At least, that has been the hypothesis; but there have been no empirical data as to whether such repression of negative feelings actually occurs to an extent that is detrimental to adopted children's healthy emotional growth.

Kirk (1964), on the basis of questionnaires completed by a widespread sample of adoptive parents, distinguished two alternative "coping strategies," which he called

“acknowledgment of differences” and “rejection of differences.” He saw a dilemma for adoptive parents: on the one hand, the former strategy could be used to relabel positively their family’s and their children’s uniqueness, but would sacrifice the comfort of fitting society’s norms; on the other hand, the alternative strategy would force them to act and pretend to feel like all other parents, thereby sacrificing the benefits of truth and openness in their family relationships. Kirk saw the latter as the worse sacrifice. His title *Shared Fate* suggested a way out of the dilemma: that infertile parents need to acknowledge and work through their own fate as frustrated nonchild-bearers, while helping their children resolve the loss of biological roots and build on the special nature of their family bond.

Parents’ coping strategy may indeed be important in adopted children’s development. Prospective studies have generally found either few or no differences between groups of early-adopted children and demographically matched controls but have concluded that the adoptive family environment is a crucial factor in adoptees’ adjustment (Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1985; Stein & Hoopes, 1985; Witmer et al., 1963). Although school and behavior problems have been found more prevalent in adopted children during the elementary years (Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980; Brodzinsky, Schechter et al., 1984), such differences seem to disappear by adolescence. For example, Stein and Hoopes interviewed 50 adopted adolescents and a matched sample of 41 nonadopted adolescents. On standard measures of self-image and of ego identity, they found no differences between the groups. Both adopted and nonadopted adolescents’ positive perceptions of their family relationships were the best predictor of identity formation and social adjustment. Within the adopted group, however, there was an additional significant predictor of overall adjustment, especially concerning school and self-esteem factors: self-reported “openness of family communication about adoption issues.”

We recently explored the dimension of acknowledgment versus rejection or (to avoid attributing honesty to one end of the continuum and denial to the other) *high versus low distinguishing*. We hoped (1) to investigate Kirk’s coping strategies a generation later and (2) to observe, in action, how parents and children “process” the emotional content of their experiences as an adoptive family. Does the fact of being an adoptive family have inevitable implications for parents’ and children’s feelings about themselves and each other? How much room is there for disparity of feelings? Do relatively trouble-free adoptive families differ from more problematic ones in their manner of discussing adoption issues? Is the freedom to express different, perhaps ambivalent, feelings an important aspect of identity formation in the adoptee?

The theoretical significance of these questions goes beyond adoption. The study of family processes and their impact on children’s development requires a complexity of analysis that has been most productive when applied to particular developmental issues rather than to the general, sometimes vague notion of family systems (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Kaye, 1982, 1985). Adoptive families present a natural paradigm for the study of adaptation to deeply meaningful events, on the part of the whole family system as well as its individual members. By combining a microanalysis of family discussions with a multivariate analysis of individual interviews with adopted teenagers and their parents, we were able to see the phenomenon of high versus low distinguishing in more intricate and potentially more useful ways. Methods and sta-

- R5 *Mother:* Simple no.
- R3 *Daughter:* I don't think you can just go ahead and say no, I mean I'm sure there have been, I can't really say, but
- R5 *Mother:* I cannot think of any.
- R5 *Father:* Well, I cannot recall any that we could\
- R3 *Daughter:* Uh-huh. I know, but it's just, little things like that, that would be different\
- Father:* \identify to this question.
- R5 *Mother:* Yeah.
- R5 *Daughter:* \but, nothing major at all. That I'll agree with, but I'm sure there are little differences that don't make that much difference (laughs).
- X *Father:* Next question.
[Discussion continues]

The same family, two questions later:

Do you think any of your feelings about yourselves or about one another are different in any way from what they might be if you had all been one another's biological parents and children?

- R5 *Daughter:* I don't think so.
- R5 *Mother:* (laughs) I don't think so either. Same feelings
- P *Father:* "Do you think your feelings about one another are different in any way from what they would be if you were all biologically related?"
- R5 *Mother:* You seem like our biological daughter (laughs).
- R5 *Daughter:* I don't think twice about it.
- P *Father:* Do you think your feelings are at all different\
- Daughter:* Maybe sometimes\
- Father:* \had you been biologically
- S6R5 *Daughter:* \when you're little you think to yourself, "Gee, they picked me, only a baby," you know. I know perfectly well that's not true. I mean, you know, you can use that to make yourself feel special and that kind of thing but other than that, no. Perfectly normal.
- R5 *Father:* Then the answer to the question is no.
- R5 *Mother:* That's right.
- R5Q *Daughter:* Coming right down to it, yes, the answer is no. I mean, am I supposed to treat you differently, is there something they didn't tell me (laughs)?
- R5 *Mother:* Not to my knowledge (laughs). I think it has all been very natural.
- R5 *Father:* Yes.
- R5 *Mother:* Yes.
- Father:* Next question.
- Daughter:* Shot that one down quick.

The following excerpt comes from one of the family discussions scoring *highest* in distinguishing. In this family, the father is 50, the mother 38, and the son 13.

Have other people ever treated you differently because of their attitudes about adoption?

- Son:* This one is good.
- PT *Mother:* Okay, why don't you start then.
- O1 *Son:* A lot of kids at school, like Chris, he's made fun of me, when he's mad at me he uses that against me. Big deal. And

