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## **"Family" as Constructed by Adoptees After Making Contact with Their Birth Families**

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**'Family' as constructed by adoptees after making contact with their  
birth families**

By

Adrianne Moloney, BA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of

Master of Arts  
(Sociology/Anthropology)

at the  
School of Social & Cultural Studies  
Edith Cowan University

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## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Legislative changes during the 1980s and 1990s opened confidential adoption files of the past enabling many adoptees and relinquishing parents to establish contact. This study examines the way in which the meaning of family is constructed by adoptees who have made contact with their birth relatives, and how these constructions were altered after contact. The ways in which biological and social definitions of family are constructed and contested in these settings is explored. Sociological definitions of family are discussed and the gap between ideal notions of 'family' and the lived experience of 'family' is explored. The study focuses on the process by which people are assigned as family. It explores what 'family' means to those involved in the study and the criteria they employ to construct their meanings of 'family'. Participants were adults of both sexes and various ages who were adopted as infants during the years 1935 - 1975 (the period of 'secrecy'), and who had made contact (in some form) with their birth parent(s) or birth family. Qualitative data came from in-depth interviews conducted with twelve participants who were asked to map their families. A focus group was also held with six interviewees and three other interested adoptees. Adopting a phenomenological approach, participants communicated their meanings of family, and the study examines the way those meanings were constructed. By examining the incorporation (or exclusion) of birth family members into adoptees constructions of family, the thesis provides a better understanding of how family relationships are idealised and, potentially, realised.

## **DECLARATION**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

### **PERSONAL REFLECTION**

Adopted at the age of six weeks from the Broadmeadows Orphanage, in Victoria, I was the third and final child to be adopted into my family. I cannot remember adoption being spoken about negatively; rather it was something that was often joked about. I always felt a special bond with my family because of the fact we had in a sense adopted each other as family members. Twenty-seven years later, I feel this bond has become stronger as each of us has located and contacted our respective birth families.

It has been over three years since I first made contact with my birth parents (refer to Appendix F for personal adoption papers). Our relationships have developed into strong friendships and we keep in regular contact. The most profound effect I felt from making contact with them was the impact it had on not only ourselves, but the families from which we have come and the ones we have established. In both positive and negative ways I have seen and felt the impact of our reunion on existing family relationships. The significance of this event in my life and the lives of those that were around both myself and my birth parents, made me reconsider the importance of family relationships and 'family' itself. The experience made me reflect on whom I regarded as my family, the reasons I regarded them as familial and the roles particular members play. Questions grew about the impact of contact on family relationships and the way in which 'family' itself is viewed. The research topic of this dissertation grew out my own experiences and an interest in exploring the perceptions of other adoptees in regards to meanings of 'family'.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Twentieth century adoption practices in Australia and other Western countries have differed from those that have come before. The defining characteristic of adoptions from the 1930s to the 1980s was the high level of secrecy employed by both the state and society at large (O'Shaughnessy, 1994). Records pertaining to the adoption were sealed, making identifying information inaccessible to the participants involved in the process. Although secrecy had surrounded adoptions before this time, legislation had not existed that prevented parties involved in the adoption process from obtaining any identifying information (Samuels, 1990; Swain, 1992).

Closed or confidential adoption was introduced under the guise that it served the best interests of all parties involved (Adoption Legislative Review Committee, 1997a) . For the child, sealing adoption records assured their genealogical identity would not be revealed, thus reducing the stigma that illegitimacy may bring to them. Signified by the adoption of a new family name, the child adopts a new identity, that of their adoptive family detached from their genealogical heritage. Adoptive parents were given the opportunity to name and raise their adopted child "as if they were the natural children of their adoptive parents" (Mellor, 1990, p147). The establishment of legislation and the subsequent sealing of adoption records gave adoptive parents the security of knowing birth parents could not reclaim their biological child. Birth parents, or more specifically birth mothers, were required to sign documentation relinquishing all legal rights and responsibilities to their child. By relinquishing the infant completely, and any future contact, it was argued birth mothers would be more able to deal with their grief and loss.

Many birth mothers were told that with time, they would forget "this unfortunate incident" and would/should get on with their lives (Swain, 1992; Farrar, 1997).

Unmarried mothers were not seen as capable of fulfilling the role of a parent without the financial and physical support of a husband. In contrast, adoptive families were seen to represent the ideal 'family' to provide the appropriate environment for a child to be reared. The adopting couple were financially secure, their marriage viewed as 'stable', and they were capable of meeting the child's material and emotional needs.

This period of secrecy in adoption coincides with increased state interest and intervention in family matters. The interests of the child became a higher priority and decisions regarding the appropriate psychological and social environment for a child to be reared was established by 'experts'. Standard child-rearing techniques were promoted by educational, medical and child care workers (Reiger, 1985). 'Good parents' followed guidelines and would be rewarded with a 'normal' child. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, influential theories emerged regarding the importance of the socialisation process in the development of an individual's adult personality. The impact of the social environment in which an individual is reared was emphasised. Adoptive families therefore could indeed serve the same functions as non-adoptive families and be seen as being *the same as* a biological one. However, I would argue, as others have, that individuals are the product of both their environment and their biological make-up. It appears legislators of the mid-twentieth century did not consider the implications of denying adoptees information pertaining to their genetic background (Samuels, 1990; Small, 1987).

In response to the voices of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, legislation pertaining to access to identifying information was amended throughout Australia during the 1980s (Swain, 1992). Although this legislation varies from state to state in Australia, amendments made at this time enabled adoptees to access sealed records containing identifying information about themselves and their birth parent(s). These changes gave many adoptees (and some birth parents) the opportunity to locate and contact their birth relatives. Increases in the occurrence of this phenomenon over the past ten years has warranted research on the effects of reunion on the individuals involved and the impact it has had on their lives over time.

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

Although many 'reunions' have occurred since legislative amendments in the mid-1980s, there have been few studies conducted focusing on the impact of these reunions and subsequent contact (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Depp, 1982; Pacheco & Erne, 1993; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1974). While there is some research on constructions of 'family', such as Levin's work on step families, none deals directly with adoptees' constructions of family. The perceptions adoptees hold of their 'family' have not (as far as I can determine) been explored in family research. This research project focuses on the 'after effects' of contact and how this influences an adoptee's construction of family, rather than the motives and procedures involved in the search and contact process (refer to Gonyo & Watson, 1988; Picton, 1980 ).

In a society where decisions made by government agencies about the welfare of an elderly man, or a sick young man, or that of an eight year old girl in foster care have direct consequences for families, questions of what constitutes 'family' and who are regarded as 'family' are central issues of concern. Explorations of family from an individual's perspective have revealed that in many cases, those regarded as 'family' or who perform familial tasks were not always legally or biologically related (Bould, 1993; Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982). As research has not been previously conducted to explore the meaning of family as constructed by adoptees after contact with their birth families, this research project is unique and contributes both to the field of adoption and to sociological discussion of 'the family'.

## **THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

There were two central research questions asked in this study. The first examined how an adoptee constructs the meaning of 'family' and what factors contributed to whom they included in their construction. Subsidiary questions extending from this include: what sort of criteria do individuals employ to determine who are family members?; and what does 'family' mean to adoptees? The second central research question explored how an adoptee's construction of 'family' was altered after contact with their birth parent(s) or birth relatives.

The study also examined the way in which social definitions of family are constructed and contested in these settings. A third research question asked how 'family' was constructed in the sociological literature. A subsidiary question stemming from this third research question explored the differences and/or similarities of an adoptees'

constructions of 'family' in comparison to traditional sociological notions of 'family' and those employed by government agencies.

'Family' is a commonly used term that has subjective meanings and values attached to it, therefore it is crucial definitions are drawn from individual perceptions (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). The reunion between adoptees and their birth relatives is a meeting between people who are biologically related, but does this make them 'family'? By examining an adoptee's construction of 'family' and the extent to which birth family members are included (or excluded) within this construction, discussions can explore not only what distinguishes between 'family' and 'non-family', but also the distinction between relations and 'family'. A better understanding of how family relationships are idealised and potentially realised will be the result of this exploration.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

To explore meanings of 'family' in addressing the central research questions, a desirable approach was one that allowed the voices of the participants to be heard and used to inform the research. Accordingly, a phenomenological position was selected as the most appropriate approach to adopt for, as Hammond, Howarth and Keat (1991, p1) state, "phenomenology involves the description of things as one experiences them, or of one's experiences of things".

An approach developed under the umbrella of phenomenological sociology is symbolic interactionism. Emerging from the area of psychology and influenced predominantly by the work of George Mead, the symbolic interactional framework is primarily concerned with:

the everyday interaction of people and the way they perceive the world, and create and maintain and change it and their interaction...Reality is here considered not as objective or given but as created, negotiated and understood by the family members through the interpretation they give to it. Social reality, society, culture, economy and so on are abstractions invoked and constructed in real terms when 'realised' by people and when included in their action (Sarantakos, 1996, p15).

As the topic of research focused on individual perceptions and constructions of 'family', the subject determined the method and approach adopted. The phenomenological approach taken assisted in establishing the appropriate method to employ and will be discussed in detail in chapter two. Adopting a symbolic interactional framework enables an understanding of constructions of family to emerge from the participants. These understandings, or their 'reality' of family as it is lived, are explored to develop an understanding of how individuals construct their meaning of family.

## **PLAN OF THE STUDY**

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter Two outlines the methodology employed to explore the research questions of this study and evaluates the usefulness of the specific methodology used and how the participants themselves felt about the method used. The limitations of this will also be discussed.



Chapter Three discusses 'the Western family' and the way it has been conceptualised in the sociological literature. Included in this discussion is the changing position of children within 'the family' and the higher emotional value attached to them both within the family and wider society.

Chapter Four provides an overview of adoption practices throughout history and discusses the changing perceptions and practices of adoption. The main focus of this chapter is on the changing legislation in Australia.

Essentially chapter Five introduces the reader to the participants and the data collected. Divided into two parts, the first includes those people who were adopted as infants within Australia. The second introduces those that were adopted overseas, including the United Kingdom and South Africa.

Chapter Six discusses two central questions pertaining to constructions of 'family'. The first asks what is 'family'? It explores what the term 'family' means or represents to participants. The second addresses the question of who is 'family'. It discusses who the participants include in their construction of 'family' and the reasons they included and/or excluded.

Chapter Seven discusses the impact of contact on the participants construction of 'family' and how time impacts on these constructions. This chapter draws the main conclusions and returns to answer the central research questions.

## CHAPTER 2 METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and justify all of the data sources used in my research and the method of analysis. A description of each data source will be included together with the reasons they have been utilised. The selection and composition of the sample and the limitations relevant to this particular sample group will be discussed. As I have adopted a phenomenological approach to explore an adoptee's construction of 'family', the research methods employed comply with this perspective. These include participant observation, in-depth interviews and a focus group. Participant observation of triad meetings, held by two Perth adoption support organisations, allowed me to access informants and to develop a rapport and trust with them. To gather the qualitative material analysed in this research, a two stage data collection was undertaken; two in-depth interviews and a focus group.

The documentary data used in this study included: research material focusing on the search and reunion process (Post Adoption Resource Centre, 1992; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Picton, 1980; Sachdev, 1992; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1974); discussions of legislation pertaining to adoption within Australia (Boss, 1992; Turner, 1995; Stonehouse, 1992); quantitative research dealing with the number of adoptions as well as family structures (Angus & Golley, 1996; McDonald, 1993) and personal accounts of adoption experiences (Chick, 1994; Matthews, 1996). Combined with sociological literature on constructions of family (Levin, 1993; Levin & Trost, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982; Bernardes, 1987, 1993; Bould, 1993; Gilding, 1991) and literature placing adoption in a wider context (O'Shaughnessy, 1994; Mellor, 1990; Brennan, 1994; Swain, 1992; Picton, & Boss, 1981; Samuels, 1990;

Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1978), the documentary data provides the basis for an understanding of the social context of adoption, past and present.

## **THE SAMPLE**

The selection of informants from Perth, Western Australia in this research was based on two common elements; they were adopted at infancy during the period of confidential adoptions, and had contact with their birth family. As informants were "chosen for a specific reason or purpose", purposeful or "judgement" sampling was used (Johnson, 1990, p28; Patton, 1990). Purposeful sampling allowed the selection of participants to be done to suit the needs of my project, based on the phenomenon being studied (Robson, 1993). In the case of this study, the only requirement of participants was their adoptive status, and having contact with their birth family. Current age or gender were not factors in the selection process.

The phenomenological perspective and research methods consistent with this approach mean that the number of participants involved in this research was not as crucial as the quality of the interview data collected. According to Seidman (1991, p45), "the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants". Participants in this study all experienced being adopted at a time of confidential adoptions and had made contact with their birth relatives once legislative changes were in place. Twelve participants were selected as

case studies to be discussed to enable sufficient depth and richness to emerge from the data analysis.

Of the twelve participants selected, six were adopted as infants within Australia (Anne, Belinda, Elsie, Faye, Jenny and Kathy). Five participants were adopted within the United Kingdom as infants, Carl and Dave migrating as children with their family and Matthew, Henry and Lisa who migrated to Australia as adults and are current residents. Isabel was adopted in South Africa as an infant and emigrated to Australia with her family of procreation. Three main differences between those adopted within Australia and those who were not were considered, namely: legislative differences pertaining to their adoption and access to identifying information; distance from adoptive family and birth family; and cultural differences that may exist in relation to family structures and the way in which 'family' is viewed.

There are differences in adoption practices between Australia, the United Kingdom, and South Africa (the countries in question). However, as all allow adoptees to access identifying information, the differences are not pertinent to this study as the focus is on the impact of contact rather than the search and reunion process itself.

For adoptees with their adoptive and birth family residing overseas, distance is a major factor in developing and maintaining family relationships (a point that will be developed further in chapters five and six). However, in regard to selecting participants, this is not only relevant to those adopted overseas, as those adopted within Australia also contend with distance if their adoptive and birth families do not live in the same city or state. Differences between those adopted in Australia and those that were not, regarding

distance from family members, did not warrant the exclusion of either group from the sample.

Cultural differences between those adopted within Australia and those from overseas was an important consideration to take into account in selecting participants. Although there are inevitably differences between the United Kingdom, South Africa and Australia, all participants share a white Western background, and accordingly I assumed similarities would also exist in the way individuals would *feel* about 'family'. Rather than entering the research with preconceived notions of differences that may exist between these three countries, I allowed the participants to express any differences they felt were important to the central research questions.

There were of course limitations to the sample. Many of the participants were contacted through support groups and were perhaps more prepared to talk about their adoption experience than may be true of many others. As they had already discussed issues they felt were important with others either in a public forum or private counselling, this may have unduly influenced how they spoke about their adoption experience. Rather than using their own language to describe their experience, they may have used the language given to them by counselling organisations such as describing adoptive families as dysfunctional (Dave). Other limitations were related to the small number of adoptees willing and able to be involved in the study. Many adoptees whom I met had not had any contact with their birth family and were in the process of searching and making contact. These I omitted from the sample.

## GETTING IN TOUCH WITH ADOPTEES IN PERTH

As a starting point to meet adoptees who have made contact with their birth parent(s) or birth family, I contacted two Perth organisations, the Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS) and Jigsaw, W.A. Each organisation offers support and assistance to anyone involved in the adoption process including mediation, counselling and support groups. Monthly triad meetings were held by both organisations consisting of adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents, and other family members or friends. Attending these meetings enabled me to observe and listen to a variety of individuals' stories from different perspectives in the adoption triad and gave me the opportunity to meet adoptees. As these meetings require participants to share some of their story, I was compelled to relate my adoption experience within these settings. In sharing my experiences in this forum, trust was established with many informants prior to my speaking to them on an individual basis. As Belinda said to me in her first interview:

I wouldn't have done this probably if you hadn't been through it all yourself...you've been through it, you weren't just someone trying to find out other people's information...you've been there and you know what you felt.

Although I assured Belinda all I had was my own perspective, her comment suggested to me that not only had I succeeded in developing trust in one of my informants, but that also a central reason for this was my adoptive status. The level of acceptance I experienced with many of my other informants was based on the fact that I was also adopted and had shared the experience of meeting my birth parents. According to Singleton, Straits, and Miller-Straits (1993, p325), ideally participant observation

"assumes the observer will become an accepted member of the group or community, able to speak informally with the people".

It was at the first Jigsaw triad meeting I attended that I met Anne, whom I sat next to throughout the meeting. At the end of the meeting as coffee and tea was offered I proceeded to 'mingle' and managed to speak to ten adoptees. Adoptees approached in person were given a flyer (refer to Appendix B) stating a brief overview of the project, its purpose and how they might participate in it. Four of the ten approached had only just begun searching, another three took a flyer but did not proceed any further, and the final three, Belinda, Carl and Dave agreed to be involved in my research and were subsequently interviewed. Jigsaw also held morning triad meetings which were much smaller than the evening meetings. It was over a number of morning meetings I attended that led me to meet and recruit Isabel, Jenny, Kathy and Lisa. Informants not recruited from Jigsaw included Faye who rang me after she had heard about my project through ARCS. The final three included in the in-depth interviews, Elsie, Matthew and Henry, were referred to me by colleagues.

All participants were given the option of either giving me their phone number there and then or ringing me to arrange a suitable time. The location and time of the interview was arranged to suit the participants. Some preferred their homes, others their work place and others the postgraduate common room at Edith Cowan University, Mt Lawley Campus, in Perth, Western Australia.

## **THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

The use of the in-depth interviews is consistent with the phenomenological approach adopted in this research. According to Seidman (1991, p41) "the purpose of an in-depth interview study is to understand the experience of those who are interviewed, not to predict or to control that experience". To explore the meaning of 'family' from the perspective of the participants, a semi-structured interview schedule directed the two separate interviews consisting of a series of open and close-ended questions (refer to Appendix D for interview schedule #1). Open-ended questions were used which enabled informants to use their own terminology, and to bring forward any relevant issues they felt were important to discussions of 'family' (Singleton, Straits & Miller-Straits, 1993). As suggested by Seidman (1991, p14), the interviews were spaced a week apart to give participants enough time to ponder what was discussed in the first interview without losing the connection between each interview. On each occasion the interviews lasted for approximately an hour.

### **In depth Interview #1**

The purpose of the first in-depth interview was to gather background information on the participants such as time and place of adoption, number of family members (both in adoptive and birth families), how adoption is received in both the adoptive and birth families, details of the search and reunion process, and questions relating to the effect of contact on their relationships and lives. To structure the interview schedule for the first in-depth interview, I adapted the three-interview series from Dolbeare and Schuman (cited in Seidman, 1991, pp10-12). This series incorporated a focused life history,



details of their adoption experience and reflection on the meaning of that experience to them.

At the onset of the interview, informants read and signed the consent form (refer to Appendix C). Permission was then gained to tape record the interview (none declined). Before beginning, I provided them with a brief description of myself and the purpose of both the research project and the first interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured at this point and pseudonyms selected were introduced.

### **In-Depth Interview #2**

The focus of the second in-depth interview was on constructions of family and the impact of contact with birth relatives on those constructions. In order to get the participants thinking about the impact of contact on their lives, I began the second interview with four questions. The first asked participants to describe any changes in any of their close relationships since contact. The second inquired about their sense of identity, before and after contact. The third question asked them to describe any changes to their sense of kin, before and after contact. The final question probed for information on whom they felt they received the most support from in their lives. These questions avoided the term 'family' to provide the opportunity for participants to bring it forward themselves. The purpose of these questions was to see how important 'family' was in the participant's lives and the extent to which contact has impacted on their lives and relationships.