- OQT *Father:* How has he used that against you?
 O1 *Son:* Said at least he knows who his father is, stuff like that.
Father: Hm. Well you
 O4 *Son:* I forgot what it was.
Father: Yeah.
 O3 *Son:* My teacher, Mrs. N. treats me a little bit differently.
 OQT *Mother:* Do you think that's because you're adopted?
 O3 *Son:* Yeah, I mean in a way.
 OQT *Father:* Better or worse?
 O1 *Son:* Worse.
 OQT *Mother:* How?
 O1 *Son:* She'll say stuff like "You think because you've gone through one experience in your life you've paid all your dues," and stuff like that.
 O3 *Father:* Oh, that was that suffering bit, whether you've suffered enough.
 O3 *Son:* Yeah, long time ago.
 O406 *Father:* I don't know that it enters into my relationships with anybody, the fact that we've adopted children. I've never thought about it before, but it seems that people sometimes say it's wonderful that we've adopted children, but I don't know if they act any differently toward us because of that.
 O1 *Mother:* What first came to my mind is an incident that happened in the grocery store. Somebody came up to me and said about (10-year-old, not present), when he was two or three, "He's not your child, he must be adopted." But that's never happened in relation to you (Son) because people have always said\
 OQM *Son:* Well what did you say then?
 O4O1R5 *Mother:* I don't remember. My main concern was protecting you and him, I think all three of you were there, from hurt feelings. I just wanted to get away from that person. I'm sure what I said was "He is my son, these are my children." Whether or not you were adopted or looked like me, my main concern was for you, this person was obviously a jackass.
 O1R2 *Father:* Those feelings are around, different people have them. I guess to some extent we ourselves might, even. It's not the usual way to have children
 O3 *Mother:* I remember once taking (9-year-old, not present) to the Irish festival at Ridge Park, these 10 musicians looked alike and she said, "Mommy, why do they all look alike?" and I realized that for her, brothers and sisters don't automatically look alike.
Son: (inaudible).
 XT *Father:* (Starts to call interviewer).
 PM *Son:* Well, does Dad think we were done?
 PF *Mother:* Yeah, (to Father) I don't think (Son) is finished.
 PT *Father:* What more do you have to say, (Son)? I'm sorry.
 O3 *Son:* I told earlier about Granny.
 OQT *Father:* Oh yeah Granny. Maybe you should talk about that more.
 O4 *Son:* Well, I don't have to, it's already in there (on the tape), I've said basically what I thought I meant.
 O1 *Father:* Well you picked up some real problems in grandmother and grandfather's feelings.
 [Discussion continues]

One reason some family discussions have a predominant tone of "rejection of differences" and others a predominant tone of "acknowledgment" is that the system exerts pressure on each member to confirm the consensus being formed by the others.

tistical analysis of this study are reported in more detail by Kaye and Warren (1988). This chapter adds a few additional results, proposes directions future researchers might take, and elaborates on the implications of "acknowledgment versus rejection of differences" for clinical work with adoptive families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OR REJECTION AS A DISCOURSE PROCESS

The contrast between a low-distinguishing family discussion and a high-distinguishing one is readily apparent in transcripts from our study. The following excerpt comes from one of the families scoring *lowest* on the "distinguishing" variables to be discussed later in this chapter. (Codes on the left pertain to the categories listed in Tables 7.2 and 7.3.)

In this family, the father and mother are 53, and the daughter, 18; the following question was asked:

Would your family life have been different over the years if you had all been one another's biological parents and children?

- Mother:* I can
 XR5 *Father:* The answer is no.
 XR5 *Mother:* That's right. (laughs).
Interviewer: Okay, but I'm going to leave the room anyway, so you can talk about why you feel that way.
 P *Mother:* Okay, read that question again.
 PM *Daughter:* Family life—
 PM *Father:* "Has your family life been different from how it would have been if you had all been biologically related to one another?"
 R5 *Daughter:* I don't think it changes it much.
Father: No, except for—
 R5 *Mother:* Not for us, no.
 A3 *Father:* Except for the trip to The Cradle that we made once or twice.
 R3 *Daughter:* It just changes little things, you know, like when I was little, most little kids just threaten to run away, I'd threaten to go to The Cradle and get readopted (laughs).
Mother: (laughs).
 R3 *Father:* Well, yes, most other little ones wouldn't think of such things.
Mother: (laughs).
 R3R5 *Daughter:* Well, they (i.e., the adoption agency) knew about it, so what the heck. I can't think of anything else different, you know\
 R5 *Mother:* I can't think of any.
 R5 *Daughter:* \specific things that would change. You know, other families do things together, you know, they have their ups and downs. We're certainly not exempt.
 R5 *Mother:* That's right.
Daughter: You know. I can't see\
Father: I still say\
 R5 *Daughter:* \any major difference.
 R5 *Father:* \the answer is a simple no.

In the first family above, the daughter was talked out of her initial assertion of some fairly mild differences, not by direct argument, but merely by her parents' ignoring her point and reasserting that they "can't think of any" differences. In the second family, the son began by indicating he had something to say, Mother encouraged him and then confirmed his position with supporting anecdotes, and Father eventually acknowledged that they had a point.

METHOD

Besides exemplifying two poles of the continuum, the foregoing transcripts illustrate our method of observing "acknowledgment versus rejection of differences" as a process of family discourse (Kaye & Warren, 1988). We asked many of the same questions Kirk (1964) did. Unlike Kirk, however, we (1) interviewed our informants individually, in person; (2) interviewed their adolescent adoptees; and (3) also recorded them in family discussions to see whether manifestations of those coping strategies might be found in the ways different parents communicate with their children.

Sample

The population sampled was a restricted subset of all adoptive families: only maritally intact, racially homogeneous families with at least one teenage child who was adopted before age 2. In addition, all lived within a 90 minutes' drive from downtown Chicago. Through two large adoption agencies' mailing lists, we distributed flyers describing a study of "communication in adoptive families." This recruitment method dictated that all children had been told about their adoption, parents had remained on their agency's mailing list, and all members of the family were willing to be interviewed. As with any sample of volunteers, the possibility exists that their feelings and opinions may be unrepresentative of the population from which they selected themselves. Our interest, however, was in comparing these 40 families with one another. We shall refer to each family's oldest adopted child between the ages of 13 and 19 as the "target" child.¹

Procedure

A pair of investigators made a single visit to each family's home, lasting 2 to 3 hours. They began by assembling the family around the kitchen or dining-room table, obtaining informed consent from each child and both parents, and then charting a genogram, which mainly served to establish rapport and bring the relevant chronology to the forefront of everyone's attention. A semistructured family discussion followed (similar to the dialogues quoted above), and then the members were interviewed individually.

The family discussions consisted of seven parts (Table 7.1). An interviewer presented each question to the family, made sure it was understood (e.g., did the youngest child know what "biological" meant as opposed to "adopted"?), and left the

Table 7.1 Questions Asked as Separate Parts of Family Discussion

1. What are the three things you like best, that you do together as a family? What does each person like to do alone, or some of you without the others? What are some things you all do together that you don't like?
2. Tell the story of how Mom and Dad adopted (*Target*).
3. Would your family life have been different over the years if you had all been one another's biological parents and children?
4. Have other people ever treated you differently because of their attitudes about adoption?
5. Do you think any of your feelings about yourselves or about one another are different in any way from what they might be if you had all been one another's biological parents and children?
6. Besides what you have already said, are there any other ways life has been *harder* for any of you because of being a member of an adoptive family?
7. Besides what you have already said, are there any other ways life has been *easier* for any of you because of being a member of an adoptive family?

Note: Each question, typed on a card, was left with the family when the interviewer left the room.

family alone to discuss it. The family was to decide whether they agreed on one answer or preferred to say that some members felt one way and others another way. In either case, they were to talk about *why* they felt as they did, and only then call the interviewer back for the next question.

Afterward, each parent and each child aged 13 or over was interviewed privately and confidentially. Subjects filled out a standard 10-item self-esteem instrument (Rosenberg, 1979). Then the interviewer administered a questionnaire similar to Kirk's. This questionnaire included a few items of factual information, such as annual income, and questions like "Has anyone in the family been involved in professional counseling or therapy?" Most of the items, however, garnered subjective responses. These the interviewer rated on the spot, using a 5-point scale (e.g., "Do you ever feel uncomfortable talking about adoption?").

One question of particular importance to this chapter fell somewhere between factual and subjective matters: "Can you think of any problems such as these in the family over the years?" The interviewer probed specifically for "school problems," "behavior problems," "problems with other children," "marriage problems," "health problems," "emotional problems," and "other kinds of problems." In each case, she checked "yes" if any such problems were recalled, not necessarily involving the target child. Then she went back through the items that had been answered affirmatively, asking whether the informant thought those problems had any relationship to their being an adoptive family. The replies to the latter question were rated on a 5-point scale from "definitely unrelated" to "primarily related to adoption" in that family member's opinion. Thus we obtained two distinct variables from each individual, the number of "yes" items and the mean rating (referred to below as Problems due to Adoption) across those items.

"OPEN" DISTINGUISHING IN FAMILY DISCUSSIONS

Tables 7.2 and 7.3 list our coding categories, illustrated by actual examples. As Table 7.4 shows, the levels of distinguishing in the family discussions varied with

Table 7.2 Brief Definitions and Exemplars of Coding Categories

Process codes

- P** Comments or injunctions about the *process* of discussion ("Read the question again.")
Q *Queries* more specific than the interviewer's ("Why?")
X *Terminating* discussion when others appear to have more to say ("We're getting long-winded.")

Topic codes

- A** *Adoption* decision, application, waiting, getting baby, etc. ("We waited exactly 9 months."—A5)
B *Biological* parents, background, possible search, etc. ("I can fantasize that John Lennon was my father."—B6)
D *Developmental* tasks ("You kids have had a lot more trouble in the area of self-confidence."—D1)
H *Heredity* vs. environment ("We would all have had blue eyes."—H3)
I *Inability* to give birth ("I was 32 by then, and they said it might take several years."—I2)
O *Others* ("It upset you that time your friend teased you."—O1)
R *Relational* feelings—"You three are that much more special to us."—R6)
S Child's *self-concept* and sense of roots ("This is who I am, right here."—S5)

the question asked and with the issues raised in response to each question. Talking about the process of adoption, including infertility, applications, and interviews (Question 2 and Topics **A** and **I**), brought out acknowledged differences and disadvantages, as did other people's reactions (Question 4 and Topic **O**) and the child's curiosity about roots (Topic **B**). Conversely, with regard to feelings about the family or about the children's development, distinguishing was low (Questions 3, 5, 6, and 7; Topics **D**, **R**, and **S**).

The microanalysis does not concern us here, but its results can be summarized briefly. All three family members could be seen influencing one another toward consensus, in that the likelihood of each person's high- or low-distinguishing remarks depended on what the other speakers had most recently said; however, the moment-to-moment influence of parents on adolescents was no greater than that of adolescents on parents. Thus we found no evidence, at this age, that parents repress acknowledgment of differences or elicit rejection of differences any more than adolescents and fathers constrain mothers' expression of feelings in the family discussion, or adolescents and mothers constrain fathers' expression of feelings. The mutual influences were characteristic of a commonly observed group process: it becomes increasingly difficult to express and maintain a deviant opinion, as other participants in the conversation confirm one another's consensus.

Table 7.3 Levels of Distinguishing

1. Unqualified high distinguishing of *disadvantages* or *costs* of adoptive relationship ("I would feel closer to you, and we might not fight as much."—R1)
2. Mild or qualified distinguishing of disadvantages or costs ("It's just this little teeny question in the back of my mind, I don't know where I come from."—S2)
3. Mentions difference without clear advantage or disadvantage ("Our relatives wanted to know what kind of family the baby would come from."—O3B3)
4. Denies remembering, or ever thinking about it; or explicitly refuses to answer ("How would I know, I wasn't born."—A4)
5. Asserts *no difference* ("Isn't it how you're raised that determines who you are?"—H5Q)
6. Asserts *advantages* of adoptive relationship ("You didn't have to go through labor."—I6)

Table 7.4 Levels of Distinguishing by Question and Topic Codes

	Percentage at Each Level ^a					
	1 Unqualified Disad- vantage	2 Mild Disad- vantage	3 Neutral Differ- ence	4 Can't Say	5 No Differ- ence	6 Adoption Advantage
Question^b						
2 Story	12.6	30.1	29.1	17.5	9.7	1.0
3 Family life	2.8	2.6	19.1	8.4	62.6	4.5
4 Others	12.8	7.9	33.7	3.4	38.8	3.5
5 Feelings	6.0	3.3	17.0	8.7	59.0	6.1
6 Harder?	14.9	8.5	10.2	6.0	55.3	5.1
7 Easier?	4.1	6.0	8.7	7.7	48.5	25.0
Topic^c						
Adoption	20.9	4.9	41.5	28.0	3.5	1.2
Background	15.0	9.8	42.3	15.3	11.0	6.6
Development	3.8	2.0	4.2	9.2	68.3	12.6
Heredity	6.6	4.6	34.4	2.0	37.5	14.9
Infertility	2.2	50.5	12.0	1.6	12.9	20.8
Other people	14.1	8.5	36.6	2.8	35.0	3.0
Relationship	3.0	1.7	12.6	9.8	66.7	6.2
Self-concept	9.2	6.5	17.2	3.7	38.4	25.0

^aSee Table 7.3 for Levels of distinguishing.^bSee Table 7.1 for Question list.^cSee Table 7.2 for Coding categories.

Although the microanalysis involved each of the six levels as distinct events in the discourse (Kaye & Warren, 1988), we also derived a single score, Open Distinguishing, as a reflection of how each person's level codes were distributed.² This index enabled us to relate what mothers, fathers, and adolescents said in the family discussion with what they told us privately.