To achieve an understanding of individual perceptions of family I employed a three-stage method developed by Levin (1993). Levin examined the way in which the meaning of family was constructed by individuals within stepfamilies. To gain individual perceptions she developed a method to 'map' conceptualizations of the family which provides both meanings from the individual and a methodological framework to draw upon. The three-step method consisting of the family list, the family map and the verbal interview was developed by Levin (1993, p86) to uncover the "hidden knowledge that everyone has, but usually does not articulate, concerning who is one's family...(regarded as) backstage knowledge".

### **The Family List**

The family list is a tool used to introduce the topic of discussion and to stimulate the participant's interest in the topic at hand. The aim of the family list was to provide information about the individual's current view of who their family is and to capture "a spontaneous expression of the individual's description of family" (Levin, 1993, p88). To begin, participants were handed a pen and a notepad and asked:

When you think of your family, whom do you think of? Make a list of those you consider to be your family (Levin, 1993, p87).

On completion, participants then read the list aloud stating the relationship they held with each member. Participants were then asked questions regarding the selection criteria they employed to determine who to include or exclude. For example, was it the fact of an existing relationship, subjective feelings of obligation, frequency of contact, or a combination of criteria which led to the inclusion or exclusion of some family

members? The family list was for the participant to keep, with the option to change or update it at any time during the interview.

### **The Family Map**

The purpose of the family map was to depict structures and relationships within the family, and indicate the closeness and/or distance participants perceived themselves to have from others. The map provided a visual representation of the inner images of family not easily articulated by other means (Levin, 1993). Using a large sheet or card participants were asked to place tokens (circular for female and triangular for male) representing themselves and their family members and were instructed as follows:

Would you please place your family on this sheet using these pieces of paper. The triangles are males and the circular pieces are females. Would you start with yourself and then place the others according to how close or how distant you feel they are to you. The map should represent your current situation (Levin, 1993, p87).

This map was then briefly discussed as participants explained who was who and why they were placed in certain positions. Participants were then asked to construct a second family map following the same instructions as the first but selecting a time in their lives prior to contact that was significant for them. There was no pattern to the time selected, some participants used the map to represent their early adolescence, and others selected the time just prior to searching for their birth family and others based it on the period in their lives they were still living in their country of origin. This second map was then elaborated on with respect to who was included and why they were placed in particular positions. The two maps were then examined and differences present were then discussed.

## **The Interview**

The family list and map are insufficient in isolation and need verbal explanation. According to Levin, combining the interview with the family list and the family map constituted a triangulation of methods. The interview enabled the family list and the family map to be explored in more detail and individual interpretations of closeness and distance gained. The reasoning employed to place certain family members in particular positions on the map was explored to determine factors which contributed to perceived 'closeness' and 'distance'. Reasons for inclusion and exclusion of particular members was also explored to develop an understanding of why particular people are regarded as 'family' and others are not.

## **FOCUS GROUP**

In addition to participant observation and in-depth interviews, a focus group was used to collect qualitative data for this research. A focus group is a planned discussion used to elicit perceptions held by individuals in relation to a particular topic of interest. Typically lasting from one and half to two and a half hours, a focus group is used to "produce qualitative data that provides insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants" (Krueger, 1994, p19). Krueger (1994, p44) suggests using focus groups to explore preliminary findings and gather additional information whilst allowing the "ideas to emerge from the group". The aim of the focus group in this research was to develop themes emerging from the interviews, to gather more focused data on the meaning of 'family' and to allow participants "to respond in their own

words, using their own categorizations and perceived associations" (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990, p13).

The focus group was held in the evening at Edith Cowan University, Mt Lawley Campus and two tape recorders were used to ensure each participant was recorded clearly. In total, nine participants were involved in the focus group, some of whom had been interviewed and others adoptees invited to attend. Of those who had been interviewed previously, Anne, Dave, Faye, Henry, Jenny and Lisa attended the focus group. Belinda, Carl, Elsie, Isabel and Kathy were unable to attend due to personal commitments and Matthew had declined at the time of signing his consent form. I met Mandy and Olivia at a morning Jigsaw meeting and invited them to attend. Natalie arrived unexpectedly with Dave to join the discussion<sup>1</sup>.

The structure of the focus group followed the sequential categories of questions suggested by Krueger (1994, pp54-55) including, opening, introductory, transition, key and ending questions (Refer to Appendix E). Initially participants were greeted, given a name tag and offered a hot or cold drink allowing them to relax and get seated. As the group gathered, I introduced myself welcoming them all to the focus group. An overview of the topic was then given to them as were the ground rules for the discussion (Kruegar, 1994, p113).

The opening question began the discussion with an invitation for all to introduce themselves to the group. Each participant introduced themselves and stated who they had met in their birth family. The introductory question introduced the topic of

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<sup>1</sup> Mandy, Olivia and Natalie were involved only in the focus group. As the interview process had been completed, they were not interviewed individually.

discussion and 'connected' participants with the topic. Participants were asked "when you think of family, what sorts of things come to your mind?" The purpose of this question was to get participants thinking about the word 'family' and what it means to them.

The transition questions, used as a bridge between the introductory and key questions, asked "what sorts of things do we expect from a family?" and "what are we obliged to do for our family?". These questions focused on what families do or at least what participants expected of them.

Kruegar (1994) regards the key questions as crucial to the analysis and as forming the core of the research. There were five key questions explored in the focus group. The first asked about the significant people in their lives and the reasons for their significance. This question was designed to allow participants to express in their own words the significance of 'family' in their everyday lives. They were then asked how we distinguish between those who are family and those who are not, what makes us call certain people family? This second question explored the reasons beyond a legal and biological relationship for the differences between 'family' and 'non-family'. Differences between adoptive and biological families, and the expectations attached to each, formed the third question. This question was asked to elicit responses from the participants regarding differences they felt were important between the two 'families'. The effect of contact on the way they think about their adoptive family was also explored to ascertain the impact of contact on their current family relationships. The fifth key question participants were asked was how they felt contact had affected their ideas about what families do and are.

Leading to the closure of the discussion, participants were asked to describe what things were most important to them in relation to families and to what had been discussed throughout the evening. To close the discussion, I provided participants with a short summary of the key points that had emerged. After the group commented on the key points raised, they were then asked if there was anything anyone wanted to add before we finished. This enabled participants to provide their own summaries and thoughts of what we had discussed throughout the evening.

## **EVALUATION OF METHODS**

The research methods employed in this research are consistent with the phenomenological approach adopted. The participant observation served its purpose in allowing me to access an environment to contact informants and provided me with an opportunity to discuss a variety of adoption issues with different people, from the perspective of an insider. From participating in the triad meetings, trust was developed with many of my informants.

Each in-depth interview was successful in gaining the data required. The first semi-structured interview collected qualitative data about participants' background, their adoption experience and information regarding their reunion and subsequent contact.

The second in-depth interview explored the participant's construction of 'family'. The family list was successful in introducing the topic and producing a spontaneous response from participants. The family map achieved its goal in providing a visual representation of family relationships for both myself and participants. It enabled the

discussion to focus on why participants included particular members and the reasons for their positions on the map. This method would be particularly useful in longitudinal studies as the impact of time on an individual's construction of family could be explored. The discussion generated from both of these tools assisted in maintaining the focus of the interview whilst allowing participants to share stories and information they felt were important to the discussion at hand.

Those interviewed were asked to evaluate the methods employed. After explaining the aims of Levin's (1993) method and what it was attempting to achieve they were asked if it had in fact achieved these goals. Participants agreed the method had forced them to think about who their family was, the criteria they use to include people, and the significance certain people hold in their lives. As Anne stated, "I thought I was put on the spot...you have to make a decision as to where these people fit into your life...confronting". Many found it a helpful exercise in providing them with a visual representation of the closeness in relationships within their family they had not previously conceived, as the following comments suggest:

It showed me, I realised how close I was to my family, my wife and children (Dave)

I found it really useful...bit of a shock...the difference in what I had, mine was quite sparse from where it is today...I found it really, it really made me look at all my relationships differently...Yeah, I took a lot away from it (Faye)

I found it gave a sense of objectivity...that's how I see, that's how I perceive it so I found it quite useful cause you tend, I think familiarity breeds contempt, and when you actually do that exercise it's not quite how you actually see it initially on a reflex basis so I found it quite useful (Henry)



The use of a focus group enabled me to explore themes emerging from the data collected from the interviews. In addition to exploring themes I felt were important, and collecting more focused data on the meaning of family, issues important to participants emerged. The forum was successful in allowing participants to express in their own words the issues and features of 'family' that they felt were important.

Overall, the research methods were effective in exploring the way participants constructed their meanings of family. Consistent with the phenomenological approach adopted, the research methods allowed participants the freedom to express in their own words what family meant to them. This enabled their terminology to be utilised, and in doing so, I was able to develop an understanding of their lived experience of family.

## CHAPTER 3 THEORISING THE FAMILY

*"we know quite a lot, understand very little and can explain even less"*  
(Harris, 1983, pXI)

Harris' comment highlights the difficulties faced when studying the field of 'the family'. Throughout the past century social scientists have researched the social institution referred to as 'the family' but even today there is little consensus as to its meaning (Barrett & McIntosh, 1991). The purpose of this chapter is to identify the historical and contemporary sources adoptees draw upon in constructing their own families.

Initially the chapter will provide a brief historical overview of Western family life to highlight the significance of the historical development of the institution referred to as 'the family'. It will then examine the meaning of the word family and the way in which this has transformed over time. The differences between Australian family life at the time of settlement and other Western societies will then be explored. The construction of motherhood will constitute the next section of the chapter. Following this, I will discuss sociological constructions of family, leading to the final section in which contemporary constructions of family will be explored.

It is not appropriate in a study of this focus to discuss at length historical accounts of Western family life. What is important is the understanding gained from the literature that there is no *one* history of Western family life; pre-industrial family structures were diverse and a single family type was not predominant (Anderson, 1980; Kain, 1990). Differences in family life are related to class, ethnic background, geographical location, as well as access to resources, and the role played in production (Harris, 1983).

The impact of industrialisation on Western family life has been the focus of much sociological and historical literature (Barrett & McIntosh, 1991; Ehrenreich & English, 1979; Harris, 1983; Kain, 1990; Laslett & Wall, 1972; Morgan, 1975; Oakley, 1972, 1981; Poster, 1978; Reiger, 1985; Segalen, 1986, 1996; Shorter, 1975). Prior to industrialisation the production and consumption of goods was centred around the household. Women were involved in a variety of tasks both within and outside of the household and child care was not the central role of biological mothers. Women at this time were not identified as 'nurturant mothers'. Prior to the seventeenth century, childhood as a separate category did not exist and children assumed adult working roles. Emerging predominantly in the upper class, the relationship between parents and their children changed and value was placed on children as children (Aries, 1963). The introduction of education was instrumental in separating children from the adult world of work. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century with the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the affective ties between parents and their children were seen as central and the private nature of the family unit was introduced. By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, children were seen as needing protection and nurturance and the State assumed a greater role in the welfare of children (Brennan, 1994; Dickey, 1987; Mellor, 1990; Picton & Boss, 1981; Reiger, 1985; Tapper, 1990; Van Kriekan, 1992).

Industrialisation was instrumental in creating the division between the private sphere of the 'home' and the public one of work, as production moved away from the household. The new image of the family, emerging from the bourgeois class, was a small unit existing in the private realm of the home. Bourgeois women retained a minimal role in production and were therefore able to devote more time to child care and domestic tasks

within the home. It became a scene of domesticity in which women emerged as primary caretakers of both the home and children, and the male head was seen as the wage earner. It was argued this was a place of fulfillment for women where joy could be found in motherhood and in creating a nurturant environment for her family (Barrett & McIntosh, 1983; Gordon, 1982). It is here we see the emergence of the identification of women primarily as mothers, and naturally inclined to maternal love (Badinter, 1981). This ideal notion of family held by the dominant class was then imposed on working class families through the regulation and surveillance of child rearing techniques. The Infant Welfare movement, consisting of education and medical professionals is an example of one of the ways the dominant class sought to educate working class mothers and improve the child rearing practices of working class families (Anderson & Zinsser, 1988; Badinter, 1981; Barrett, 1988; Chodorow, 1978; Ehrenreich & English, 1979; Gilding, 1991; Poster, 1978; Reiger, 1985).

The dominant paradigm in family studies during the period of confidential adoptions was functionalism. Conforming to a nuclear structure, family at this time was seen as the natural ordering of social relationships. Based on the assumption that biological nuclear families were natural and in fact normal, policies of secrecy in adoption sought to, in essence, 'naturalise' adoptive families so they could be seen to be the same as their biological counterparts (Dietrich, 1992; Mason, 1993; Mellor, 1990; O'Shaughnessy, 1994; Sachdev, 1989; Samuels, 1990; Small, 1987; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1978; Swain, 1992).

## THE MEANING OF 'FAMILY'

Derived from the Latin words '*familia*' meaning household and '*famulus*' meaning servant, the word 'family' entered the English language in the fourteenth century (Gilding, 1991). Until the mid-seventeenth century the notion of 'family' covered both co-residence, those living within the household including servants and other workers, and kinship, those biologically or legally related. Each household member subject to the authority of the male head of the household were referred to as 'family' (Flandrin, 1979). According to Engels (1884/1986, p88) the term 'family' was;

invented by the Romans to denote a new social organism whose head ruled over wife and children and a number of slaves, and was invested under Roman paternal power with rights of life and death over them all.

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth century the meanings merged and the dominant definition came to be seen as a small group of kin sharing the same residence (Morgan, 1975; Williams, 1983). The important feature of this definition is the exclusion of other household members who were not biologically or legally related, such as servants. The 'naturalness' of the family, in which affective bonds amongst family members replaced productive ones, was promoted in the nineteenth century by the bourgeois class. Emphasis was placed on affection between members, with particular attention paid to the relationship between mothers and their children, as 'motherhood' was deemed to be a natural trait of and role for women (Badinter, 1981; Gilding, 1991).

Throughout the twentieth century, the nuclear family was promoted by middle class professionals, the State, and social scientists as the 'natural', 'normal' and ideal family

structure in a modern capitalist society. According to Golder (1985, p2) "our narrowing definition of family seems to reflect the widespread assimilation of a pattern of family living which was once distinctively bourgeois".

## **AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES**

### **Colonial Family Life**

The development of Australian family life followed similar trends to Western European patterns. There are, however two distinctive features of the colonial period in Australia that set it apart from other industrial capitalist societies. The first relates to the disproportionate ratio of men to women in the early nineteenth century, and the second to the distance between families and their extended kinship networks often left behind. Geographical isolation, lack of mobility, inadequate communication, and the vast distance found in the outer regions also contributed to disruptive family relations (Grimshaw & Willett, 1981).

The higher proportion of men during colonial settlement had a number of repercussions for living arrangements in households and the formation of families. As many men were convicts or single settlers they often lived in hotels, dormitories or boarding houses, making household sizes exceptionally large as available accommodation was shared. As other developing Western countries were reducing their household sizes Australia's increased, doubling that of Britain during the same time (Snooks, 1994). These living conditions, combined with the smaller number of single women reduced men's interaction with women and children, limiting their opportunities to marry and

form families. It was not an ideal environment to promote the bourgeois ideals of domesticity and family life (Gilding, 1991; Golder, 1985).

According to Grimshaw (1979), an ethos of 'mateship' developed amongst male settlers as they shared the difficult times of settlement and formed strong bonds. Family life and domesticity threatened these bonds as loyalty would have to be transferred to the family and interaction among 'mates' reduced. This element of hostility to family life and domesticity present during the period of settlement persisted into the twentieth century.

The second feature that makes Australia unique to other Western industrial societies is the absence of extended kinship networks at the time of settlement. Often families would have to rely on people they had known from their country of origin, people they had met whilst on their journey here, or people living in the same area. In any case, the extended kinship networks present in England at the time did not exist in the same way in Australia. This then made the Australian nuclear family more independent from wider familial ties and also more dependent on each other. Strong emotional and instrumental ties bonded the small family unit and in one sense it was "born modern" due to the limited range of kin at the time of settlement (Grimshaw, 1979; Grimshaw & Willett, 1981, p146).

### **The Late Nineteenth Century**

The impact of industrialisation and modernisation affected families of all classes. Household arrangements were dependent on the economic resources and the role played

by individuals in production. In the late nineteenth century, wage earners and small producers lived in "high density terraces and cottages" in the city, enabling them to walk to their place of employment. Often these households were highly extended as workers shared the limited accommodation available. The ruling class however, had larger houses commonly built on the outskirts of the city in order to be removed from areas of production. Generally the household contained limited kin and servants (Gilding, 1991, p35).

For women in the late nineteenth century financial independence was limited to those with inherited fortunes, women holding professional occupations such as nursing, and those involved in a business secured by kinship ties (for example, postmistresses). A less desirable profession, that of prostitution, also offered financial independence, but exposure to exploitation was great and the longevity of this occupation was limited. For many, there was a dependence on 'menfolk', either their fathers or husbands. With limited training, domestic service was one of the few occupations women could take and marriage was a viable economic solution for single, unskilled women. For married women income could be generated either through domestic service or within the household, assisting in the family business or the taking in of boarders, lodgers and children (Gilding, 1991, Golder, 1985).

Up until the late nineteenth century domestic service was the main source of income for both single and married women. As technological advances modernised the home there was a decline in the use of domestic service by the ruling classes. Combined with this decline was an expansion of the industrial workforce which saw working-class women entering the factories to gain employment, rather than in the mansions of the elite. The



home became more streamlined and based on ideologies of efficiency, "notions of work in the home as 'domestic science' and the 'housewife' as manager" were advanced (Gilding, 1991, p58). The idea of managing a home based on rational principles began to be applied to all classes. Women, as wives and mothers, became the sole tenders of the home and children (Reiger, 1985).

## **MOTHERHOOD AS A CONSTRUCTION**

By the mid-nineteenth century, ideologies were firmly in place ascribing the role of mothers and wives to women, their concerns extending no further than matters related to the domestic sphere and childrearing practices (Kain, 1990; Oakley, 1974; Reiger, 1985). Motherhood was promoted as natural, which might be biologically true of childbearing, but is not the case in childrearing as the dominant class had come to assume. The notion of motherhood emerging from the nineteenth century bourgeoisie and perpetuated by the twentieth century middle class, was instrumental in constructing the ideologies that formed the modern nuclear family (Chodorow, 1978 ; Gilding, 1991).

Gilding (1991, p93) argues that "in general terms, 'motherhood' was redefined from procreation to care and vigilance, and women were increasingly defined as 'mother' irrespective of class". Both in Australia and other Western countries, two major changes in child care occurred from the late nineteenth century which assisted in supporting dominant notions of motherhood. The first was an increase in the responsibility mothers took for their infants, diminishing the role nurses, older children, kin and neighbours had previously taken. The other is the reduction in the number of

children to care for, enabling more time and resources to be devoted to those born, under the guidance of expert advice and care (Gilding, 1991; Shorter, 1975).

However, the emerging notion of motherhood proved to be problematic for some, as those living under conditions that did not allow for improvements in the standard of living, were not able to maintain the childrearing standards established and expected by the dominant class. Urban living conditions were extremely poor with sanitation facilities incapable of catering for the growing numbers of urban dwellers, and single rooms were often shared by up to eight people (as well as the extra occupants of rats, cockroaches, lice and bedbugs), without running water or windows. In addition to these living conditions, working environments were tough with a working day consisting of fourteen to seventeen hours a day. More often than not, working class women were required to work in order to supplement or solely support their families. As their “work varied in the late nineteenth century according to the demands of the household economy, so too did the provision for babies and infants” (Gilding, 1991, p81). Both within Australia and other Western countries, the proletarian home was obviously not a scene of domestic bliss (Anderson & Zinsser, 1988, pp284-285).