"PRIVATE" DISTINGUISHING

In addition to Open Distinguishing, six of the variables from our individual interviews had been hypothesized as possibly related to an underlying dimension of acknowledgment versus rejection of differences: Discomfort in talking about adoption; Life Was Harder due to the adoption (including Kirk's questions about recollected frustration and sadness); Problems due to Adoption (given that any of the seven types of family problems were reported, to what extent were they considered adoption-related?); how much the person Knows About Birthparents; Thinks About Birthparents; and Feels About Search (difference-rejecting parents would be less comfortable with their children's searching, and difference-rejecting children less likely to do so).³ These variables did constitute a unitary dimension among the adolescents, as indicated in Table 7.5. All 21 linear coefficients in the triangular matrix are positive, and 17 of the 21 are significantly so.

Among the parents (with whom Kirk originally postulated the dimension of "ac-

Table 7.5 Predicted "Acknowledgment" Variables

	Open Distin- guishing	Think Birth- parents	Know Birth- parents	Problems Due	Life Harder	Discom- fort
Adolescent						
Will Search		.62***			.39**	.48***
Discomfort	.52***	.56***	.28*	.54***	.69***	
Life Was Harder	.48***	.53***		.79***		
Problems due to Adoption	.34*	.51***	.30*			
Knows About Birthparents	.31*	.44**				
Thinks About Birthparents	.43**					
Mother						
Feels if Child Searches	.29*		.28*			
Discomfort						
Life Was Harder						
Problems due to Adoption		.35**	.27*			
Knows About Birthparents		.40**				
Thinks About Birthparents						
Father						
Feels if Child Searches	.32*					
Discomfort	.31*	.47***		.48***		
Life Was Harder						
Problems due to Adoption		.27*				
Knows About Birthparents						
Thinks About Birthparents						

* .01 < *p* < .05; ** .001 < *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001 (39 d.f., one-tailed)

knowledge versus rejection of differences”), the cluster of variables was far from unidimensional. Only 10 of 42 coefficients were significantly correlated, and 11 of the nonsignificant ones were in the negative (theoretically wrong) direction. We conclude that these seven variables essentially measure different things, and may even have a somewhat different meaning to mothers than to fathers. There is no underlying dimension of “acknowledgment” in general, among parents, though there definitely appears to be such a dimension among adolescent adoptees.

INTRAFAMILY AGREEMENT AND DIFFERENCES

Family members tended to agree with one another on five of the six forms of distinguishing we tapped privately (Table 7.6, rows 2 through 6). The highest parent-child correlations (row 7) were between the single question “How much does your child want to know about his or her biological parents?” and a composite of 16 items asking the children how much they did, in fact, think, wonder, and talk about those biological parents. So the children’s degree of interest in the lost parents was no secret from their adoptive parents; and, in fact, the families seemed to share a common degree of knowledge and curiosity about the birthparents (rows 5 and 6). Nonetheless, in answer to the question “How do you think your parents will feel if you some day search for your birthparents?”, the adolescents’ answers bore no re-

Table 7.6 Concordance Among Family Members

	Father ↕ Mother	Father ↕ Target	Mother ↕ Target
Open Distinguishing	.57***	.10	.08
Discomfort	.29*	.47***	.01
Life Was Harder	.29*	.42**	.26*
Problems due to Adoption	.57***	.36*	.22
Know About Birthparents	.58***	.55***	.61***
Think About Birthparents	.29*	.33*	.50***
Child Wonders About Birthparents	.54***	.66***	.58***
Parents Feel About Search	.37**	.21	.15
Parents Feel x Child will Search		.02	.09
Child Thinks Parents Feel x Will Search		.01	.01
Self-Esteem	.18	.20	.29*

* .01 < p < .05; ** .001 < p < .01; *** p < .001 (39 d.f., one-tailed)

lationship to how their parents actually felt about the prospect of their searching. We have reason to suppose that the parents' reported feelings were reliable, since the two parents tended to say the same thing. Yet the children's answers to "What is your best guess: that you some day will or won't want to search?" bore no relation to how the children thought the parents felt, as well as no relation to what the parents actually felt.

There was a moderate degree of family concordance on whether life had been any harder or easier than it would have been had they all been biologically related, and on their comfort in discussing the topic. The two parents' overall levels of Open Distinguishing were highly correlated; yet adolescents managed to express a weight of opinion *uncorrelated* with their parents (top row of Table 7.6). This is not inconsistent with everyone's influence on what the others were saying (revealed in the microanalysis mentioned above). It simply means that individual differences among the adolescents contributed much more variance to what they said over the course of the whole family discussion than did the moment-to-moment influences of their parents.

Matched pairs can be significantly correlated, as the variables are in Table 7.6, yet significantly different. For example, although the parents' reply to Know About Birthparents was highly correlated, mothers claimed to know slightly more about their children's biological parents than fathers did (paired $t = 2.3$, $p < .05$). Mothers also acknowledged thinking, wondering, and talking about the original parents more than fathers did ($t = 2.1$, $p < .05$). And their Open Distinguishing was much greater than their husbands' and adolescents' ($t = 5.1$ and 5.2 , $p < .001$).

UPDATING KIRK'S COPING STRATEGIES

We drew several conclusions from the foregoing results. First, the various questions that Kirk (1964) found reflecting a continuum for adoptive parents, which he called acknowledgment versus rejection of differences, remain relevant dimensions, even in

a generation far less secretive about adoption. The family concordance on those variables suggests that they are meaningful characterizations of how the subject of adoption has been handled by different families.

Second, an observer can easily discern (by discourse analysis or merely by reading transcripts such as those quoted above) the process of consensus-building in a family discussion of adoption. Although the baseline question about favorite activities usually led to a split decision (as allowed by our instructions), that virtually never happened with the adoption questions; dissenting views were expressed, then suppressed.

Conversely, the various questions asked of the parents—predicted to be components of a common factor—failed to correlate with one another. There appear to be *several*, relatively independent, dimensions along which they might distinguish their own experiences and feelings, as adoptive parents, from those they attribute to biological parents. (Among the adolescents, as Table 7.5 shows, high versus low distinguishing is a single strong factor.)

A minor discrepancy between our results and Kirk's (1964) was that Discomfort with the topic of adoption positively correlated with the other six types of distinguishing. (Kirk had suggested the opposite, that *rejection* of differences would lead to discomfort in discussing adoption issues.) All six correlations were significant among the adolescents, three out of six among the fathers (and the fathers and target adolescents agreed on Discomfort). Discomfort was simply not operative among the mothers, perhaps due to self-selection; they probably had been the ones who took the lead in the family's consent to participate.

However, our study does not constitute a failure to replicate Kirk's (1964). In fact, he actually developed separate indices of acknowledgment, empathy, communication, and trust; the idea of a single continuum comes more out of his discussion, and others' oversimplification of it, than out of his data. Furthermore, our methods were different, and we focused only on the adolescent stage of the family life cycle. (The fact that one-third of our sample had biological as well as adopted children may partially explain the multidimensionality of their answers to our questions; but Kirk's sample also was mixed.)

The fact that we did not find a unidimensional continuum of high versus low distinguishing among these parents does not mean we failed to see much "rejection of differences." It means that what we saw was more subtle and multifaceted than the literature suggests. For example, one mother reminisced, in the family discussion, about how she had handled a crisis brought on by another child's remark to her daughter:

- R5 *Mother*: You came home and said, "Mother, do I have two mothers?" And we went through "what is a mother?" We went through all the things a mother does—helping her children, making their clothes, shopping, and so on—and I said, "Okay, how many mothers do you have that do those things for you?" And that was the end of that.
- R4 *Daughter*: I don't even remember.
- R5 *Mother*: You don't remember, so that *was* the end of that!

Handling the child's question in that way was a rejection of differences; the first thing most mothers do for their children is to bear them, which this mother seems to have omitted from consideration. Yet over the course of the discussion her low levels

of distinguishing (codes 4, 5, and 6) were counterbalanced by an equal number of high distinguishings (codes 1, 2, and 3). She told the interviewer, "When they were babies and I was changing them I would say, 'Oh you darling adopted child.' I wanted them to know from Day 1 that they were adopted, so they would grow up knowing what their situation was, I didn't want it to be a shock." This family frequently watched 8mm movies of their early birthday parties and other important occasions, including the days they went to court for their adoption decrees. So there was a mixture of low distinguishing with respect to family roles and bonds, high distinguishing with respect to origins. Perhaps the mother was giving lip service to acknowledgment of differences, keeping her options open: if problems developed, the children would "know what their situation was, it would not be a shock"; but if appreciation was to be had for maternal services, she could fall back on the "one mother" reasoning.

The fact that most parents and children expressed a mixture of distinguishing and nondistinguishing sentiments would not in itself require us to revise the "acknowledgment versus rejection of differences" idea. What does argue against this idea is that there is no evidence low distinguishing should be equated with "rejection" or "denial." The latter terms imply that all adoptive families really experience important differences and, deep down, feel them; with some acknowledging those differences while others resist doing so. The data to be reviewed next indicate quite the contrary, that when people say their adoption has or has not been a major distinguishing factor, they are probably telling the truth.

FAMILY PROBLEMS

All but eight families in our nonclinical sample (80%) had at least one experience with professional counseling or therapy of some kind in the years since the target child's adoption. In one family, both parents and the target child had been psychoanalyzed, a sibling had received psychoeducational tutoring for learning disabilities, the father had been treated for alcoholism, and the parents were currently in marital counseling; another family had been in six different therapies totaling 19 years (some concurrently), individually and as a family, for reasons including a son's violent aggression and learning problems in elementary school and drug problems in high school, the father's alcoholism, the mother's depression, and marital problems. Those two cases were extremes, however. More typical would be one parent's brief treatment for depression or anxiety, or one course of family therapy initiated because of a child's school problems. The proportion of target children who had ever seen a psychologist or psychiatrist was 21% (about 50% higher than a national sample of adolescents adopted in infancy, and four times the rate among nonadopted adolescents; Zill, 1985). Out of seven types of problems queried, mothers' numbers of *yesses* ranged from zero to seven, and fathers' and children's from zero to six.

Kaye and Warren (1988) derived a concatenated measure from all three individuals' answers to probes for school, behavioral, social, emotional, marital, health, and "other" problems, as well as engagement in professional counseling or therapy. Variables predicted by this index of Problems are listed in Table 7.7, the target's age having been partialled out of the correlations. The more adopted children in a family,

Table 7.7 Correlates of Problems and Self-Esteem

	Family Problems ^a	Adolescent's Self-Esteem
Number Adopted	.34*	
Counseling with Child	.74***	-.41**
Adolescent		
Open Distinguishing	.35*	-.37*
Discomfort	.32*	-.28~
Life Was Harder	.44**	-.58***
Problems due to Adoption	.62***	-.45**
Knows About Birthparents		
Thinks About Birthparents	.45**	-.42**
Probably Will Search		-.39*
Talks with Mother	-.31*	.50***
Talks with Father		.26~
Self-Esteem	-.47***	(1.0)
Mother		
Open Distinguishing		
Discomfort	.40**	-.33*
Life Was Harder		
Problems due to Adoption	.31*	
Knows About Birthparents		
Thinks About Birthparents	.41**	-.31*
Child Talks with Me		.27~
Father		
Open Distinguishing		
Discomfort	.29~	
Life Was Harder		
Problems due to Adoption	.25~	-.28~
Knows About Birthparents		
Thinks About Birthparents	.29~	-.45**
Child Talks with Me	-.38*	.31*

^aAfter partialing out target adolescent's age, because Problems increased with age.

*.01 < *p* < .05; **.001 < *p* < .01; ****p* < .001 (39 d.f., two-tailed)

~.05 < *p* < .10 (included to show consistency among family members)

the more problems. (Whether a sibship was all adopted or mixed biological and adopted made no difference.) As problems increased in number, they were more likely to involve counseling that centered on or included the children; and the problems were more likely to be regarded, especially by the children, as having been due to adoption. Target children in "problem" families expressed discomfort in talking about adoption, thought their own and their parents' lives had been more difficult than if they had been biologically related, and more frequently thought about their birthparents. They also expressed such feelings in the family discussion, reflected in the variable Open Distinguishing. However, they rated themselves as less likely to talk with their mothers about things that worried them. And they scored extremely low on Rosenberg's (1979) self-esteem instrument.

In addition to considering their family's problems as being adoption-related, both fathers and mothers in these "problem" families thought and talked about the child's biological parents more, yet felt less comfortable talking about adoption. Fathers (but

not mothers) thought their children were less likely to come to them with worries (Child Talks with Me), than did fathers in families with a smoother history.

There are inherent weaknesses in retroactive self-report data, regardless of reliability. It cannot be proven that our subjects' reports of problems in their families were objective; what if "rejection of differences" led people to deny problems they actually experienced? However, we presume our Problems variable is valid for several reasons. First, the large number of problems our subjects reported; they hardly seem to have been denying them. Second, the fact that we originally assessed Problem Types, Therapy, and Counseling with Child as separate variables; they were highly correlated, which implies validity. Third, the reliability among family members gives credibility to those variables.