Unable to meet bourgeois standards of child care, working-class families were subjected to a high level of surveillance and intervention from the emerging middle class professionals. According to Segalen (1986, p289), “philanthropists and charitable societies discovered working class poverty and sought to eradicate it”. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the Infant Welfare movement, a combination of medical professionals, educationists, and middle class voluntary organisations, attempted to improve and educate working-class parents, or more specifically, mothers regarding

child rearing practices (Badinter, 1981; Reiger, 1985). Concerns from the dominant class regarding living conditions and the growing number of neglected and abandoned children contributed to the belief that improvements to the childrearing practices of the lower class were seen as necessary both in the interests of the child and the State. Poster (1978, p171) suggests that;

from 1830 onward the liberal state began to formulate policy on family matters, but generally it intervened only in the affairs of proletarian families; no one monitored the treatment of bourgeois children.

In Australia, as elsewhere in the West, rational scientific principles dominated childrearing practices in the twentieth century. Contrary to established bourgeois notions of family and the belief in the instinctual nature of motherhood, it was thought these instincts needed to be guided under the watchful eye of experts. Influenced by American theories of child development, twentieth century mothers were seen as playing a crucial role in the social and psychological development of their children. To achieve this goal, they required the advice of professional child care experts. The medical profession instructed mothers on such matters as handling infants, feeding procedures, how to clothe and wrap the infant, the use of dummies, even to the amount of attention paid to the child. As theories were developed and updated so too was the advice and instructions given to mothers (Gilding, 1991; Ross, 1993). As Reiger (1985, p 128) states:

Women were being confronted by a new group of middle-class child care professionals who were decrying and undermining their traditional mothering patterns, arguing that mothering should be taught along rational, scientific principles.

By the 1920s and 1930s, two domains of knowledge existed to assist women in their role as mothers and wives namely; 'mothercraft' and 'domestic science'. 'Mothercraft' employed the services of professional child care workers and was designed to advise women on appropriate child rearing techniques. The progress of children was monitored as the medical and education professions combined forces to observe and measure the health of children within school settings. 'Domestic science' became a part of many school's curriculum and young girls were taught the skills of homemaking and mothering; the assumed roles they would take in the future. As Segalen (1986, p289) suggests, "the school became the place where the family was produced".

The advice given by child care professionals was not necessarily accepted by working class mothers. These women were active players in either accepting, rejecting or modifying the advice given to them from the 'experts'. This depended both on their interpretation of that advice and the circumstances in which it could or could not be applied (Reiger, 1985). As Gilding (1991, p92) states;

mothers were not passive or ignorant, as experts assumed...child care practices were based on realistic assessment of time and resources in the household economy; both what was currently available, and what was required in the future.

As it had in the past, the demand for women to be involved in work outside of the household dictated the kind of care they were able to provide for their children. Middle class professionals did not take into account the everyday lives of the mothers they were trying to educate. Whilst they were expected to provide and fulfill the needs of their children in a particular way, working class mothers did not have the resources or skills to achieve the same standards as the dominant class. Their role in the workforce was

more crucial to their family's survival and with minimal assistance from the State, the options available were few.

## **SOCIOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'FAMILY'**

### **Functional Families**

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s functionalism was the dominant paradigm in the field of family studies. Talcott Parsons (1951), as a leading figure of the functionalist approach, argued that as result of industrialisation and modernisation, the functions of the family were reduced to largely two; the socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personalities (Parsons & Bales, 1955). These two functions formed the central role of the more specialised modern family (Collier, Rosaldo & Yanagisako, 1982; Morgan, 1975). From this perspective, the nuclear family is the ideal family structure to fulfil these functions as the prescribed roles of each family member (male breadwinner, female wife and mother) are suited to an industrial capitalist society. The nuclear family was deemed the 'natural' family structure within a modern Western society.

The acceptance of the nuclear family as the 'natural' and most appropriate family structure to reproduce good citizens is evident in arguments emerging in the 1950s and 1960s proclaiming the decline of the family (Fletcher, 1988b). Concerns were directed at the presumed increase in permissive sexual behaviours of the younger generation, the rising divorce rates and the number of children born out of wedlock. It was argued that younger adults were no longer entering marriage and therefore failing to reproduce what came to be called the 'traditional' family structure. As the State took over many of the

functions performed by the family, such as caring and providing for the elderly, sick, unemployed and educating children, the family was blamed "for declining standards of society at large" (Fletcher, 1988a, p1). The principal assumption underlying these arguments was that the family, as the site of moral guidance, was no longer performing its prescribed function effectively, having failed to transfer the values necessary to make a good citizen (Barrett & McIntosh, 1991; Morgan, 1975). Children were no longer internalising appropriate cultural norms and therefore not reproducing the nuclear family unit which facilitated stable adult personalities. It was assumed that the nuclear family was the only family structure able to care for children and provide them with the appropriate moral guidance in order to reproduce the values of the dominant class. Single mothers, for instance, were not viewed as appropriate carers, and most certainly did not constitute a 'proper' family (Golder, 1985; Mason, 1993; Swain, 1995).

Social scientists have been criticised for relying too heavily on functional constructions of the family as they fail to place the family in historical and social context and often render the family a passive agent (Anderson, 1980 ; Barrett & McIntosh, 1991; Harris, 1983; Shorter, 1975). From this perspective the transformation of the 'traditional' extended family to a modern nuclear family is seen as an inevitable and natural process of industrialisation and the shift in the economy from feudalism to capitalism. The extended family networks which are present in family life are not recognised. Relying on consensus, 'the family' is seen to fit into a functioning system. A major criticism of this approach is the failure to look at the conflict and contradiction existing within contemporary societies. The functionalist ideal of the family in which nurturance and care take place may in reality be a place of violence and conflict (Cheal, 1993).

## **The Family is Re-Addressed**

From the late 1960s and 1970s the family was readressed as feminist writers argued that nuclear constructions of the family portrayed were oppressive to women. The nuclear family idealized the role of women as wives and mothers, for only women have the 'natural' capability to carry out these tasks. This then consolidated their primary role as that of caregiver but as Thorne (1982) asks, who is the caregiver for women? The dangers of using ideal images to portray family life were highlighted, as many individuals, in particular women, may attempt to reproduce these "unworkable images" in their own lives and upon failing to do so feel inadequate (Badinter, 1981; Barrett, 1988; Barrett & McIntosh, 1991; Bernardes, 1993, p36; Chodorow, 1978; Chodorow & Contratto, 1982; Collier, Rosaldo & Yanagisako, 1982; Thorne, 1982). Critiques from feminist and gay liberation groups pointed towards the narrowness of the nuclear family model. Other family structures present within the community were not given the same recognition by policy makers and in certain cases were deemed to be 'non-familial' (Bould, 1993).

The nuclear family, although demographically dominant in many Western societies is most certainly not the only family structure present, nor does it remain static throughout an individual's life course. As Edgar (1993) argues, at one stage in an individual's life they may be a part of what is seen as a nuclear unit, but this does not remain stable throughout their life due to a variety of significant life events such as death, divorce, the birth of a child, remarriage and contact with birth family members. However, as Braten (cited in Levin, 1993, p84) argues, the nuclear family has developed a

model monopoly (which) results when only one perspective of a complex reality becomes universal. This narrows the range of perspectives and suppresses alternative possibilities.

Bernardes (1986b; 1987; 1993) argues that as functionalist sociology dominated family studies, references to 'a family' or 'the family' became common place. 'The family' referred to was commonly constructed as nuclear and was deemed to be the most suitable and 'normal' family structure in modern Western societies. The result of presenting 'the family' as a single entity that conforms to a 'normal' (nuclear) structure renders those not fitting this image as 'abnormal', 'unnatural' or in functional terms, 'dysfunctional'. As Bould (1993, p133) states,

this conjugal family has become *the family*...(and) within this frame of reference, other family living arrangements are considered to be somehow deficient in familial content, or most radically, not familial at all.

### **Census Definitions**

Census definitions in Australia and other Western societies reproduce functional sociological constructions of 'the family'. The definitions employed reflect the kind of information collected, based on the statistical collection of household organisation. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997, p26), for example, defines 'the family' as:

two or more persons related to each other by blood, registered marriage, adoption, or a de facto relationship who live in the same household. Three major family types are identified: couple families, one-parent families and families of related adults. Families living in non-private dwellings and non-family members (such as friends or boarders) are excluded.



Although this definition gives recognition to one parent families, as is found in functional sociological definitions of 'family', it is limited by the need to reside together and the requirement of an existing legal familial relationship (Bernardes, 1986a; Bould, 1993; Ford, 1994; McDonald, 1992; Sarantakos, 1996). Limited by residential constraints, this definition does not take into account family relationships outside of the household. As McDonald (1992, p6) states, while the censuses "allow for multiple family households,...they do not allow us to examine the incidence of multiple household families". The result of such restrictions is a failure to recognise and acknowledge both the familial support networks found across households, and the "power of intimacy at a distance" (Bould, 1993, p134; Edgar, 1993). In everyday life support is not restricted only to those residing within the same household, nor is it restricted only to family members. Although the kind of support given and received differs due to living arrangements and geographical location (such as assistance with daily tasks), it is not limited to a singular household (d'Abbs, 1991; Millward, 1992). As suggested by Bould (1993), it cannot be assumed (as it had been previously) that distance or separate households reduces support between family members. The emotional ties held between people beyond the household need to be taken into account to develop a better understanding of family life as it is lived.

The second aspect of the 'official' definition of family used by the ABS is the requirement of a legal familial relationship. De facto relationships are included as they have received legal status. Households that do not conform to the census' definition of 'family' are defined as 'non-families' (Ford, 1994). However other research shows, and this study will demonstrate (Bould, 1993; Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982; Levin, 1990; Levin & Trost, 1992), a person's construction of 'family' is not dependent on the

existence of a legal relationship. In many cases, individuals draw on those not legally related to them for support, and depending on the extent of that relationship can (and do) perceive them to be 'family'.

Definitions of 'family' that assume family members are only those legally related sharing a common residence render the extended family networks invisible and have contributed to the belief, as was argued by Parsons, that the nuclear family is an isolated unit. Although evidence of extended familial ties outside of the household disputed this assumption, issues of 'presumed' isolation are once again raised in reference to elderly people living alone. According to Bould (1993), it has often been assumed that elderly people living alone are isolated from their family and that the likelihood of entering a nursing home was higher because of the limited familial support. In reality, as Bould (1993, pp134-135) suggests, it is more likely those living alone will "often enjoy extensive extrahousehold ties with family and friends", and those living with their family are "likely to be beholden to the adult child and unable to negotiate the reciprocity necessary for interdependence and intimacy".

So what does this say about sociological constructions of family? Firstly, the definitions of family based on co-residence do not reflect how individuals experience 'family life'. Those living alone are not automatically isolated from their 'family' and extended familial networks across households do exist (Bould, 1993; Millward, 1992; McDonald, 1992). Not only is the concept of 'family' limited by residential constraints in the sociological tradition, but it is also restricted by the necessity for a familial relationship to be legally recognised (biological or legal relationship). By including only those that hold a legal or biological relationship in the construction of 'family' the

emotional ties held between people are not acknowledged nor recognised as familial in nature. Individual perceptions of family do not always correspond to the legal definitions used by government agencies and social scientists.

'The family' cannot be defined as there is no *one* family. Conceptualisations of 'family' as conceived by individuals are not static but are in fact influenced by differing social circumstances and settings. As Bernardes (1986b, p595) states; "the concept can and does mean all things to all people, including 'family scholars'".

## **CONSTRUCTING CONTEMPORARY FAMILIES**

The diverse nature of families within Australia and elsewhere has forced policy makers and social scientists to recognise family forms other than the nuclear model. The existence of ethnic and cultural differences, particularly in Australia, influence both the diversity of family structures and the acceptance of other familial models. The increase of single-parent families, de facto relationships and gay relationships has led to greater social acceptance of these family types between the 1970s and 1990s, resulting in recognition within social policies and legislation.

Family is an individual experience to which each person attaches a different meaning. The dominance in the belief of the 'naturalness' of the nuclear model and the emphasis placed on the normality of this model, as outlined earlier, fails to recognise the reality of family life and the meanings people attach to the term. Gubrium and Holstein (1990) argue that to understand the meanings attached to the family, we must speak *of family* and what it means to *be family*. In eliminating 'the' from family enables an

interpretation to be one that "always attend(s) to the voices that... (speak) of the family in order to discern what any set of relationships meant to those concerned" rather than interpreting "the ostensible family" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p9).

There is no one definition of family and although family does provide certain functions for individuals, these functions are not always met nor are they restricted only to the family (Stacey, 1990). The fulfillment of physical and psychological needs outside of 'the family' leads to the development of relationships that, although not legally recognized as a family relationship, hold the same amount of attachment and obligation.

Legally, family members are recognised as those who are related biologically, through adoption or marriage, and who are obligated to provide care and nurturance for each other. But when we examine the reality of this definition in light of obligations felt and acted upon as Bould (1993) did, the carers are often not legally defined as family members, although ideologically they were viewed as such by the individuals, and in some cases more than the legally defined members. The following two cases described by Bould highlight this sentiment.

The first case presented by Bould is that of a gay relationship in which both partners, 'Tina' and 'Phil' were H.I.V. positive. When 'Phil' died, 'Tina's' friends realized she could not care for herself and organized twenty-four hour care amongst themselves. Throughout her sickness, it was the network of friends surrounding her who performed the caring tasks, rather than her family of origin. At the time of her death, notification was given to her family of origin and as they arrived in town for the proceedings they

were supported and accommodated by the network of friends their son/brother had. The family of origin were the first to say that her friends were indeed her family.

The second case Bould describes is that of a young boy in the care of a woman who was neither biologically nor legally related to him. The family of origin did not want the responsibility of caring for him and when presenting their case in a court of law, the woman caring for this young boy stated that although she was not his legal mother, the boy saw her in this role. The relationship between the woman and child was based on care and nurturance, not legally defined relationships and the court in this case decided the young boy was better with his foster mother than his biological one. An emotional tie can exist without legal or biological family ties (Bould, 1993, p142).

Once again the definition of family becomes an issue, for in legal terms, in the past one had to be biologically or legally bound to another to be regarded as family, rather than the obligation and care provided and shared. As Bould's research highlights, the contemporary court system is beginning to recognise the importance of emotional ties. It is another reminder of the importance of studying the institution we call 'the family' from the perspective of those living within them (Bernardes, 1993; Richards, 1985).

The aim of this study is to do just that. By drawing upon the way in which adoptees who have had contact with their birth family make up their notions of family, we can develop an understanding of how families are constructed in contemporary settings. Issues of adoption and the social settings in which adoptions occur are relevant to this analysis and discussion of notions of family. This is the subject of the next chapter in which adoption will be discussed in more detail.

## CHAPTER 4 ADOPTION

*"Modern Western adoption is rooted in the past, but is radically different from its forebears"*

*(O'Shaughnessy, 1994, p59).*

The purpose of this chapter is to place the confidential system of adoption into social and historical context. Focusing on Australia, I will discuss how this system of adoption reflected dominant values of the time, and how legislative amendments made in the mid-twentieth century supported dominant constructions of family. There was an acceptance that the nuclear family was the most appropriate family structure in which to rear children. The changing construction of the unmarried mother in the late 1960s and early 1970s will be discussed to highlight shifting notions of family.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of adoption prior to the establishment of legislation. The second section discusses the development of child care services in Australia, including the introduction of institutional care such as orphanages and industrial schools, and the boarding-out system which will lead to the introduction of adoption. The third section will concentrate on the development of legislation pertaining to adoptions in Australia during the early part of the twentieth century, and the stigma attached to adoptions at this time. The fourth section will discuss the attempts to develop uniform legislation between the Australian States and Territories during the 1960s. Following this I will address the decline in adoptions during the early 1970s. Legislative changes throughout the 1980s and 1990s will be discussed in the next section together with the event of 'reunions' between adoptees and birth parents. The final section will discuss current Australian adoption practices.

## **ADOPTION THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

Adoption features in ancient records, legends and myths, one of the most famous being that of Moses to the Pharaoh's daughter. Historically, the main motivations for adopting children (and adults in some cases) has been to perpetuate family lineage, preserve family assets, and/or upon the adopter's death to bestow appropriate religious rites to preserve "spiritual continuity" (Benet, 1976). O'Shaughnessy (1994) links the birth of legal adoption with the emergence of private property, states and patrilineal households found in ancient Greek, Roman and Near Eastern (including Babylonian, Sumerian, Assyrian and Hittite) societies. The acquisition of private property introduced the concept of inheritance and the practice of primogeniture. Children became valuable heirs to retain property and assets within the family, as well as perpetuating the family name (Benet, 1976; Goody, 1976).

During antiquity the meaning of blood ties was very strong and non-relatives initiated into the family were expected to sever all ties to their birth family and pledge allegiance and loyalty to the new one. According to Sorosky, Baran and Pannor (1978, p26), "to seek one's origins or to question one's true identity was seen then, as now, dangerous, ungrateful, and disloyal". Two common themes can be found throughout mythologies and fables. One includes the desire of adoptive parents to be the same as biological parents and to achieve this the biological identity of their adopted child was hidden both to the adoptee and society in general. The second is the unyielding desire of adopted children to search and discover their genetic roots and heritage often without the approval of adoptive parents.

In Western and Eastern Europe between the fourth and eighth centuries up until the late eighteenth century public, legal forms of adoption decreased as the importance of blood lines became paramount in the High Middle Ages particularly among (or because of) the nobility. Using ideologies of breeding and blood lines the nobility and aristocracy justified their social, economic and political power. This contributed to the diminished number of public legal adoptions as legitimate heirs were only those related by blood. Throughout the Middle Ages, as adoption nearly disappeared, indenture was more commonly used to transfer the custody of a child whereby children would be sent to work in exchange for food, shelter and education or training (Samuels, 1990).

In late nineteenth century Western societies, adoption re-emerged in the public arena as a viable way to create and/or extend a family and as a solution to care for unwanted and destitute children. Western notions of adoption differed from those other societies and from practices of the past in two ways: adoption was seen to rescue children separated from their biological family, and a desire for secrecy existed that had not been present elsewhere. Benet (1976, p15) argues that this distinctive approach is related to the lack of a "strong historical tradition of adoption, (and) laws were framed to meet a new situation: the break-up of the extended family under the impact of industrialization and urbanization". Throughout the nineteenth century concern for the welfare of children increased both within the private realm of family and the public one of community and State. This growing concern was influential in the development of child welfare policies and the establishment of adoption legislation.



During the period of European settlement in Australia, the rising number of vagrant and destitute children 'roaming' the streets became a concern to government, church and charity organisations (Brennan, 1994). To address these concerns, Governor King pushed for the introduction of residential schools; in 1803 in New South Wales, the opening of the first Protestant and Catholic orphan school marked the commencement of children's services in Australia (Mellor, 1990).

The creation of child welfare institutions at the turn of the century was a method of controlling and combating delinquency, and developing good citizens who would contribute to the community rather than depend on it. Platt (1969) argues that the changes in child welfare at the turn of the century were related to the upper and middle classes attempts to develop a new form of social control in a changing social and economic environment. Lasch (1977) develops this perspective; he argues that child welfare constituted assertions of "middle class 'social pathologists' such as teachers, social workers, and doctors" over working class families (cited in Van Kriekan, 1992, p18). In Lasch's view, professionals and/or experts had taken over and undermined the family by transferring socialization to external agencies such as schools, juvenile courts and clinics for child guidance designed and put into place by middle class professionals.

Responsibility for caring for children became the responsibility of first and foremost the family (or more specifically mothers) and, as a back up if this first unit did not succeed, the State. These views on child care identified the family as the primary and ideal place

in which children developed, but more significantly in this century the State came to assume the ultimate role of protector and provider (Tapper, 1990).

### **The position of the unmarried mother**

Many single female settlers arriving to undertake domestic service often did not have training for employment nor extended family networks to support them. With limited opportunities to obtain food and shelter some women were forced into prostitution or a series of liaisons. Often the result of these relationships was both illegitimate and unwanted pregnancies. For women during this period pregnancy out of wedlock meant limited employment and marriage opportunities as they were looked upon as permissive and lacking in moral fibre. Women went to great lengths to conceal both the pregnancy and birth of the child (Samuels, 1990; Swain, 1995).

Family dislocation also contributed to the number of destitute children during the nineteenth century. This resulted from various reasons such as the death of a parent (or parents) or family separations as a consequence of the nineteenth century gold rushes. The gold diggings often took men away from their families leaving them with little means of support, and at times a second family was fathered in other colonies. Divorce also led to the inability of women to care for their children, as entitlements for support or maintenance were inequitable, making the task of providing for both themselves and their children arduous (Golder, 1985).

Unmarried mothers unable to support their children had few choices. Two options from charitable and State organisations were available both in England and Australia to

unmarried women, with or without children, unable to support themselves; *outdoor* and *indoor* relief. Providing those applying were "respectable" and "deserving", outdoor relief could be obtained in the form of goods, rather than money, from charitable organisations (Mellor, 1990, p6). Indoor relief required recipients to be admitted into an asylum or similar institution for the poor. Within institutions infants would remain with their mother whilst children aged above seven to eight were usually placed in a working position or another institution. Mothers were expected to work within these institutions to support themselves and their child (Mellor, 1990).

Infanticide was not uncommon; as Brennan (1994) points out, over eight hundred unidentified babies were found in Sydney city morgues between 1881 and 1939. Less extreme options taken by women included abandoning infants on the doorstep of charitable (usually church) organisations or leaving them in public places where the child would be 'rescued' by a benevolent stranger. In most instances of infant abandonment, mothers went to "extraordinary lengths" to ensure the survival of their infants, often leaving them fully clothed with a bottle close at hand, and on occasions waiting close by until someone had taken their child into care (Swain, 1995, p115). Mothers not taking this option could surrender one or more children to the child rescue groups emerging in the nineteenth century. Once relinquished they had little access to the child and found it difficult to regain control.

In other cases, payments were made by mothers to place their infants in the care of private nurses or carers. Most entered this arrangement in the hope they would be reunited with their child once they were able to provide for them. However, in many cases infants died of sometimes deliberate neglect as it was more profitable for carers,

or baby farmers as they came to be known, to neglect the children in care. This was particularly the case when lump sum payments were made rather than intermediate ones. Mellor (1990, p5) cites examples of 'baby-farmers' placed on trial for murders such as Mrs Blatt of New South Wales in 1888, the Makin couple also of New South Wales in 1894 and one of the last trials held, that of the Mitchells in Western Australia in 1907.

As public awareness of the plight of destitute children and the shocking behaviour of the so-called baby farmers grew calls were made from the middle classes, in particular, for legal provisions to be made to improve the inadequate laws protecting infants. The decade spanning 1864-1874 saw the establishment of legislation such as the Neglected and Criminal Children's Act (1864) in Victoria, Destitute Persons Relief Act (1866) in South Australia, Better Care of Destitute Children Act (1866) in New South Wales, Industrial Schools Act (1864) in Western Australia, and the Industrial and Reformatory Schools Act and the Training Schools Act (1864) in Queensland. Queensland was the only colony to distinguish between neglected and criminal children, the former being sent to industrial schools and the latter to reformatory schools. In response to rising concerns, three forms of child care were established between 1860 and 1890 in the form of orphanages, industrial and reformatory schools, and boarding-out.

### **Orphanages and Industrial Schools**

Orphanages established from the mid-nineteenth century were run primarily by private organisations, particularly churches. Relying on fundraising and grants issued by the government, the amount donated or raised impacted on the conditions in which children

lived. With limited resources, these 'barrack-style' institutions became overcrowded and, combined with the spread of disease, lack of personal care and inadequate training provided, were decreed to be dehumanising by charitable and government bodies (Mellor, 1990).

Industrial schools, whilst providing sufficient training for future roles in manual labour or domestic positions, conveyed only minimal personal care as was inherent within this type of institution. Modelled on the district union schools of England, Australian industrial schools were set up to provide "a rudimentary education and industrial training for the children of the 'perishing and dangerous classes' " (Mellor, 1990, p18). Primarily they were established for children living in poor conditions in which their parents were unable or unwilling to care for them, rather than those without parents.

Orphanages and industrial schools both accommodated a large number of children in a single institution, and as the number of destitute children increased the demand for space did not match the slow growth of child care institutions. The system of boarding-out, developed as an alternative to institutional care, not only relieved the increasing pressure for the State to provide for children, but also (it was hoped) enabled the opportunity for children's emotional needs to be met in the form of "family-based care" (Mellor, 1990, p20).

The establishment of industrial schools in Australia and the legislation accompanying them were significant for two reasons. The first is that it signified the commencement of a more active government involvement in the residential care of children and services provided for them. The second is related to the power of the legislation in allowing

children to be seized and placed within institutions without the consent of parents. This according to Mellor (1990, p20) "represented a major intrusion by government into the rights and responsibilities of parents".

## **Boarding out**

The concept of boarding-out was first introduced in South Australia by Emily Clark who adapted the idea from English, Irish and Scottish examples where children from workhouses had been placed with private families. By 1872 a voluntary organisation, the Adelaide Boarding-Out Society, was established offering assistance in the supervision and monitoring of boarding-out placements (Mellor, 1990). Between 1870 and 1890 other Australian states followed this initiative and legislation such as the Destitute Persons Act (1872) in South Australia was formulated. The intent of the legislation was to ensure children boarded out were not abused or placed in an environment deemed to be detrimental to the child<sup>1</sup>. The Infant Life Protection Act (1890) enacted in South Australia eighteen years later regulated the placement of children and required prospective foster and adoptive parents to register with the Chief of Police and later the Neglected Children's Department (NCD). Under this legislation, police had the power to inspect homes in which children were being placed, and provisions were made for the registration of private maternity hospitals handling such placements as well as "women taking children into care for profit" (Swain, 1995, p101).

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<sup>1</sup> Other states established legislation which provided the necessary legal and administrative framework for boarding out children: NSW, State Children's Relief Act (1881); Vic, Neglected & Criminal Children's Amendment Act (1874) 1907; TAS, Public Charities Act (1873); QLD, Orphanage Act (1879). The Neglected Children's Department was given the responsibility for administering the legislation rather than Chief of Police.

Boarding-out arrangements are significant as they reflect a shift in attitude to the provision of child care in Australia. The protection and welfare of children became paramount, and regulation and surveillance of parenting emerged as the role taken by child care 'professionals'. Parties interested in boarding a child were scrutinised more closely by authorities and were required to submit a written application including references, and an inspection on their homes was carried out. In the event a child was placed in a home, those boarding the child were paid a weekly subsidy from the government. After placement, the child's progress was monitored and those undertaking this task could recommend subsidies to be reduced and/or removal of the child if sufficient provisions were not being met (Mellor, 1990). However, as Swain (1995, p133) suggests, children were boarded out without extensive supervision and under the ILP Act, "apart from one perfunctory visit", the NCD or police had little power to intervene.

Resembling what is now regarded as foster care, boarding-out arrangements solved the inherent problems of institutional care as it offered children a putatively 'normal home' upbringing, rather than the regimented living quarters of orphanages and industrial schools. Authorities hoped that these environments would offer the child a greater opportunity to develop into a stable and self-sufficient adult, one able to perform both productively and morally within society.

Families agreeing to board a child without receiving a subsidy were seen to have adopted the child, as full responsibility for their welfare was completely transferred to the 'foster'/adoptive parents' (Mellor, 1990). This responsibility was recognised socially and emotionally, rather than legally, as legal provisions for full adoption were not in

place. In most boarding-out arrangements, contact with the birth family was discouraged, and a shift towards adoption was encouraged by authorities as it alleviated government boarding-out subsidies (Samuels, 1990). With these forms of adoption, birth parents could at any time reclaim their child, which occurred in some cases when the child was a suitable working age. According to Mellor (1990, p147) prior to the establishment of legally binding adoption orders in the 1920s:

adoption was seen as little other than an improved form of boarding-out, where the adoptive family took over responsibility for the child and brought it up as their own.

Legislation was needed to ensure birth parents could not reclaim their child and, as such, it allowed full legal parental rights to be transferred to the adoptive parents. With the growing influence of the infant rescue movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century, concerns were also held that children boarded or adopted were taken in for the purpose of child labour, rather than for the protection and welfare of the child. The needs of the child became paramount and adoption legislation developed was intended to reflect this.

## **ADOPTION LEGISLATION IS INTRODUCED**

Up until the late nineteenth century both in Australia and other Western societies, informal adoption was not uncommon (particularly between relatives), but few legal provisions existed and adoption practices were not regulated (Swain, 1992; O'Shaughnessy, 1994). Private arrangements were often made between relinquishing parents and adopting parents, or more commonly, mediated by mid-wives, nuns, priests, doctors and lawyers. In some cases, adoptive parents had documents drawn up by a



lawyer or justice of the peace which regularised the agreement between themselves and the relinquishing parents. However, these were not legally binding agreements (Swain, 1995).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was not unusual for midwives and relinquishing mothers to place advertisements in local papers notifying the availability of their child for adoption. In many instances, with an offer of payment or premium to have their child adopted (Swain, 1992; 1995). Before the establishment of legislation, adoptive parents (sometimes a single parent) did not undergo scrutiny; they could simply arrive and pick up an infant within the same day. Child welfare agencies and the Neglected Children's Department hoped that through the provision of legislation for adoptions, "the evils of the informal system could be eliminated" (Swain, 1992, p11).

In Australia, adoption is the responsibility of each State and Territory with the power to grant adoption orders given to the Supreme Court<sup>2</sup>. In 1896 the first Australian legislation pertaining to adoption was introduced in Western Australia (Adoption of Children Act) followed later by which other Australian states <sup>3</sup>. Primarily concerned

with transferring legal parental rights to the adopters, legislation established at this time ensured inheritance (both financial and social) for the adopted child. Legislation severed the legal ties between birth parents and their children and eliminated the possibility of reclamation.

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<sup>2</sup>With the exception of Queensland where the power is granted to the Director of Children's Services.

<sup>3</sup>TAS, Adoption of Children Act (1920); NSW, Child Welfare Act (1923); S.A., Adoption Act (1925); VIC, Adoption Act (1928); QLD, Amendments made to Infant Life Protection Act (1921), Adoption of

Relinquishing parents, in particular mothers, were required to give formal, written consent to the adoption, indicating their awareness that all legal rights to the child were relinquished. A revocation period of twenty-eight or thirty days (depending on the state and territory) was offered, giving relinquishing parents the option to repeal their decision. However, as Swain (1995) suggests, revocation was a legal option rather than a practical one, and few repealed their decision.

The aim and result of an Adoption Order was to make "the adopted child legally the same as if they were the natural children of their adoptive parents" (Mellor, 1990, p148; Boss, 1992). Concealing the biological identity of the adoptee, achieved through the issuing of an amended birth certificate displaying the name given to them by their adoptive parents (with the exception of Western Australia), provided a mechanism by which the adoption could remain confidential both to the adoptee and the community. According to Ley (1992, p101);

It was believed that by obliterating a child's birth identity it was possible to create for an adopted child a new identity which would ensure the genealogical history of the adoptive parents was now that of the adopted child. This practice was ostensibly to protect the child from the stigma of its birth, which was very often as the result of an ex-nuptial conception.

However, the establishment of legislation during the 1920s did not eliminate informal adoptions.

## **The Stigma Associated with Adoption**

Although legislation was established in Australia throughout the early part of the twentieth century, acceptance of adoption in the wider community was not achieved until after World War Two. Until the outbreak of war, adoption was seen as the last resort for single mothers, and they were encouraged to work (or marry) in order to support their child. A prevailing assumption at this time was that adoption was an easy solution for un-wed mothers, who found themselves 'in trouble', to dispose of their child. According to Swain (1992,p3), the opposition towards adoption was due to:

The scandal associated with the informal adoptions of the past, the concern, in an eugenically minded age, about the quality of illegitimate babies and the lingering desire to punish rather than to relieve the single mother.

Qualities attributed to relinquishing mothers from lower social classes, included promiscuity, criminality and immorality. Prospective adoptive parents and adoption agencies were concerned that the adopted child would inherit these undesirable genetic traits. To overcome these fears, orphanages such as the Bethany Babies' Home in Geelong, Victoria, promoted the high standard of children they had available for adoption. An excerpt from the Geelong Advertiser (dated March 1934) described by Swain (1992, p13), had the caption "Pumpkins and Babies grown at the Bethany Home" followed by an article in the women's section reading as follows:

At Bethany, the wee mites are watched over with a motherly care, such as we would give our own children, while there is a personal supervision so that habits may be corrected, inherited traits watched for and carefully directed, where confidence, love and happiness reign, and physical disabilities may be modified and lightened.

Other homes such as the Methodist Babies Home in Victoria also advocated that any perceived imperfections could be overcome by trained professionals within their home, using scientific methods. Influenced by American psychological discourse, the doctrine emerged that the environment could obviate heredity through adoption. According to Small (1987, p34);

Belief in the supremacy of nurture over nature formed the basis for the fantasy that the child's ancestry could be denied. It became necessary to find ways to foster and protect this fantasy. Hence adoption policy moved toward secrecy and practice moved toward protection.

By the end of World War Two, adoption became the solution to the problem of illegitimacy, and infant adoption became normal practice (Swain, 1992). An increase in the number of war orphaned children influenced not only the number of legal adoption placements, but also a shift in attitude as the construction of the unmarried pregnant woman was transformed. Orphans and illegitimate children were now not simply the result of a sordid affair of a 'fallen woman', but were orphans of war heroes. Single mothers began to be viewed as "victims, more sinned against than sinning" and were "depicted as capable of reclamation if only the evidence of their sin could be hidden and, ultimately, washed away" (Swain, 1995, p78).

A new class of single mothers emerged and the reasons for relinquishment were extended beyond economic concerns (although these were still relevant), to maintaining social approval within the community and not bringing shame to their families. Stimulated by the needs of middle class families, new styles of maternity homes emerged offering anonymity and an assurance the pregnancy would be concealed. As the clientele base shifted to middle class women, maternity homes moved to

accommodate young women where concealment of their pregnancy was crucial to their family (Swain, 1995).

From the 1950s onwards the list of prospective adoptive parents grew and as the demand for infants increased, objections from relinquishing parents, more specifically mothers, were silenced. Adoption was presented as their *only* option and if they really loved their child as they claimed, it was in the best interests of their child to adopt them out. Young mothers entertaining thoughts about keeping their child were promptly dissuaded. Practically and morally, unmarried mothers were seen as incapable of providing for their child's needs. At a time when the nuclear family was promoted as the ideal family structure in which to rear children, unmarried mothers were clearly unsuitable (Mason, 1993).

## **ATTEMPTS FOR UNIFORMITY IN LEGISLATION**

During the 1960s, State and Commonwealth governments attempted to create uniformity in adoption legislation. The result of these discussions was the drafting of a Model Bill which became the Adoption Children Ordinance Act (1965) in the Australian Capital Territory, and was incorporated into the legislation of other states<sup>4</sup>. Complete uniformity was not achieved between the states, but two common characteristics were incorporated in all States and Territories. The first was the

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<sup>4</sup> WA, Amendment to (1896) Adoption of Children Act (1964); VIC, Adoption Act amended (1964); TAS, Adoption of Children Act (1968); NSW Adoption of Children Act (1965); QLD Adoption of Children Act (1964); NT Adoption of Children Act (1964).

fortification of notions that the welfare of the child was to be paramount, reflecting the shift towards more child-centered policies. The second was the prohibiting of private placements with the power to grant adoption orders limited to the courts, magistrates and in the case of Queensland, the director responsible for family services. It was hoped this would eliminate 'black market' adoptions and enable professionals to monitor the adoption process (Boss, 1992; Turner, 1995).

Assumptions prevailing in policy development and practice in relation to the provision of child services have been influenced by "an acceptance of the nuclear family as most appropriate form of care for children", and a rejection of alternative arrangements such as single parent families (Mason, 1993, p16). Legislative changes in the 1960s endorsed the role of professionals in the adoption process and gave them power to judge the suitability of environments and parents. Those eligible to adopt an infant were married heterosexual couples in steady employment and unable to have children of their own. The selected adoptive family was seen to represent the ideal family model (traditional nuclear family), which could provide the appropriate environment for a child to develop. According to O'Shaughnessy (1994, p73), twentieth century adoptive couples were;

the new aristocracy, not of land and blood, but of money, faith and respectability. They were the ideal bourgeois Christian conjugal couple, their perfection marred by an absence, a lack of children.

Adoptive parents were encouraged by adoption agencies to maintain the secrecy of their adoption to the child and the wider community. It was reasoned that secrecy in adoption was in the best interests of all involved, particularly the adopted child. If unaware of their status, adopted children would bond more easily with their adoptive

parents, and would grow to be 'the same' as if they were born to them (Small, 1987; Swain, 1992; Watson, 1988). Provided both the child and wider community were oblivious to the adoption, the stigmatising effects of illegitimacy would not be felt by the adoptee, nor the adoptive family. For adoptive parents who did not want to be regarded as different to other families, concealing the adoption enabled them to "be accepted as a couple who were fertile and the family itself was regarded as a 'normal' (biologically created) family" (Ley, 1992, p102).

## **DECLINE IN ADOPTIONS**

From the early 1970s, there has been a steady decline in the number of infants available for adoption. Peaking in 1971-72 at 9,798 in Australia, the number of adoption orders has diminished by 91% to 855 in 1994-95 (Angus & Golley, 1996). This reduction can be attributed to a number of factors and was influenced by the changing social awareness of choices involved in bearing and keeping children.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a shift in attitudes towards women, children, and the family. The momentum of the women's movement<sup>5</sup> in the late 1960s highlighted many issues associated with the position of women, both within the workforce, and the home. Public awareness was raised as women began to agitate for more equal status in the home and workplace. There was a push for provisions to be made to accept the reality of single parent families and the need for child care in order to enable women to enter the workforce or develop their education. Reforms to working conditions, wages,

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<sup>5</sup> In using the term 'women's movement' I do not want to imply it was a "single, united entity" and recognise it was made up of a multitude of individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives (Brennan, 1990, p74).

education and child care services was a response to these demands. Increases in the number of working women, divorced or separated parents, and more complex family relationships generally, was gradually reflected in family policies (Mason, 1993; Walshe, 1994).