PROBLEMS CAUSE "ACKNOWLEDGMENT"

Clearly this cluster of "acknowledgment" variables is no manifestation of a problem-preventing strategy, since five of them as measured in the children, and three as measured in both parents, were positively associated with a history of family problems. To explore this further, we split the sample into a low-Problems group and a high-Problems group (using the median, $n=20$ in each group) and ran the correlation matrix in Table 7.5 separately for each group. Of the original 21 predicted correlations, 15 were significant among the targets from high-Problems families, whereas only 5 of the 21 were significant among targets from low-Problems families. Most important, the same five "distinguishing" variables still correlated significantly with Problems in Table 7.7, even within the high-Problems group.

We conclude that the intercorrelations shown in Table 7.5 were due primarily to children who had experienced more than the median degree of problems over the years. A set of at least six variables—Discomfort, Life Was Harder, Problems due to Adoption, Think About Birthparents, Probably Will Search, and Open Distinguishing—appear to have represented children's reactions to actual family and developmental difficulties over the years. There was no evidence of variability in openness versus denial, such as might have been inferred either if the "distinguishing" dimension had emerged regardless of Problems or if it had been uncorrelated with Problems within the high-Problems subsample.

The direction of effects we infer is the most parsimonious account of these admittedly nonlongitudinal data, since the problems reported were supposed to be historical facts, whereas most of the other variables in Table 7.7 involved present opinions or retrospective feelings about the past.

SELF-ESTEEM

The adolescents' Self-Esteem (as measured immediately after the family discussions) was significantly related to most of the variables measuring feelings or opinions in the subsequent individual child interviews (Table 7.7). In addition to family Problems, other indications of difficulties in the family—attribution of problems to the fact of being adopted, lack of communication, a sense that life had been harder due

to the adoption—predicted low Self-Esteem in the adopted adolescent. The amount of factual information known about the birthparents was unrelated to Self-Esteem (and unrelated to Problems). Each person's frequency of thinking about the biological parents was associated with low Self-Esteem in the target child. Surprisingly, children with low Self-Esteem were those with higher Open Distinguishing; that is, those who had acknowledged more differences and disadvantages in the family discussion. One might have predicted the opposite—that a child would need good self-esteem to acknowledge differences—had the various measures of distinguishing not been so closely associated with Problems.

Inspection of the data revealed that all types of family problems predicted low Self-Esteem in the target child—not only school, peer, or behavior problems (on the part of any child in the family), but also marital, health, “emotional,” and “other.”

There is reason to consider the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scales a valid instrument when administered in an emotionally neutral setting (Rosenberg, 1979). In the present study, however, these scores may have been affected by the immediately preceding family discussions. The self-esteem we measured may have been a state rather than a trait: differences between children whose families had experienced problems (attributing many of those problems to adoption) and those whose families had been more peaceful, may be less salient and not necessarily important when the children are in other situations. This remains a question for study.

In a situation where the subject of adoption has been brought up, there are clearly big differences among adopted adolescents in manifesting self-esteem as well as in related feelings about life satisfaction and relationships with parents. The target children ranking in the top half on Self-Esteem had mean scores roughly the same as the *whole* sample of fathers and mothers. Such a score would be obtained by someone who answered positively on about half, and *strongly* positively on the other half, of items like “At times I think I am no good at all” (agree = negative) or “I take a positive attitude toward myself.” The target children ranking in the bottom half on Self-Esteem agreed, on the average, almost as frequently or as strongly with the negative items as with the positive ones.

In short, at least half of our sample of adolescents showed extremely low self-esteem at the time we tested them, and that fact was strongly associated with a history of family problems.

THE ADOPTIVE FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

Clearly, one would like to draw developmental conclusions from this study: that high distinguishing (i.e., a strong identification with the circumstances or consequences of having been adopted or of being an adoptive parent), far from preventing problems over the course of the adopted child's development, results from them; and that a tendency to feel “no different,” far from causing problems, is a natural, straightforward outcome of good family functioning. It seems sensible to theorize that feeling “my adoption has made our family's life difficult” impairs children's self-esteem. Unfortunately, the opposite direction of effects is equally plausible: that some children's low

self-esteem both creates problems for them and leads them to attribute those problems to the fact of being adopted. All such conclusions demand longitudinal research.

In hopes that other investigators will undertake such research, let me propose a theory quite the opposite of Kirk's (1964). The more problems they had had, the *more* the parents and children attributed those problems to adoption and the *more* they thought about the birthparents. Such behavior would appear therefore to be a strategy for coping with developmental problems in adoptive families; but probably not an adaptive strategy.

On the basis of clinical experience, Brodzinsky (1987) interprets high distinguishing, as I do, as a coping strategy. He suggests reserving the term "acknowledgment" for moderate distinguishing, and proposes that the opposite extreme from "rejection of differences" is "insistence on differences," which is no better for the child. Our study provides empirical support for such a curvilinear model. However, when we look at the results of our study as a whole, they indicate that adolescents whose adoptive families have had developmental difficulties use the coping strategy on their own, not merely (if at all) in response to their parents' emphasizing differences. The general point (on which Brodzinsky and I agree) and the specific question of whether the coping originates in parents, in children, in the family system, or at all three levels demand longitudinal research. Our theories can be tested only by assessing distinguishing, problems, and recovery from those problems, throughout the years from adoption to launching.

Although systems exert pressure on each member to confirm the consensus being formed by the others, the children wound up fairly independent of their parents' consensus. This is not so surprising at this period of their lives. It is in the nature of adolescents to call into question their parents' attitudes. Furthermore, the fact that parents affirmed their adolescents' opinions, at least as much as the other way around, also seems age-appropriate. Parents have a motive to agree with the adolescent rather than to dispute every independent thought—the more so if they fear the child may break ranks radically, and adoptive parents have special fears of that kind (Sorosky et al., 1978). Thus by this age, reasonably self-assured children are somewhat buffered against the parental "party line," especially if it happens to refute their own experience. Less self-assured adolescents may err in the direction of exaggerating the causal significance of their adoption in every family problem that arises, even when their parents overtly deny that connection.