Up until the early 1970s, it was "assumed that the ex-nuptial baby was an unwanted baby" and adoption was a way of saving the abandoned infant (Swain, 1995, p204). Groups such as the Council for the Single Mother and her Child (CSMC) and the National Council for the Single Mother and her Child (NCSMC) sought to overturn this belief. Using the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) as a vehicle for their political voice, the social stigma attached to single mothers was reduced and financial assistance became available in 1973 with the introduction of the Supporting Mothers Benefit. The introduction of this benefit enabled more women to keep their children, which in turn affected the number of infants available for adoption (Walshe, 1994). As women gained greater control over their lives outside of marriage and in the workforce, fewer women relinquished their children for adoption (Swain, 1995).

The development and growing acceptance of methods of contraception such as the pill, gave women more choice regarding the reproduction of children. Abortion, although surrounded by controversy, was also an option for women not wanting to have their child, and reflected the greater power women had over the choice of bearing children. This option although available previously, was made legally accessible and performed in safer settings such as medical clinics<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The first change was in Victoria in 1969 where provisions were made in the legislation. Abortion can only be performed lawfully if it is to preserve a woman's life. The interpretation of this provision varied and more doctors were prepared to conduct such an operation to eliminate backyard operations (Swain, 1995).



Advances in reproductive technology provided the opportunity for infertile couples to have their own children, but the success of fertility programs (such as IVF) was not guaranteed (Ley, 1992). As the number of infants available for adoption declined and waiting lists for prospective adoptive parents grew, other options were sought by infertile couples. There were two main categories of adoptable children available to prospective couples: children with special needs, who had previously been unadoptable children, and intercountry adoption.

Children with physical or mental disabilities are designated as 'special needs' adoptions. Prior to the decline in the number of healthy infants available for adoption, these children often remained in institutions and were not seen as appropriate candidates for adoption. 'Special needs' adoptions have increased and interestingly, under certain circumstances, children in this category can be adopted by single people<sup>7</sup>.

Intercountry adoption was examined seriously in Australia for the first time between the mid-70s to the mid-80s. Intercountry adoptions were officially organised at the end of the Vietnam War when large numbers of orphaned and displaced children were adopted. According to Stonehouse (1992, p6), what began as a humanitarian act of assisting children without families (lost through war, poverty or natural disaster), has developed in some instances, into a "black market of babies from developing countries". A result of these concerns has been the tightening of adoption procedures both within Australia and the countries from which children are adopted. In the 1990's the number of children available from overseas countries has declined, reflecting domestic adoption

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<sup>7</sup> Single people are able to adopt under 'special', 'particular', or 'exceptional' circumstances in all States and Territories, depending on the interpretation in each State. In New South Wales and Queensland, single people are able to adopt children with 'special needs'.

programs and changing attitudes towards adoption in some countries (Angus & Golley, 1996).

## **ADOPTees AND BIRTH PARENTS MEET**

Despite legislation prohibiting the disclosing of identifying information throughout the 1970s and 1980s, adoptees and some relinquishing parents located each other using various (and at times illegal) means. Coinciding with this was an increase in research investigating the effects of confidential adoption on both the adoptee and the relinquishing parents. The results of this contributed to intense debate regarding the benefits and costs of confidential adoption (Byrd, 1988; Watson, 1988).

Research findings, predominantly from the field of psychology, indicated relinquishing parents, particularly mothers<sup>8</sup>, suffered emotionally as a result of not only relinquishing their child but also the lack of on-going information regarding the welfare of their child (Winkler & Van Keppel, 1984). For adoptees, studies began to indicate the number of adopted children (or people) using psychiatric services was higher than for those not adopted. Issues of identity confusion, feelings of loss, isolation and abandonment were reported as being central to adoptees, due to the lack of information available regarding their genealogical background and the reasons for their adoption (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1978).

Voices of adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents and professionals proclaimed the need for identifying information to become accessible. In recognition of this need,

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<sup>8</sup>The impact of relinquishment on birth fathers has not been as thoroughly documented (Sachdev, 1991).

voluntary contact registers were established in most Australian states enabling anyone involved in the adoption process to register their name and wishes in regards to the contact they wanted, and the release of identifying information on themselves (Lee, 1992).

Within Australia and other Western countries, national conferences were held and provided a forum for the issues raised in research findings to be discussed. The first conference in Australia, held in Melbourne 1976, endorsed the recommendation that adoptees and relinquishing parents have the right to access information pertaining to the adoption (Picton, 1976). Subsequent conferences held followed this initiative and motions were moved to place pressure on governments to amend legislation that prevented access to identifying information to those involved in the process (Picton, 1976; Picton, 1979; Oxenberry, 1982; Vine, 1992).

In 1984, legislative changes were made in Victoria which enabled adoptees to access their original birth certificate and files pertaining to their adoption. Over the next ten years other States also made legislative changes<sup>9</sup>. Although each state differs in the amount of information able to be accessed and who is able to access it, the records were finally opened. The main push for legislative change came from the combined pressure of adoptees, adoptive parents, birth parents and professionals who argued that the rights of adopted children were first and foremost in the debate. According to Turner (1995, p45)

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<sup>9</sup> SA, Adoption Act (1988); TAS, Adoption Act (1988); NSW Adoption Information Act (1990); QLD, Adoption of Children Amendment Act (1990); VIC, Adoption (Amendment) Act (1991); ACT, Adoption Act (1993); NT, Adoption of Children Act (1994); WA, Adoption Act (1994).

above all, the new legislation was inspired by research that seemed to persuade adoption practitioners that the insistence on secrecy of the adoption process that permeated this 1960's legislation was misconceived.

These legislative changes have resulted in not only the unsealing of closed adoption files, but have also created more open adoption practices.

## **CURRENT AUSTRALIAN ADOPTION PRACTICES**

Legislation pertaining to adoptions between the Australian States and Territories is diverse. Boss (1992), identifies three main areas of diversity namely; the jurisdiction dealing with adoptions, the child's right to be consulted about their adoption (depending on age and level of understanding), and the treatment of potential adopters. For instance, in relation to the treatment of potential adopters in New South Wales, de facto couples are able to adopt a child provided they have shared a relationship for a minimum of three years. In Victoria, only married couples (minimum two year relationship)<sup>10</sup> are able to adopt. However, for couples in New South Wales, infertility is a necessary condition to adopt while in Victoria this is not a requirement. As Turner (1995) suggests, de facto couples living in Victoria may move to New South Wales to adopt, and vice versa for an infertile married couple in New South Wales.

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<sup>10</sup>Variations exist between Australian States and Territories in relation to length of relationship and age of adopters. In South Australia, married couples must have been together for a minimum of five years and applicants must be aged between twenty-five and forty-seven years. In Tasmania, married couples must have been together for minimum of three years (this can include de facto cohabitation before marriage) and the minimum age of prospective adoptive parents is eighteen years. In Queensland, married couples must be together for minimum of two years. In Western Australia married couples must have cohabited for minimum of three years (this can include de facto cohabitation before marriage) The minimum age limit of adopters is twenty-five years old and the age difference between the adopters and the child must not exceed forty years. In the Australian Capital Territory the length of marriage is not specified and the minimum age of adopters is twenty-one years. Refer to Nygh (1993) for more details.

The diversity in legislation between Australian States and Territories also exists in relation to accessing identifying (or non-identifying) information for both past and present adoptions. Western Australia, in particular, made provisions in the Adoption Act (1994) for adoptive parents and birth parents to negotiate what has been termed an adoption plan. The aim of an adoption plan "is to facilitate the sharing of information between parties to the adoption regarding the child's development and significant events in his/her life" (Adoption Legislative Review Committee, 1997b, p8). Under this legislation, the parties involved negotiate the kind of contact and information they will share and the frequency of that contact. This provision reflects a move towards more open adoption practices and as such, a more fluid understanding of family. Although not legislated, open adoptions have been operating informally in other states such as Victoria and in other parts of the world, such as the United States (Allen, 1996).

The 'kind' of children being adopted has been influential on legislative changes. The majority of children adopted are no longer new born infants and there has been an increase in the number of step parent adoptions. In these arrangements, negotiations between birth parents is seen as necessary, as there has been recognition given to the importance of birth fathers. Consent must be obtained from the legally identified father before a child can be adopted (both in step-parent and unrelated adoptions).

Recognition of the trauma caused by secret adoption practices of the past have been central in promoting legislative changes. For adoptees, there has been an acknowledgment that they have two sets of parents, biological and social, and have the right to information on and contact (if desired) with their birth parents. Adoptive parents, once unaware of the biological background of their adopted child, are able to

access medical and genetic information that can assist in the rearing of their child. Contact with birth parents enables them not only to ask ongoing questions if needed, but also allows them to share information about the child. Although there have been concerns raised that adoptive parents may feel threatened by potential interference from birth parents, a study conducted with those involved in an adoption plan indicate that some adoptive parents would in fact like more contact with the birth parents (O'Dea, 1997).

Adoption practices of the past gave little power to relinquishing parents, particularly mothers. A shift towards more open adoption practices, such as an adoption plan, enables birth parents to participate in the selection process of adoptive parents, and to have access to ongoing information about their child. This is in recognition of the pain caused by the lack of knowledge about their child after relinquishment. Past adoption practices offered minimal counselling to relinquishing mothers and they were encouraged to give their child up for adoption in the best interests of their child. Current practices offer counselling services and birth parents are presented with options to encourage them to keep their child.

Throughout the 1990s, there has been an increase in literature not only from academic perspectives, but also personal accounts of those involved in the adoption process (Chick, 1994; Matthews, 1996; Valentine & Slaytor, 1990; Post Adoption Resource Centre, 1994). The moving stories of those involved highlight the inadequacies of secret adoption practices of the past and the need for more open adoption policies.

A report tabled in the Australian Parliament in 1997, 'Bringing them home', contains many accounts of the pain endured by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children adopted under assimilation policies in Australia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Although the adoption of these children was under different circumstances to those of non-aboriginal Australian children, the accounts contained in this report serve as a reminder both of the importance to individuals of knowing their biological background and the inadequacies of past policies. There has been a shift in adoption practices in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children which reflect a better understanding of the operation of other family models and systems, and practitioners now endeavor to place them with their family of origin or within a Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander family.

Australian adoption policies throughout the twentieth century have transformed from secrecy to more open arrangements. Changes have been influenced by not only the concerns raised by those involved in the adoption process, but also the changing construction of the unmarried mother, and shifting notions of family. Unmarried mothers are now encouraged to keep their child and in the event of adopting their child, to maintain contact with them. There have been calls for adoption to be abolished as the past practices have caused so much pain to those involved, and the emotions surrounding the word 'adoption' are often conceived as negative. As Turner (1995, p44) states "it may not be too extreme to argue that adoption is becoming a 'politically incorrect' concept".

The following chapter introduces the adult adoptees involved in this study and will describe their adoption experience. I will explore the impact of contact with their birth relative and how they accommodate their two families in their everyday lives.



## CHAPTER 5A MAPPING THE FAMILY

The purpose of these related chapters is to introduce the participants involved in this study. Primarily it describes each participant's background and experiences related to their adoption and subsequent 'reunion'. Based on the interviews conducted with participants, the family maps constructed will also be presented and discussed in an attempt to describe each participant's construction of their family<sup>1</sup>.

The central question explored in these chapters is who participants regard as their family and why they include them in their construction. By exploring these questions, I hope to reveal how individuals construct their families, and in particular the impact that meeting birth family members has on adoptees.

Due to the large amount of data contained in chapter Five it is divided into two sections, part A and part B. There are seven participants in part A, all of whom were adopted as infants within Australia. The participants introduced in this section include Anne, Belinda, Carl, Elsie, Faye, Jenny, and Kathy. Part B includes a total of five participants, four of whom have been adopted within the United Kingdom, Dave, Henry, Matthew and Lisa, and the other, Isabel, adopted from South Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Kinship terminology and abbreviations are taken from Schusky (1972).

## ANNE

Anne is thirty-five years old and at the time of the interview was undertaking a degree at Murdoch University, Western Australia. She lives with her two children, a daughter aged eleven from her first marriage, and a son aged five from her second marriage. Anne does not have any relatives in Western Australia except for her children and described finding "pseudo families" as she has shifted around. Anne's adoptive mother died in 1995 and her adoptive father and sister currently live in Queensland.

Anne was thirteen days old when she was adopted in 1962 from the Salvation Army home in North Fitzroy, Melbourne, Victoria. At the time of her adoption, Anne's adoptive parents were living in the Wimmera, a district of Western Victoria, and it was through the local town court that they adopted her after a local priest agreed they were "fit parents". In Anne's adoptive family she had one older brother (four years older) who was also adopted. Following the adoption of Anne, her adoptive mother had two children, a boy five years younger than Anne and a girl three years her junior.

Anne can remember being told she was adopted at the age of about eight or nine. Her adoptive mother "spilt the beans", as Anne says, after her older brother fought with a boy in the neighbourhood who had been taunting two others about their adoptive status. At being told, Anne remembers feeling devastated and shocked because the concept was difficult to grasp. As she states, "it is like an onion, like the word adoption on the outside is different to the adoption in the middle, like each time you take a piece off there's more and more stuff".

Adoption was not discussed a great deal as she was growing up as Anne recalls.

It wasn't really ever discussed or anything that I can remember. When mum would broach it like with dad, dad sort of never really said that much about it like as far as he's concerned I'm his daughter and that's all there is about it. When mum sort of broached it there was never really anybody in the house.

In the years 1975 and 1976 both of Anne's brothers died in accidents within seven months of each other and her family moved to Tasmania. Anne had had an extremely close relationship with both of them particularly with her older adoptive brother. It was when her brothers died that she feels her family disintegrated. Anne was not happy about the move and remembers feeling isolated from the loss of her brothers, and felt her parents offered little explanation about their move to Tasmania. This time in her life is represented in her family map prior to contact (Fig 1A). Anne felt extremely close to her adoptive brothers throughout her life and positioned them close to her on the map. Anne's adoptive mother and father were both included in the map but at a distance as she felt angry for not being told why they were moving away from their home, and did not feel her adoptive parents understood how she felt. Her adoptive sister was not included as she could not remember her in the picture, although she was there.

At the age of eighteen Anne applied to the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau, to obtain information pertaining to her adoption. Anne's adoptive mother had remembered the name given to her at birth, her birth mother's name and where she lived. From this information and what Anne had obtained from the department, the search was narrowed down to Davenport, Tasmania. Anne and her fiancé eventually tracked Anne's birth mother's younger brother from the phone book, who offered to meet with them but did not think he would be of much assistance. They drove to his house in Davenport, and on arriving,

he looked up and I just sat in the car and I just grabbed the dashboard and thought 'oh my god I look like this person', it was just, it was the most scariest, nicest feeling it was, scary hit you in the face, lovely, it was just a huge range, range of emotions.

Anne then explained to her uncle who she was and he arranged for Anne and her husband to meet one of his sisters. Anne's aunt told her that her birth mother was married with four boys and living in Queensland. According to Anne, this particular aunt is a link to her birth father with whom she is friendly.

Once Anne had obtained her birth mother's address, she debated about writing to her "like I've got this far, I know she is alive, I know where she is, do I want to know anymore sort of thing". After a couple of weeks she did write to her with the help of her adoptive mother.

The first time Anne met her birth mother and birth brothers was on a trip to North Queensland with her now ex-husband. They had arranged to meet at a pub but on arriving late (and getting lost) they, or more specifically her husband, rang her to tell them where they were. The first time she spoke to her birth mother was when her husband passed her the phone and she sat there stunned thinking, "my god I don't want to do this, I just didn't want to do this". She took the phone and cried, unable to say anything. They arranged to meet the next day allowing each of them time to compose themselves. That night Anne had very little sleep. The next morning the car was parked in the carpark of the pub with her birth mother, her husband and their four boys. At that moment, they "sort of ran across...like on the movies you run across to each other and cry and hug".

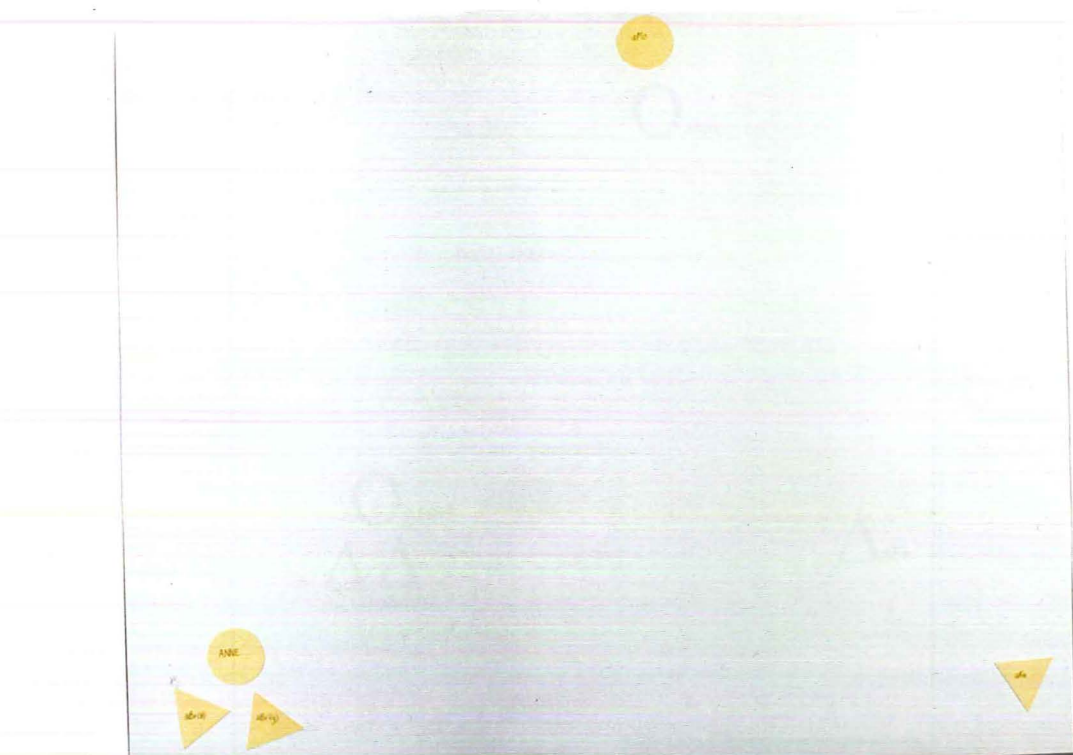
Anne has since met three of her birth mother's sisters, one brother and her mother. At the time of contact, her birth mother did not have a good relationship with her mother and Anne feels making contact with her birth mother forced them to address the issue again; they have since developed a better relationship.

Anne has been in contact with her birth mother for over seventeen years. She feels that ongoing contact has not been consistent as she writes to her but her birth mother does not reply regularly, then "all of a sudden" she will ring Anne. She feels her birth mother is not putting in the same amount of effort as she is. Anne is also concerned her birth mother will not reveal the identity of her birth father and that this may have an impact on their relationship. Anne has a good relationship with her birth mother's husband as she feels he accepts her as his daughter which made the contact much easier. She has started to write to him to find out more about the identity of her birth father. Anne would not change anything and does not regret making contact with her birth mother.

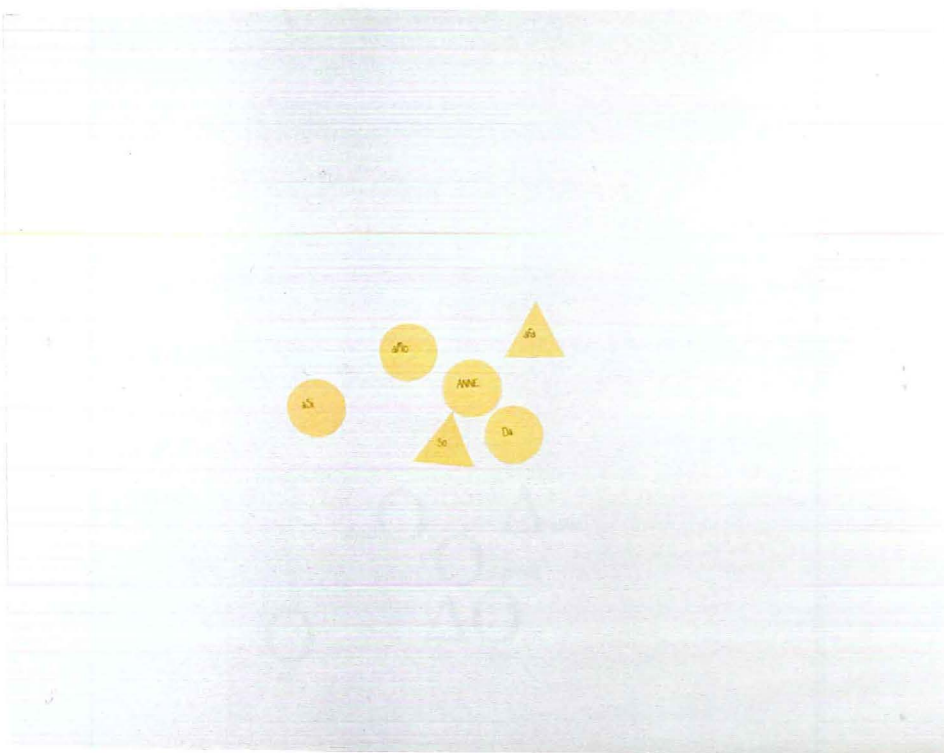
In her current family map (Fig 1B), Anne included her adoptive mother and father, her adoptive sister and her son and daughter. Although her adoptive mother died nearly two years ago, she still feels close to her and relates the inclusion to part of the grieving process. Her adoptive father is close in her thoughts and she keeps regular contact with him, calling him twice a week. The day of the interview was one of the days she speaks to him. She placed her adoptive sister at more of a distance as she feels her sister needs to sort out her own problems and by placing her at a distance she will be able to do this. The relationship she holds with her sister is a "love/hate" one, and she feels her sister doesn't really give her any support. When Anne is having problems, her sister would prefer to speak about her own problems rather than listening to Anne's. Her two children are placed in equal distance to her; this is her family *now*.

She did not include any of her birth family in her family maps. She has had contact with her birth mother, her husband and their three boys, and her half-brothers for over ten years. The first contact occurring when she was eighteen (1981). Her birth family is important to her, but the communication between her and her birth mother has not been consistent. Her mother does not maintain contact regularly and Anne feels she is the one doing all of the work without much input from her mother. Examples she provides includes not replying to letters, not responding to questions she asks (in particular about her birth father), saying she will do things such as sending birthday and Christmas presents for the Anne's children and not doing it. Anne feels her birth mother expects too much from her, ringing her only in times of crisis (she gave the example of a time her half brother was in an accident and her birth mother rang asking where was she, as she had been trying to contact her for days). Anne feels they are a part of her family, but they have not developed a close relationship for her to include them on her map or list. Trust has not developed and Anne does not feel they would be there in times of crisis like her adoptive family would be.

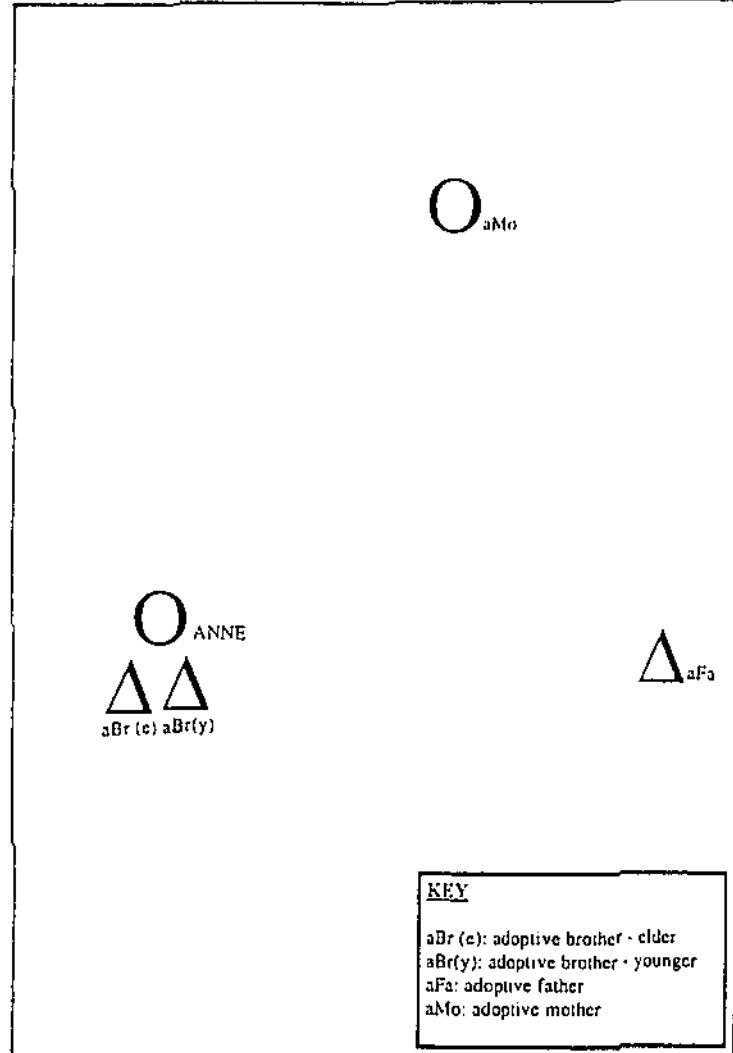
Contact for Anne did affect her concept of family, but other life changes were just as influential such as the death of her brothers, her marriage, and the birth of her children. Her birth family is important but as she states, "it's my decision whether or not I will let them in my life". The relationships need to be built and after ten years she feels she has put in a lot of effort for little return.



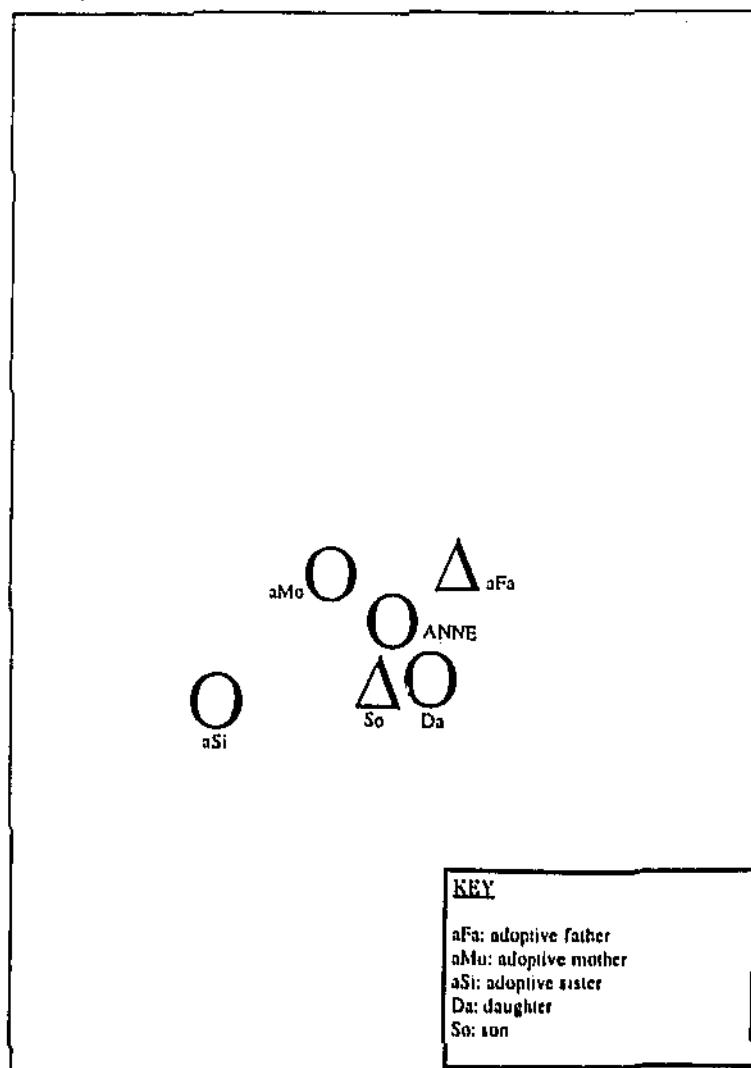
**(Fig 1A) ANNE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 1B) ANNE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 1A) ANNE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 1B) ANNE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)



## BELINDA

Belinda is nineteen years old and lives at home with her adoptive parents and her older adoptive brother. She works in a child care centre and at the time of the interview was not involved in a serious relationship. Belinda made contact with her birth mother and birth family six months before the interview.

Belinda was adopted at the age of six weeks in 1977, in Perth, Western Australia. She has always known she was adopted and cannot recall when she was specifically told by her adoptive parents. Belinda's adoptive mother told her they had a book to explain it but it is not something she remembers. However, she recalls being told about the way in which she was 'chosen'; "when I was little, she used to tell me that my brother chose me, he picked me out, [and] I always believed her". According to Belinda, her adoptive parents "didn't really bring it up much but they didn't *not* talk about it" if she broached the subject of adoption. On occasions they would joke around with comments such as "taking you back" and "we'd like a refund". It was only when she was in the process of making contact with her birth mother that she felt comfortable to ask her adoptive mother why they adopted and the reason for their infertility.

Prior to establishing contact with her birth family, Belinda perceived her family to include only her adoptive parents and adoptive brother (Fig 2A). She had not known any of her relations beyond her family of origin except when referred to in conversation. As other relatives have not been directly involved in her life she does not see them as being a part of *her* family.

Belinda had always wanted to search for her birth mother and upon turning eighteen in 1995 she applied for identifying information pertaining to her adoption. Jigsaw, WA, conducted the search and made the initial contact with Belinda's birth mother on her behalf. Initially she had been scared her birth mother would not want to have any contact with her or that she had been a product of rape, and feared other issues it may raise for her birth mother and her family.

After exchanging only two letters (sent via Jigsaw), Belinda and her birth mother met at a Jigsaw worker's house. The day they met Belinda was less nervous than she expected and after talking "for ages", they drove together to meet Belinda's older birth sister. Upon returning home and finding an empty house, Belinda rang her adoptive mother who was away at the time. She then waited for her adoptive father to arrive home to share her news with him. Belinda recalls the mixed emotions she felt later that night:

I don't think I slept much that night, sort of thinking everything that they've said and everything goes on in your head and you're kind of excited and worried what's going to happen next, are they going to call you or are you going to see them or what's going to happen, did they like you or what.

The members in Belinda's birth family include an older brother and sister and a younger brother and sister. They have always been aware of her existence and throughout their lives they referred to her as Sally, the name given to her at birth by her birth mother. This continued when Belinda met the family and her younger sister introduced Belinda to her boyfriend initially as Sally, before correcting herself. At large family gatherings (only a few of which she has attended) others also referred to her as Sally rather than Belinda.

The identity of her birth father is somewhat in contention. Her birth mother told Belinda he is the same father as of her three eldest children; the youngest boy is to her birth mother's current husband. The father of the eldest children does not believe this to be the case, and indicated to Belinda's younger sister that he is willing to have a blood test if Belinda wants him to. She does not want to push him to do this but still wonders what is the truth. In her identifying information there were descriptions of two men and at the time of the pregnancy her birth mother and her husband were separated so there is some doubt as to whether he is the father. Her older birth sister does not believe he is Belinda's birth father because of his past actions regarding the custody of the children, for which he fought hard.

The identity of Belinda's father has important implications in regards to the relationship she holds with her siblings, for they could be "full brothers and sisters" rather than "half". Siblings have been very important to Belinda. At one stage she just wanted to find her brothers and sisters and was not "fussed" about her birth mother. When she first learnt of siblings she was "stoked" particularly about the sisters, as she had always wanted a sister and already had a brother.

The ongoing contact with her birth family has not been that easy for Belinda. The relationship Belinda holds with her birth mother has been developing slowly and she feels they have not been communicating properly. At the time of the interview they had not had the opportunity to spend time alone, since each time contact had occurred someone else had been present. Belinda feels;

it's not really going anywhere, I guess well, it sort of is but it's not, she just, I think she expects me to suddenly fit in like that like cause it's just that she said to me "I just want you to feel like a part of the family" but I can't feel that until well like, I guess we have to get to know each other properly.

Belinda also feels she cannot bring up what happened in the past, particularly about her birth father although she has doubts as to what her birth mother has told her. She does not want to ask again "because you don't want to bring it up, and I don't know how she feels about it, and if she's hiding about my father...I'm not about to go and ask Teresa (her birth mother) because it kind of looks like I don't trust her".

The importance of birth siblings to Belinda is reflected in the positions they are placed in her current family map (Fig 2B). She feels closer to her birth sisters than her birth mother. Her eldest sister, in particular, is the one she talks to the most about how she is feeling. A bond has formed between the sisters, one Belinda values very much. She also includes her birth sister's two children in her map, but as she does not know them very well they sit the furthest away from her. The relationship with her younger sister (who is sixteen) has been uncomfortable and Belinda is trying to create opportunities for the two of them to spend more time with each other. Belinda feels *she* needs to initiate and develop the relationship with her younger sister as she is older and should make the first moves to show her she "is there" for her. Belinda believes her younger birth sister has trouble articulating how she feels directly to her, and uses their birth mother and birth sister to communicate to Belinda. Belinda feels her birth mother is forcing her younger sister to develop an affectionate relationship with her. To highlight this, Belinda describes one particular incident:

I was leaving and Teresa (her birth mother) goes "well give her a hug Sara (her birth sister)" and you could tell she was uncomfortable with it and that what made me a bit angry because...I want them to do it off their own...I don't want them to be pressured to like me kind of thing.

**Belinda does not place as much importance on her relationship with her birth brothers as she does with her birth sisters, particularly the elder of the two. She attributes this to**

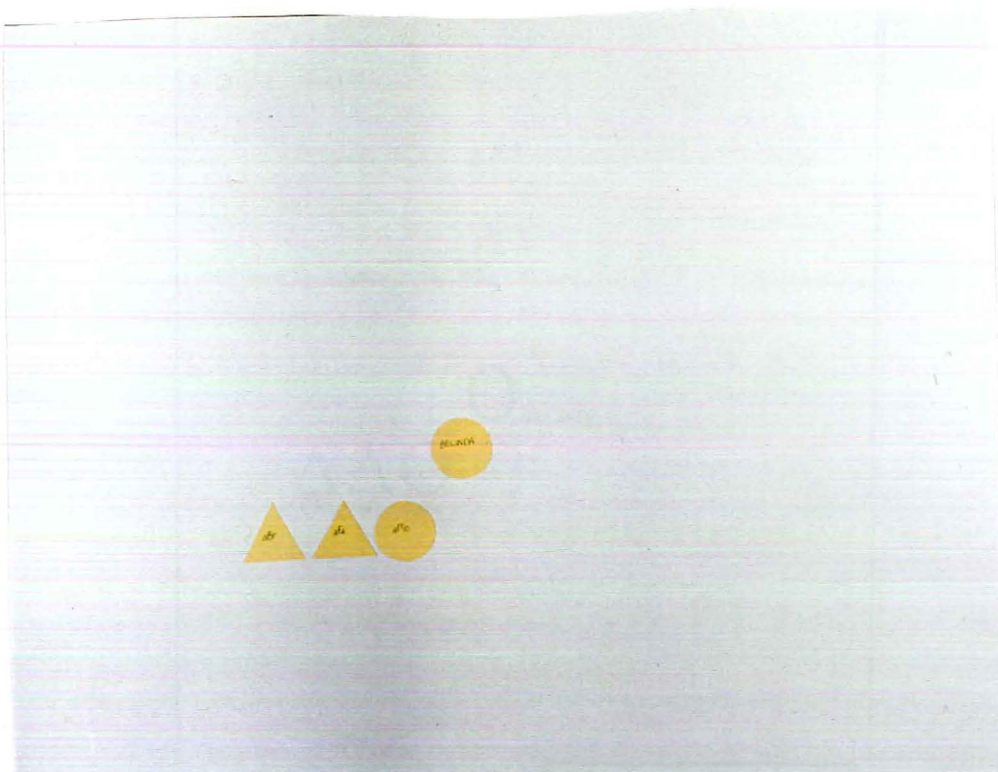
already having a brother and never having a sister in her life. She has only met her older birth brother once, but is able to hold conversations with him on the phone. The youngest child, who is the half-brother of everyone, is only ten and according to Belinda "he loves me to death, he's like...attached to me when I'm there because I'm his sister who doesn't pick on him or anything".

Belinda has no regrets about making contact, but on reflection feels it could have gone a little bit slowly. She also feels some pressure to make the effort to see her birth family as they live in Perth, "because they're here you think you should make the effort even though when you think about it you don't really want to do it". This is a factor others do not have to face when long distances are involved. Belinda does not want anyone to feel pressured into liking her and vice versa "I don't want them to have to like me or have to, I mean we might be related but it takes time to build up a proper thing when you haven't known each other for nineteen...years"

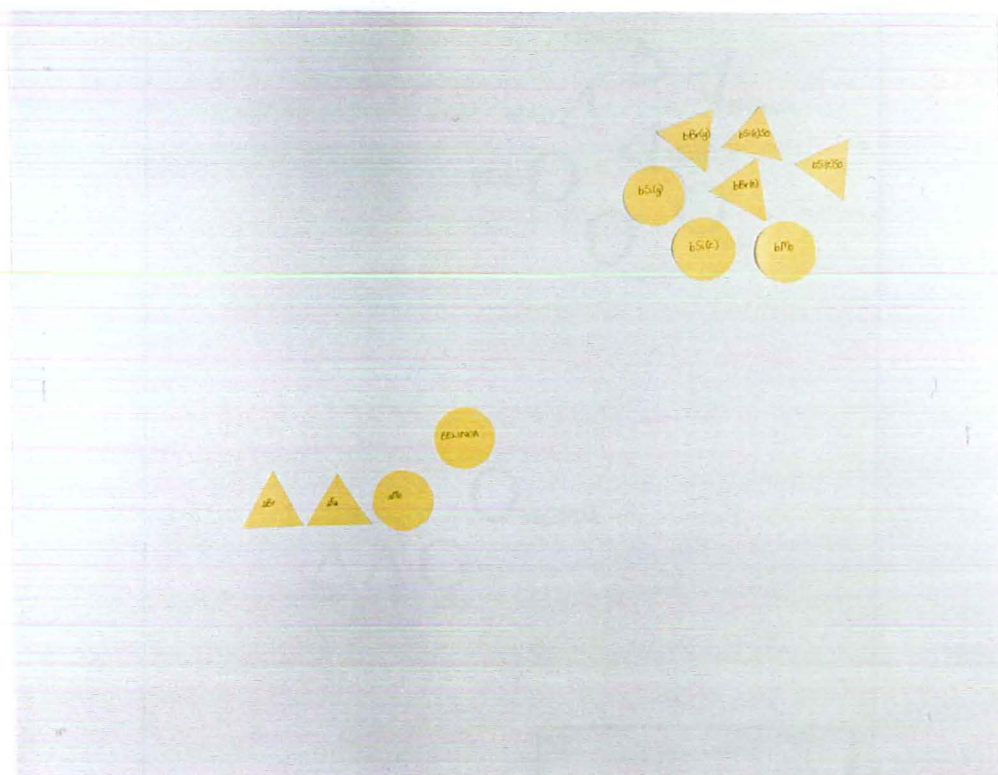
After establishing contact with her birth family, Belinda's perception of her family was modified to include both her adoptive family and her birth family (Fig 2B). Her adoptive family was placed much closer than her birth family as she feels "I am always drawn to my adoptive family rather than my birth family...they are the family that has been there for the past nineteen years". At this early stage Belinda was still establishing relationships with her birth family.