We know what powerful socialization tools parental frames are in early childhood (Kaye, 1982), yet we did not find the hypothesized parental frames in this domain and at this stage of parent-child interaction. In a similar study with families whose children are younger, we would expect more asymmetry than was found in our data. The moment-to-moment influences of parents' assertions on 6-, 9-, or even 12-year-old children would be more apparent, we predict, than the influences of children's assertions on parents'.

Ideally, investigators sensitive to how discourse processes shape children's development would record and analyze parent-child conversations at vital points in the adoptive family's life cycle: for example, at the various stages of telling, when parents disclose more information to their children and (hopefully) adjust their explanations to the children's cognitive levels of understanding (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff,

1984); or at the time when a search for birthparents is contemplated. But it is hard to envision how such moments could be captured on tape systematically.

SUBCULTURES

The number of adopted children in the family, the number of biological children, the target child's age and position in the sibship, the age at which he or she was told about being adopted, and the importance attributed to God in their daily lives all failed to correlate with father's, mother's, or target's "distinguishing" scores. (Furthermore, analysis of variance showed no interaction among any of these independent variables.)

Three effects of demographic variables within our sample point to the role of culture in how adoption is conceptualized and discussed in families. They also point to unanswered questions.

Sex Difference

Girls did more Open Distinguishing than their male counterparts ($t=2.4$, 38 d.f., $p<.02$, two-tailed), echoing the difference between mothers and fathers reported above. But no sex differences were found in the various measures of *private* distinguishing: the individual interviews elicited no consistent differences between girls and boys, between mothers and fathers, or between what the parents said about target girls and target boys. We found no sex differences in Problems.

The fact that girls did significantly more distinguishing than boys in the context of family discussions, yet scored no higher on any of the six forms of distinguishing manifested in the private interviews, raises the question whether boys simply speak with less candor in family discussions. If that were the case, the boys' Open Distinguishing should correlate less well with Problems and with the "private distinguishing" variables from their interviews than the girls' Open Distinguishing did. This was not the case. The pattern for boys alone, or for girls alone, was not substantially different from what appears in Table 7.5 for both sexes combined. Therefore, although the sex difference indicates *elevated levels* of Open Distinguishing by the girls, *variability* among the boys was related to family problems and to private acknowledgment of differences in the same way as among girls.

Farber (1977) reported, in a small sample of latency age girls, markedly more interest in the topics of adoption, infertility, and birth than among boys. The creation of babies is inherently important to females; and girls may more closely identify with their biological mothers. (Farber also found more conflicts with their adoptive mothers among girls than among boys.) Our data suggest that girls may also identify with their adoptive mothers' greater readiness than fathers to discuss the topic. The latter explanation would account for our finding this disparity only in the area of *open* distinguishing, not in our private interviews; it has something to do with the perceived appropriateness of such statements in the family context. The fathers and boys were no less candid, as measured by the correlation between their public and private assertions; but their levels of *open* distinguishing have to be interpreted in relation to the norm for their gender.

Socioeconomic Status

The better educated the parents, the more they and their children tended to mention differences or the less they tended to deny them ($r = .35, .31, .36$ for fathers, mothers, and targets respectively; $p < .05$, two-tailed). But Problems were unrelated to education (or to income). Assuming that defense mechanisms are distributed without regard to socioeconomic status, this finding further disconfirms the idea that low distinguishing is a matter of denial.

Religious Differences

One-third of the parents said they were Protestant; one-half, Catholic; the rest, except for one Jewish father, were agnostics of Christian upbringing. Faith, the importance attributed to religious faith, was included as a question in our individual interviews because some adoptive parents reject differences in the following way: "He meant us to be a family, even if we may not know what His reasons were for bringing us together through adoption."

We frequently heard God invoked by parents when insisting on the predestination of their familial bonds. God's will was used as an explanation. Not surprisingly, in answer to another question we borrowed from Kirk (1964), religious parents rated heredity much less important than the environment: biology is held in ill repute today by many deeply Christian parents. This suggests that the variable Faith might have predicted low distinguishing. But it did not; faith in God turned out to be just as strong among high-distinguishing parents.

Although unrelated to any of the family members' open distinguishing, Faith did correlate with the children's answers to Probably Will Search—positively, which means the children did not think God would frown on an adult reunion with their biological parents. Did the belief that God brought their families together assure them that the adoptive bond was strong enough to survive meeting their birthparents? Religious beliefs and values warrant further study by investigators of the adoptee's motives to search.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Our data point toward three principal conclusions. First, feelings about "differences" are largely independent of "openness of communication about adoption issues." There is plenty of evidence to support the need for the latter—both in the literature on adoptees' development and in what we know about family processes in general. Lifton (1975) writes eloquently from the adoptee's perspective: "The child swears to the secret and because children take such promises seriously, she never discusses with her adoptive father the one subject that, had it been aired, might have made them close." Reiss (1981) and many others describe the communication loops by which family members define their own and one another's identities. Students of parental behavior find that when parents' belief systems are organized rigidly, with insufficient accommodation to the reality of their children's lives, social adjustment problems and school problems result (Elias & Ubriaco, 1986; Emmerich, 1969;

McGillicuddy-DeLisi, Sigel, & Johnson, 1979). So "openness" is certainly important. But there is no evidence that asserting "I don't feel that I myself or my relationships with my family are different in any important way because I'm (or he's or she's) adopted" has anything to do with a lack of open family communication.

This conclusion runs counter to some clinicians' beliefs about denial and suppression of ambivalent feelings, implied by the phrase "rejection of differences" (Kirk, 1964). Adopted adolescents' frankly telling their parents that they believe their lives have been harder in some ways, or that their feelings about self and parents might be different from those of biological children, turned out to be consistent with what the children said privately, and more strongly predicted by a reliable checklist of problems over the years than by the contextual pressure to agree. This suggests that when adolescent adoptees deny feeling very different or being disadvantaged by adoption, they may be telling the truth. For at least some adolescents, and probably for their parents as well, "denial of differences" is simply a manifestation of actually not having experienced many negative experiences, rather than of having repressed them.

The form that "acknowledgment" takes in some adolescents, extending so far as to blame most of their family's problems on this one aspect of themselves—being adopted—is surely excessive, as is the association we found between a history of problems and an interest in the birthparents. In principle, knowledge of their biological ancestry and parentage ought to be of equal importance to all adopted children, regardless of how happy their adoptive situation is. If an interest in searching increases in response to family problems, it would seem more reasonable to describe such an interest as a strategy for coping with the personal meaning of these problems than to assume that the child who expresses no interest in searching is either denying or, as the proponents of searching would say, "not yet ready."