Belinda feels closest to her adoptive mother as they talk to each other about a variety of life issues. She perceives her relationship with her adoptive father as close but is not able to share the same conversation with him as she does with her adoptive mother. She places her adoptive brother further away as they communicate little and do not share

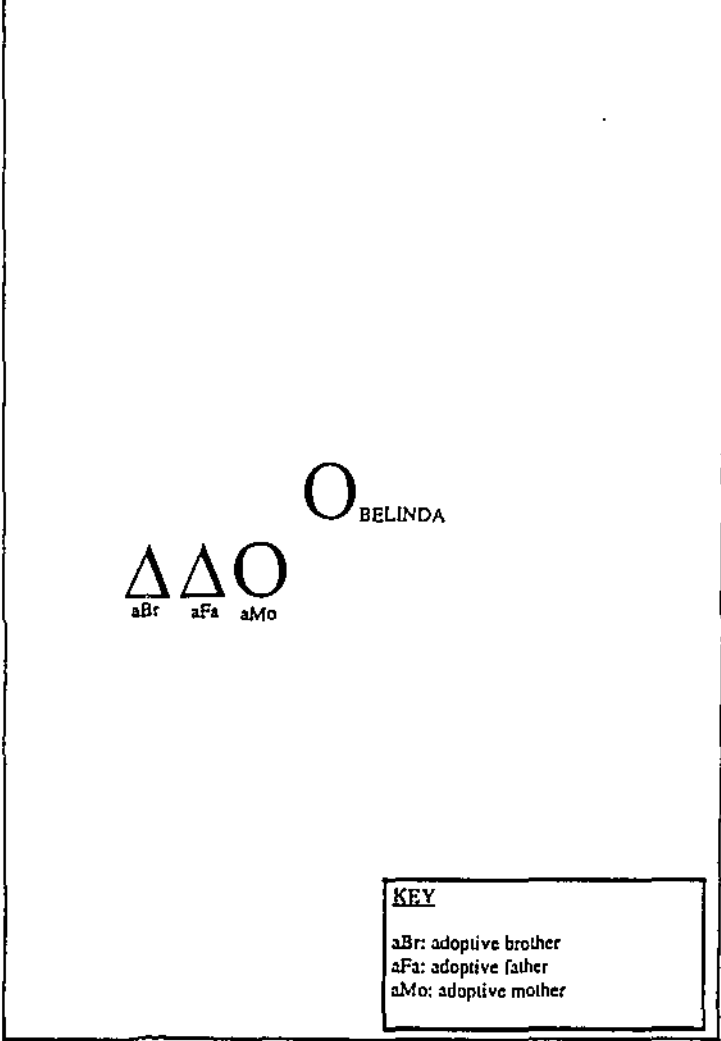
much personal information. She has been informing him of her contact experience but he does not seem particularly interested, remarking only in a negative fashion. She continues to let him know what is happening, even though the reaction may not be positive as she feels he does want to know but does not want to ask. Although she does not perceive her relationship with her adoptive brother as close, she believes "if anything happened he'd be there for me and I'd always be there for him".



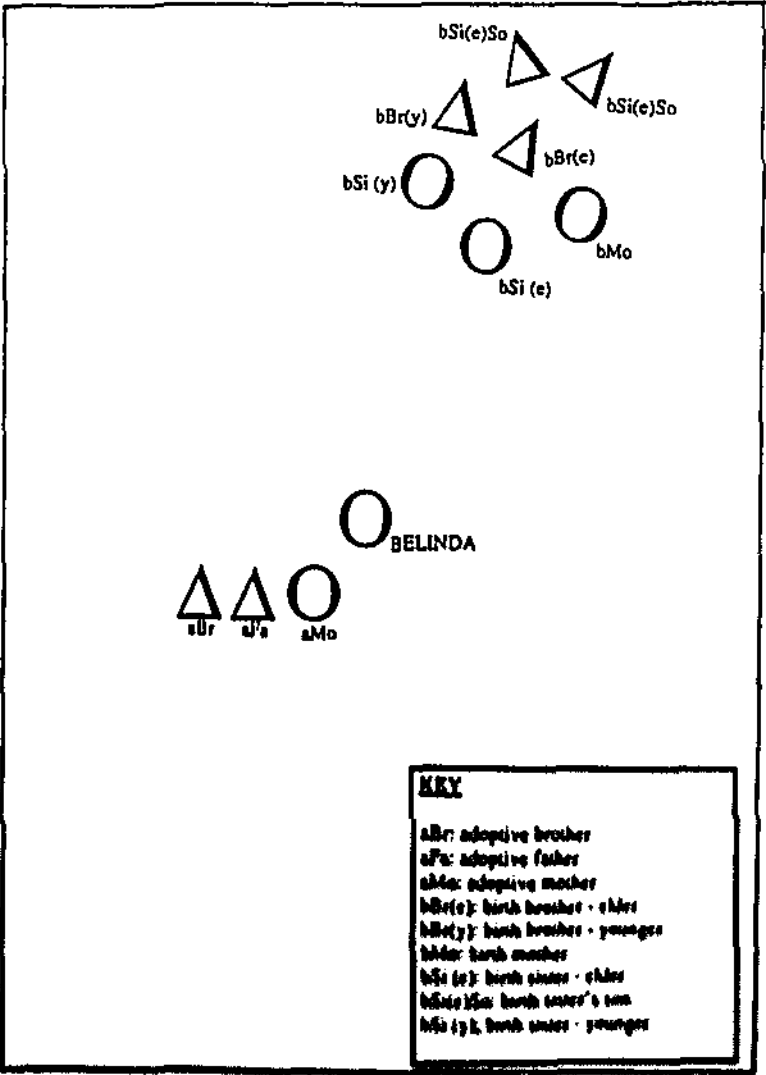
**(Fig 2A) BELINDA'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 2B) BELINDA'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 2A) BELINDA'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 2B) BELINDA'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT WITH BIRTH



## CARL

Carl is forty-four years old and at the time of the interview he was undertaking an honours degree in computer science at Curtin University, Western Australia. In total, Carl has five children; a nineteen year old daughter from his first marriage, a son aged thirteen, and two daughters aged twelve and eight from his second marriage, and a step daughter aged twenty (his second wife's daughter). His adoptive mother and brother live in Victoria, his adoptive father is no longer alive. Carl's birth family also live in Victoria and at the time of the interview he had been in contact with one of his birth sisters for over eighteen months.

Carl was adopted at three months of age from Broadmeadows, Melbourne, Victoria in 1953. Adoption was not referred to while Carl was growing up, and he cannot recall being specifically told of his adoptive status. According to Carl, "as far as I can remember, it was just never mentioned...it was just a silence on that".

Carl initially attempted contact with his birth mother in 1992 but was unsuccessful as his mother refused to have any contact. Carl left it for another three years before making a second attempt in 1995, at which time he wrote his birth mother a letter. Unfortunately she had died in the same month he had sent the letter and his birth sister was the one to open it. Showing her father the contents of the letter he commented that it was a case of misidentity and it was thrown into the bin. However, Carl's sister thought more of it as she wondered what a coincidence it was that this person had the same name as her grandfather. The post code also triggered suspicions, as she could remember her mother going on a short trip to Western Australia years previously. Her

suspicious led her to a family friend, the only person with whom her mother shared her secret, and she was told most of what the family friend knew.

After receiving confirmation from the family friend, Carl's birth sister proceeded to search for Carl, coincidentally using the same mediator used by Carl. The mediator involved informed Carl of her contact with his birth sister. Based on information previously received, Carl had been aware of his younger birth brother, but was overwhelmed to be told by the mediator of the existence of his sisters, his mother's death in April of that year and the identity of his birth father in the one day. Carl did not want to contact his sister to prevent him from doing "anything silly", but within days she rang him in August 1995.

As Carl and his birth sister spoke, they began to piece together odd events in each of their lives that connected. Carl learnt from his birth sister that when he had initially attempted to make contact with his birth mother, she was suffering from Multiple Sclerosis. Carl's birth sister is certain that this is the main reason for her refusal for contact as she would not have wanted Carl to see her in that condition. Added to this is the revelation that on two occasions, Carl's birth mother made appearances in his life. Carl does not remember the first occasion, but was told about it by the family friend, that his birth mother came to see him in 1982 in Perth. This was the mysterious holiday his birth sister can remember her taking. The second occurred in 1986, and Carl remembers a woman approaching him after he had presented at a conference, congratulating him on a wonderful presentation. Carl recalled what she was wearing to his birth sister and she confirmed the outfit he described was a suit owned by her mother.

Carl has been in regular contact with his birth sister since she first made contact. At this stage the rest of his birth family are unaware of Carl's existence. Carl's birth sister is waiting for the right time to tell her siblings about the existence of Carl and the contact they have shared. They keep in contact about once a week and have exchanged photos and other pieces of family history. Carl intends going to Melbourne to meet his birth sister in person and potentially the rest of his birth family.

At the time of the interview, Carl was attempting to determine the identity of his birth father. Jigsaw had contacted the man he believes to be his birth father in London, but as Carl states "he doesn't remember my mother or anything about it". Blood tests are being conducted to ascertain if the man they have identified is Carl's biological father. Although Carl has not had any contact with his birth father, he feels they share common philosophies and other similarities not yet uncovered.

Carl has told his adoptive family of his contact with his birth family and although his adoptive mother is anxious, she is happy for Carl. Carl has no regrets about contacting his birth family. As he states, "for the first time in my life I feel as though my family is complete". Carl had always perceived his birth parents to be a part of his family as reflected in his family map prior to contact (Fig 3A). Carl placed his birth mother closer to him than his birth father as Carl was sure she would be aware of his existence.

Also included in Carl's family map prior to contact is his adoptive parents and his adoptive brother. Carl did not feel close to his adoptive brother as they were growing up and he is placed further away than his parents. Carl's second wife appears on his map and is positioned closest to him as Carl felt she provided emotional support during their five years of marriage. In relation to his children, Carl's son appears to be closer

than his three daughters, but he did not indicate this verbally and each hold a similar position in his life. His step-daughter is separated from the other children as Carl feels their relationship varies and is good and bad at different times.

Carl's current family map (Fig 3B) reflects not only the impact of contact but also significant life changes in his personal relationships. Carl placed his partner and her two children closest to him, overlapping the tokens to represent the importance they hold in his life. He also included her two brothers as he feels they give his partner much support and as such constitute a part of his family.

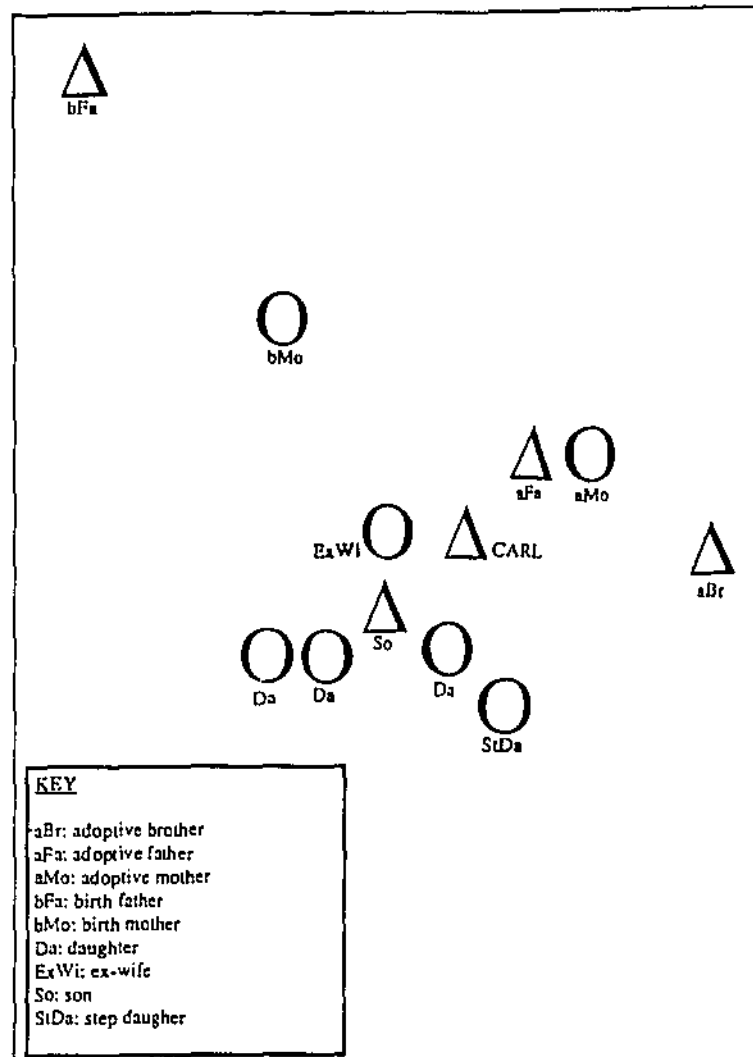
The positions held by his adoptive parents and adoptive brother are similar to those on his family map prior to contact. He did not indicate feeling closer or more distant to them (although his adoptive father had deceased). They are placed on the opposite side to his birth family, placing Carl in the centre of the two families.

The positioning of his children held little variation and once again Carl did not indicate feeling closer to either of them. Interestingly in his current family map Carl did not include one of his daughters. This was due to omission rather than exclusion as Carl simply forgot to include her.

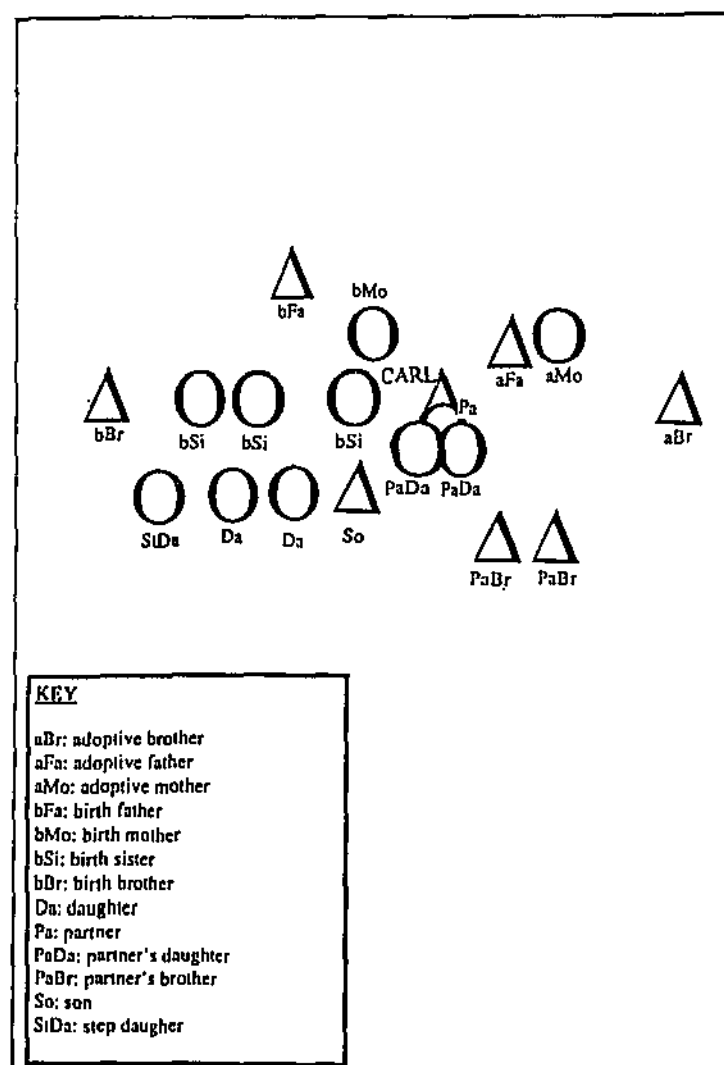
Having had contact with only one of his birth sisters, Carl placed her in close proximity to him and feels they have developed a strong relationship. Although deceased, his birth mother is also positioned close to him as he believes if not for her illness she would have had contact with him. As Carl has not had contact with his other two birth sisters and birth brother, he has not developed a close enough relationship to place them closer on the map.

The impact of contacting his birth family has expanded Carl's construction of family as more members have been added. In addition to an increase in the members included, Carl has moved his birth parents closer as he is now able to conceptualise them and knows they are (or were) aware of his existence.





(Fig 3A) CARL'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 3B) CARL'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)

## ELSIE

Elsie is twenty-eight years old and at the time of the interview was working as a Research Consultant within a University Research Centre. She was not involved in a serious relationship and shares the house she rents. Elsie's adoptive family live in Perth and she has an older sister who is also adopted. Elsie has been in contact with her birth father for approximately eighteen months and he also lives in Perth.

Elsie was adopted at two weeks of age from St Anne's hospital, Perth, in 1969. Her adoptive parents had adopted another daughter two years previously and had returned to show the nuns "what a lovely little two year old she had turned into". While they were visiting the home, one of the sisters asked them if they would be interested in adopting another child, as there had not been any formal arrangements for Elsie's adoption. Her parents agreed and took Elsie home the same day. The formal process was not completed until four months later.

Elsie remembers being told she was adopted;

Mum and dad always told me about it. [I] never really knew what it meant till I was probably about four and it was just like, we're not your real parents, you've got a real mum and dad out there somewhere, we love you and that sort of thing.

Aside from this explanation adoption was not spoken about as Elsie was growing up as she states, "you were Catholic, you didn't talk about it, didn't talk about anything like that you know plus in that generation you know you just didn't talk about those sorts of things".



Elsie first attempted contact with her birth mother in 1993. Going through Jigsaw she obtained her mother's name and located her in Victoria. Elsie wrote to her but her birth mother and her husband refused contact, as the rest of the family did not know about Elsie. They reasoned that they wanted to protect their three children, particularly the youngest who was nine years old at the time. Elsie respected their wishes and left it alone.

Elsie applied to the Western Australian Family and Children's Services to obtain her identifying information in 1994. It was then she discovered the identity of her birth father as his name was on the consent forms and birth registration. The Adoption Research and Counselling Service (ARCS) made the initial contact with her birth father in June 1995. Elsie initially wanted to exchange letters for the first few months in order to get to know him first, but within a day of receiving her first letter, he rang her at home claiming he could not write letters.

Not long after receiving the initial call, Elsie went to her birth father's home to meet him and stayed for a meal. Elsie described differences, "he's like right wing and hates the artsy-fartsy stuff and I'm this left wing academic", but also found similarities with her birth father, "there's expressions we both do, funny things at the same time, we've both got the same sense of humour". Her birth father has a son and daughter (both older) whom Elsie met in the December of 1995. She feels a bond with her birth sister,

When we are together we enjoy each others company and I think it's sort of good for her because she is also the family anomaly where she's an academic and she likes art and culture and travel, no-one else in the family does that and I'm the only other person that she's got that connection with.

Elsie tries to call her birth father once or twice a week and goes out to his place every couple of weeks. Elsie's working schedule is very busy and she sees him and his family as often as she can; however, as she states, "I don't give him anymore time than I give any of my parents".