It might be the case that adopted children can suffer from too much distinguishing as well as from too little. Defense mechanisms come into play more evidently in acknowledging differences than in rejecting them. Adoptees surely do face fundamental "differences" in that some significant people in their lives have vanished. There are also hurts and embarrassments caused by a social stigma and by people's cruelty. But it seems that many adoptees cope with such difficulties, acknowledge feelings about them, and can discuss them with their parents, without attaching central importance to them. Perhaps they, the *moderately* acknowledging, are the best-adapted adoptees (Brodzinsky, 1987).

Support Rather Than Selection

A second conclusion from our study is likely to be echoed by other contributors to this volume: we should be providing better preparation and long-term support to adoptive families. Both adoption policy and adoption research have been far too concerned with how to *select* adoptive parents who will be so free of neurosis that they just naturally create a happy environment full of open, age-appropriate communication about any issues that arise. By focusing on the problem of selection and then disappearing from adoptive families' lives (reappearing, here and there, in order

to assess outcome), adoption agencies, laws, and customs have, in fact, modeled "rejection of differences" and a norm of minimal communication (Kirk & McDaniel, 1984).

Despite the increased numbers of late, transracial, foreign, special-needs, step-parent, and single-parent adoptions, the adoption of a newborn by an infertile couple of the same race remains the most common situation, and the one in which the issue of emphasizing or downplaying the adoption most directly arises. (The other situations all intrinsically present reminders that the child's biological roots are different.) Those who work with adoptive families over the course of time need to beware of stereotypes and oversimplifications. The idea that adoptive parents can be categorized into two piles, plucky candor versus defensive denial, is one such myth.

In the population we studied (closed adoptions of healthy white newborns by parents who remained married at least into the children's teens), the "low distinguishing" parents almost completely denied being or feeling different; their adolescent children also almost completely denied such differences. But even in the relatively "high distinguishing" or "acknowledging" families, our questions elicited mostly replies of "no difference" or "no important differences." Acknowledgments of differences and disadvantages, though freely expressed, were outnumbered by assurances about nondifferences. It is important for professionals serving adoptive families to recognize that a sprinkling of distinguishings amid many assurances of normalcy is probably healthy and accurate, rather than label all such assurances as "rejection of differences" in a pathological sense.

Parents' "acknowledgment versus rejection of differences" is simply not a unidimensional, pervasive tension between alternative coping strategies. To a far greater extent than adolescents, parents were able to isolate particular problems or disadvantages without generalizing to their lives as a whole or to their self-worth. For example, some parents managed to attribute family problems largely to the adoption while at the same time denying that their lives or their children's had been harder in any way when compared with a biological family. Perhaps the ability to make such qualifications may be the best coping strategy. If so, it is one the adolescents we studied did not have available to them, either because they had not yet learned it or because they were the persons most centrally involved.

It may well be true that what is implied by the phrase "rejection of differences"—proscribing all expression of doubts and ambivalence—leads to problems. But family members' failure to report many differences or much interest in the birth-parents should not, in itself, be interpreted as evidence of such a proscription. It certainly can no longer be held that denial of differences leads to problems. Without longitudinal research, we have no way of knowing whether the various forms of acknowledgment or rejection of differences had been characteristic of different parents over the years. But if "acknowledgers" were engaged in an effective long-term problem-preventing strategy of working through their grief over infertility, they should have experienced fewer problems, not more than the "deniers" did. In fact, a history of family problems was *acknowledged* in various ways, rather than being associated with any of the hypothesized forms of denial.

The Search for Roots

Although the relation between family or developmental problems and low self-esteem is hardly surprising, the relation between low self-esteem and thinking about one's biological parents is less obvious. We know that searchers overcome powerful fears of their own as well as strong external resistance to their efforts (B. J. Lifton, 1979; Sorosky et al., 1978). Had two other recent studies not found the same relationship between poor self-concepts and searching for birthparents (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983), we might have predicted that only adoptees with good feelings about themselves would have the courage to confront the fears of some of their parents, the norms and constraints of society, and the Pandora's box their search may unlock.

Our findings suggest that parents don't necessarily share their child's interest in searching, but they don't especially oppose it, and they do share in being more curious about their child's biological origins, if they have had more problems in their relationship.

The terribly low self-esteem we found among adolescents whose adoptive families had experienced problems vividly demonstrates our third conclusion and what too few developmental theorists have acknowledged: a strong sense of self is inseparable from a sense of belonging. We see support in these data for Kaye's (1982) Vygotskian theory of the self's origins, for Winnicott's (1965) concept of the holding environment, and Kohut's (1971) concepts of mirroring and the parental self-object. Adopted adolescents whose schooling or family lives have been problematic, and who consequently feel doubts about their self-worth, seem to be highly interested in learning about, possibly reuniting with, a lost set of parents. When something is missing in their sense of self, they experience themselves as missing persons in two senses: persons who are themselves missing and who miss particular significant others. Adolescents with self-esteem problems in biological families may have somewhat similar feelings. But the adopted child has a real historical loss of ties to which to attribute the problem or in which to see hope of rectifying it. Self-esteem and attachment are functionally inseparable.

The movement toward more possibilities for information exchange between the bearing and rearing parents ("open adoption") suggests an entirely different kind of experience from that of the families in our sample. It is encouraging that the issue of "acknowledgment versus rejection of differences," as formulated by Kirk (1964) in an era of embarrassment and frequent secrecy about adoption, requires revision a couple of decades later. Perhaps it will change even more, if wondering about the birthparents is replaced by knowing more about them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author is grateful to a private donor to the Center for Family Studies, Northwestern University Medical School, for financially supporting this project; and to the two agencies, Catholic Charities of Chicago and The Cradle, which helped us recruit the adoptive families. Special appreciation goes to Sarah Warren for interviewing and coding, and to Susan Blake and Judith Heyhoe for transcribing the interviews.

NOTES

1. All target children had been placed with the parents before the age of five months; all but eight when less than two months old. In all cases, the parents (like Kirk's subjects) had experienced prolonged difficulty in conceiving or in carrying a baby to term. In most cases, the application process had then taken another year or two.

2. The index of distinguishing was defined as a weighted sum $3a + 2b + c - d - 2e - 3f$, where a through f are levels 1 through 6 as proportions of all the level codes an individual's utterances received. Thus each instance of level 1 counted 3 points, each instance of level 6 counted -3 , and so on.

3. These variables are defined more fully in Kaye and Warren (1988); complete questionnaire and formulas for reducing separate items to these summary variables are available from the author.