Elsie subsequently learnt from her birth father that at the time of her conception, he was married with his two children. Her birth parents had been having a two year affair and sixteen months prior to adopting out Elsie, her birth mother and father had had another child together, "a full older natural sister". Her birth mother couldn't raise another child by herself so she adopted Elsie out. At the time of the interview, Elsie had no intentions of contacting her birth mother, but will contact her "full" birth sister in the future so "she can make the decision if she wants to meet us". Elsie subsequently did this and is planning on meeting her birth sister in 1998.

In constructing her family maps, Elsie used arcs and circles to distinguish closeness and distance between herself and particular family members. Those in her inner circle are the people she feels "very close to", and those positioned in the remaining arcs/circles are people "I'm still very close to but are removed in some way". Elsie based her selection of those to be included in her maps on:

either legal familial status, was I raised with them and if they're all of my adoptive family...did they marry into the family...biological connections ...or have they been like really close mentors...or people who have sort of adopted me in the sense of you know they're not my children but you're the best friend of my child...and really create a very warm loving family type of environment.

Elsie's family map prior to contact (Fig 4A) is "what I have always considered to be my nuclear family". At this time in her life, her adoptive parents had divorced and her

adoptive mother had remarried. Those positioned in the inner circle are her adoptive mother and her husband, her adoptive father and her two adoptive grandmothers.

Elsie positioned her adoptive sister in the second arc as she did not feel close to her at this time in her life. Elsie also included her adoptive aunt in this area and although she had not met her at that point they communicated through cards and letters, and her aunt consistently sent presents at Easter and Christmas. Also positioned in this area were members of her adoptive father's family, most of whom she had not met.

Elsie included both of her birth parents in her family map prior to contact. She has thought about them throughout her life and as such, regarded them as a part of her family. Elsie explains:

My biological mother, I thought about her a lot, in fact I thought about her much more than I did these guys but I put her at a distance because these people I had a concept of and she, I never had a concept of so even though you know she's probably more like here, because I couldn't conceptualise her, I think that forms a very very big emotional distance...My biological father is, I didn't think about him anywhere near as much as my mother but I thought about him a lot and the potential brothers and sisters and everything else which is why I've got him there, the outer smiley face.

Positioning them in the outer arc, Elsie also included her birth mother and birth father's family. As depicted in these tokens, Elsie placed an asterisk on particular shapes to represent the inclusion of more than one member on a singular token. These will be referred to as multiple tokens.

Elsie included a total of forty-five people in her current family map (Fig 4B). She believes "that my concept of family is very fluid because of working with indigenous people". Amongst those included were her adoptive family, her birth family, aunts and

uncles, grandparents, cousins, nieces and nephews, respective partners of those included, parents of her friends and mentors (professors from overseas colleges).

The inner circle of Elsie's current family map consisted of her adoptive mother and her husband and his mother, her adoptive father, two grandmothers (one on adoptive father's side, the other on adoptive mother's side), her adoptive sister and her three children, her birth father and his partner, and her birth brother and sister. None of these members were reported by Elsie to be any closer than the other, but all represented a part of her life.

Elsie placed her two grandfathers and one grandmother in the next circle to reflect that they have passed away but still form a part of her family. Also positioned in this area of her map are what Elsie describes as "really close mentors...those professors who took me under their wing" and also the parents of friends she met whilst studying overseas. They formed an important support network at that time in her life and Elsie felt she "was really taken into families" and included in "family events like Thanksgiving".

Elsie's third circle included seven aunts and uncles from her adoptive side, three cousins (as well as two multiple tokens of five cousins and eleven cousins). Elsie explains the reasons for placing these members in this area of her family map:

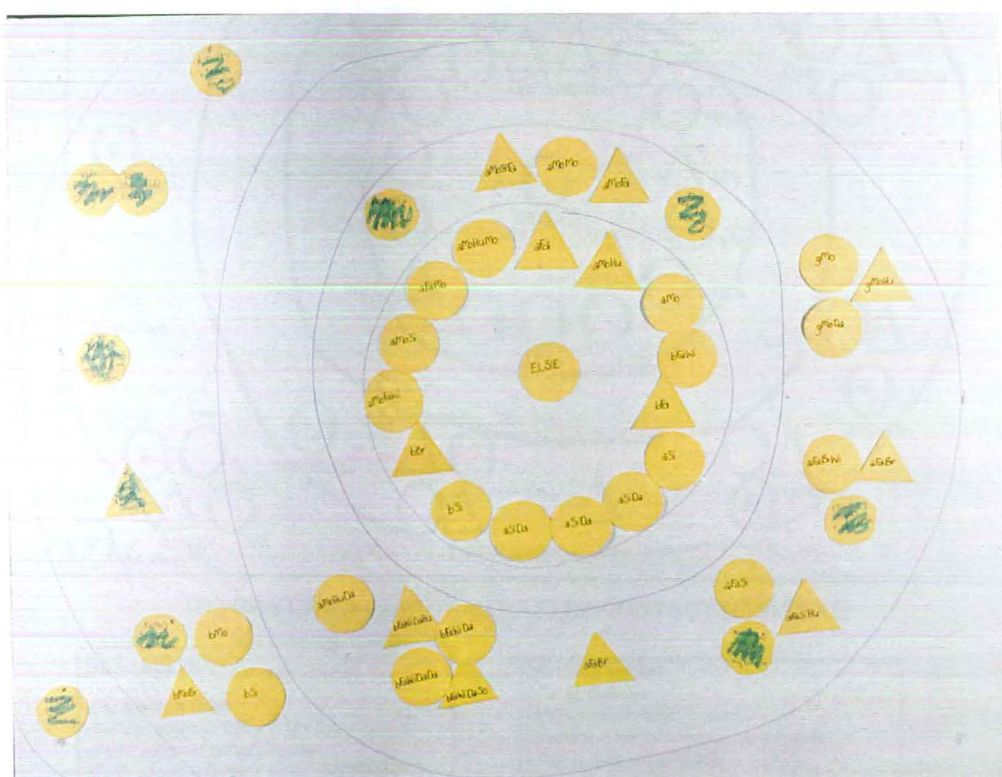
I've met them once or twice, they are my aunts and uncles that I feel that I've got some link with whereas dad's other brothers and sisters I've never met, and cousins and I just think they're just my cousins, my aunts and uncles. I've heard about them but I just don't, nothing happens here (indicating her heart) when I think of them.

Elsie feels the same about her adoptive mother's husband's daughter as she has not spent the time with her to develop a strong relationship. Her birth father's wife's daughter and her husband and two children are also placed here for similar reasons.

The fourth circle included her birth mother and her "full" birth sister, both of whom she had not met. If Elsie was to do another map now, her birth sister would be positioned closer as she has been in contact with her since the interview was conducted. Elsie also included five multiple tokens representing her adoptive mother's other family, her adoptive father's siblings and Elsie's cousins. Elsie's birth father's wife's other children and her grandchildren, her birth father's sister's family, and her birth mother's three other children are also included in this area. The fifth and final circle contained her birth mother's other family. These members are included due to the existence of a legal or biological relationship. They are positioned in this outer circle as Elsie does not feel a close emotional attachment to them.

Contact appeared to impact on Elsie's construction of family only in relation to the number of members included. Influenced by her professional work with Australian indigenous people, Elsie has an extremely fluid definition of family. The inclusion of particular members, although based primarily on a legal or biological relationship, was also based on the support and care she had received from various people in her life.

**(Fig 4A) ELSIE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**

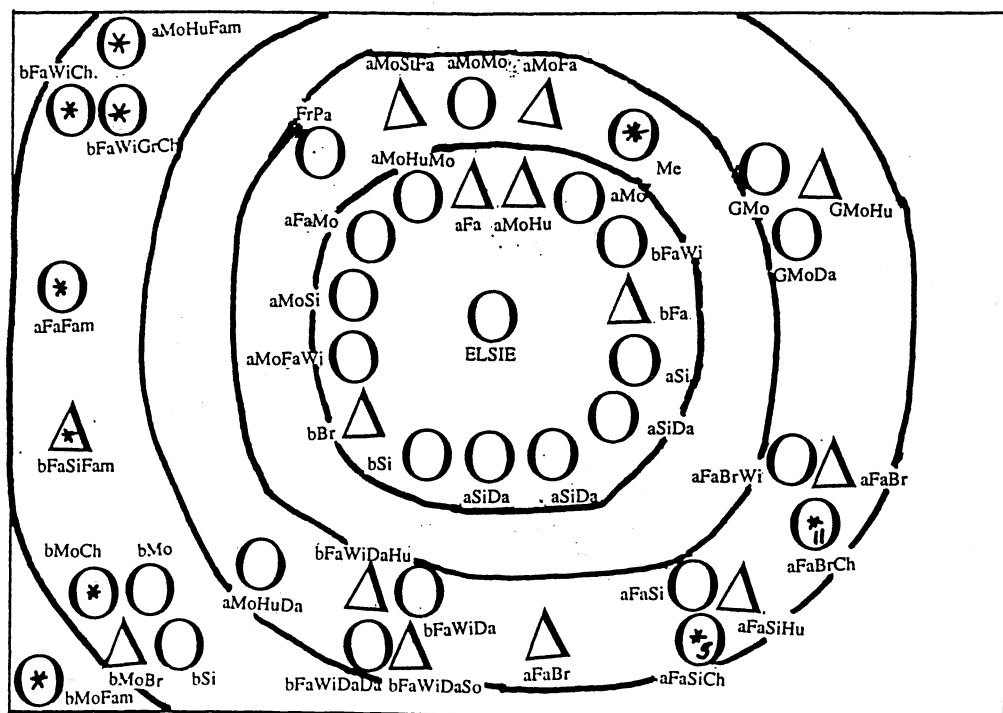


**(Fig 4B) ELSIE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



**KEY - FIG 4A**

aFa: adoptive father  
aFaMo: adoptive father's mother  
aMo: adoptive mother  
aMoMo: adoptive mother's mother  
aMoStFa: adoptive mother's step father  
aMoSi: adoptive mother's sister  
aFaFam: adoptive father's family  
aSi: adoptive sister  
bFa: birth father  
bFaFam: birth father's family  
bMo: birth mother  
bMoFam: birth mother's family



**(Fig 4B) ELSIE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**

**KEY - FIG 4B**

aFa: adoptive father  
aFaFaM: adoptive father's family  
aFaBr: adoptive father's brother  
aFaSi: adoptive father's sister  
aMo: adoptive mother  
aMoFa: adoptive mother's father  
aMoFaWi: adoptive mother's father's wife  
aMoHu: adoptive mother's husband  
aMoHuMo: adoptive mother's husband's mother  
aMoHuDa: adoptive mother's husband's daughter  
aMoHuFaM: adoptive mother's husband's family  
aMoMo: adoptive mother's mother  
aMoSi: adoptive mother's sister  
aMoSiFa: adoptive mother's step father  
aSi: adoptive sister  
aSiDa: adoptive sister's daughter

**bBr:** birth brother  
**bFa:** birth father  
**bFaFam:** birth father's family  
**bFaSiFam:** birth father's sister's family  
**bFaWi:** birth father's wife  
**bFaWiCh:** birth father's wife's children  
**bFaWiGrCh:** birth father's wife's grandchildren  
**bFaWiDa:** birth father's wife's daughter  
**bFaWiDaHu:** birth father's wife's daughter's husband  
**bFaWiDaDa:** birth father's wife's daughter's daughter  
**bFaWiDaSo:** birth father's wife's daughter's son  
**mMo:** birth mother  
**mMoBr:** birth mother's brother  
**mMoCh:** birth mother's children  
**mMoFam:** birth mother's family  
**mSi:** birth sister  
**Me:** mentors  
**FrPa:** friend's parents

## FAYE

Faye is thirty-two years old and lives with her partner of three years. Faye's adoptive family lives in Perth and she has an older brother who is the biological child of her adoptive parents. Faye has been in contact with her birth family for over three years.

Faye was adopted at two weeks of age in 1965 from the King Edward Memorial Hospital, Subiaco, Western Australia. She has always known she was adopted and recalls how it was explained to her;

That I was very special, that I was the twinkle in my dad's eye, my adoptive, and as I got older, I really can't remember when I was told the first time but I just remember that it was, you know how little kids ask lots and lots and lots, and I just always knew... I think it was a bit flowered up really. It wasn't focusing on my birth mother, it was focusing on why they wanted me, so, which made me feel really, really wanted and loved and special and all of that...which was later smashed...

At the age of fourteen, Faye was sexually harassed by her adoptive father and to a certain degree her brother. Although not in the extreme, Faye felt the experience affected her dramatically as she "no longer felt special, I no longer felt like the twinkle in my dad's eye, you know, I felt very detached, so that just sort of blew everything apart". Faye still feels detached from her adoptive family and "reconnected" with them after not communicating for a number of years prior to making contact with her birth mother.

Faye's family map prior to contact reflects the time in her life when she had cut off contact with her adoptive family and did not regard them to be a part of her family. (Fig



5A). The only members perceived by Faye to be a part of her family at this time were her ex-partner and two friends. They were placed at a distance to Faye to express the isolation she was feeling.

Faye was twenty-three when she attended the mandatory counselling and received her birth certificate and identifying information. She “sat on that” for about five years before undertaking the search for her birth mother, meeting her when she was twenty-nine. Three months after a mediator in Melbourne located her birth mother, Faye wrote to her and received a quick reply. While reading the letter Faye cried like she’s “never cried before”.

The first time they spoke was to arrange flight times for her visit to Melbourne in the middle of 1994. They had written letters and faxed notes but had not spoken. On her trip to Melbourne, Faye stayed with her birth mother and her two children (a son and daughter). Although she was sick for the most part of her stay, she was able to spend a lot of time with the family. Faye felt she held much in common with her birth sister, who is five years younger than she is.

Before going to Melbourne, Faye had been aware of older twin sisters and an older brother, all of whom had been adopted out. She has not met them but intends sending a letter to the twins, who have had contact with her birth mother, in the near future. Faye's older birth brother has not contacted her birth mother and at this stage, her birth mother has placed a veto preventing him from doing so in the future. Faye's birth mother feels her youngest son would not cope with his presence and Faye believes she has not been completely honest with her current husband about his existence. Faye and her birth sister are the only ones in the family that know about the “silent brother”.

Faye has not seen her birth family since her first trip in 1994 and from that time they have had only a few conversations. She feels angry towards her birth mother as she believes she does not make an effort to contact her. Although she does not think her birth mother owes her anything, Faye thinks she was irresponsible for adopting out four children and needs to take responsibility for it now. Her birth mother phones her on her birthday and at Christmas but has little contact in between. When they do speak however, Faye describes it as "pretty deep" and there is limited "surface" conversation between them. Faye does not know the identity of her birth father and does not feel any urgency to find out; she is happy to let it just happen.

Before making contact with her birth mother, Faye felt she needed to "sort out" the relationships she holds with her adoptive family. Faye explains:

I had to reconnect with my family before I could meet my birth mother, that was really important to me that I had this little unit. sort of, feeling okay and back together and I was feeling okay about it all. So I didn't really have any issues from my adopted family when I met my birth mother, so it wasn't really about them it was more for me, and I didn't want to go to my birth mother crying that look what you've done, you left me with this horrible family.

It is only now she is re-establishing contact and relationships with them. Faye feels that her adoptive mother judges her and expects her to conform to a more 'normal' lifestyle, one that emulates her adoptive brother who is married with two children. She feels closer to her adoptive father as she does not feel the same expectations are placed on her.

Faye does not hold a close relationship with her adoptive brother as she states "we just don't seem to communicate...I come from a different world, now I'm just, I'm just so different to my brother". This is reflected in Faye's current family map as she placed

her sister-in-law before her adoptive brother feeling she is able to talk to her more openly (Fig 5B).

Faye has established her own family, consisting of the people in her life she feels have provided unconditional support and nurturance, something she believes her adoptive family does not do. Faye feels friends accept her for who she is and do not judge her for where she is at in her life. The importance of friends is evident in her current family map (Fig 5B) . Positioned in a hierarchy, her partner is the closest member. The next 'level' consists of a barrier of friends, two of whom were closer and also appeared in her family map prior to contact (Fig 5A). These are followed closely by five other friends from whom Faye also receives support. Faye describes the relationship she holds with one of these friends in particular:

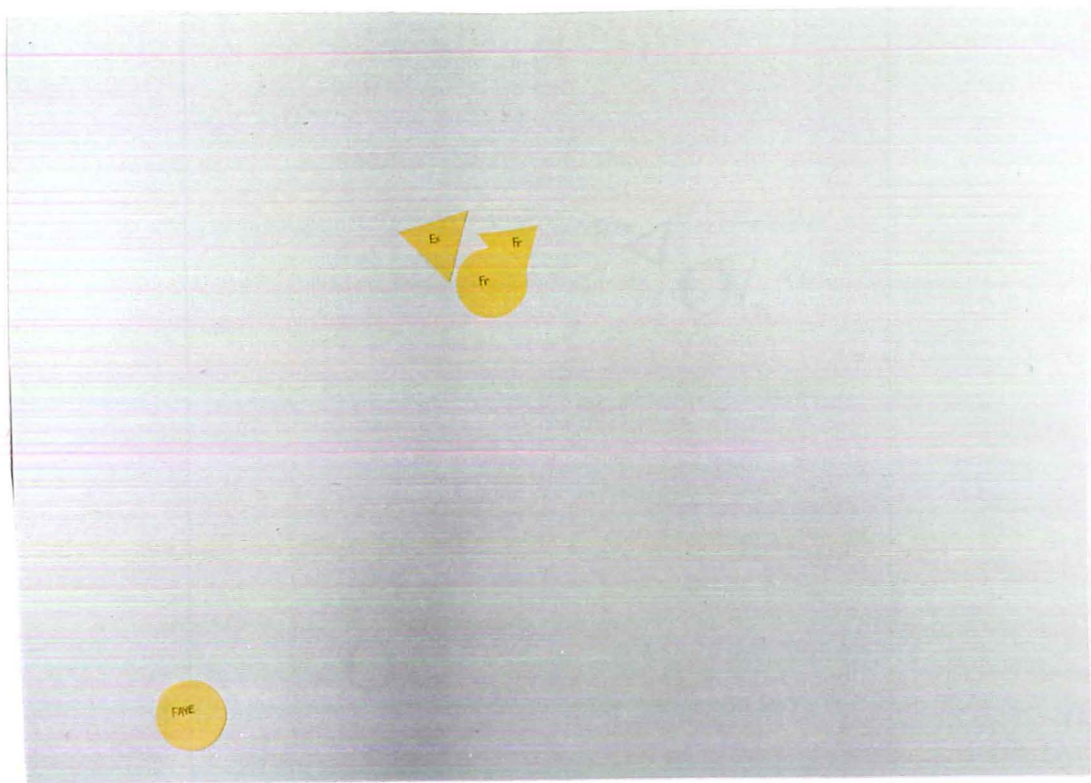
I'm her mum and she's had horrific mother troubles too so we just, we play all those roles for each other so we can be just friends, we can have fun, we can be the adviser, we can be the parent, we can be the child whatever, we just play all those roles, I just think it's a perfect friendship.

Faye placed her birth mother at a distance as she feels they have not established a trusting relationship. Faye believes her birth mother has not accepted responsibility for giving her up for adoption and does not communicate truthfully. The contact they have had seems to come from Faye's initiative rather than a two-way exchange. In the future she would like to move her closer, as she states:

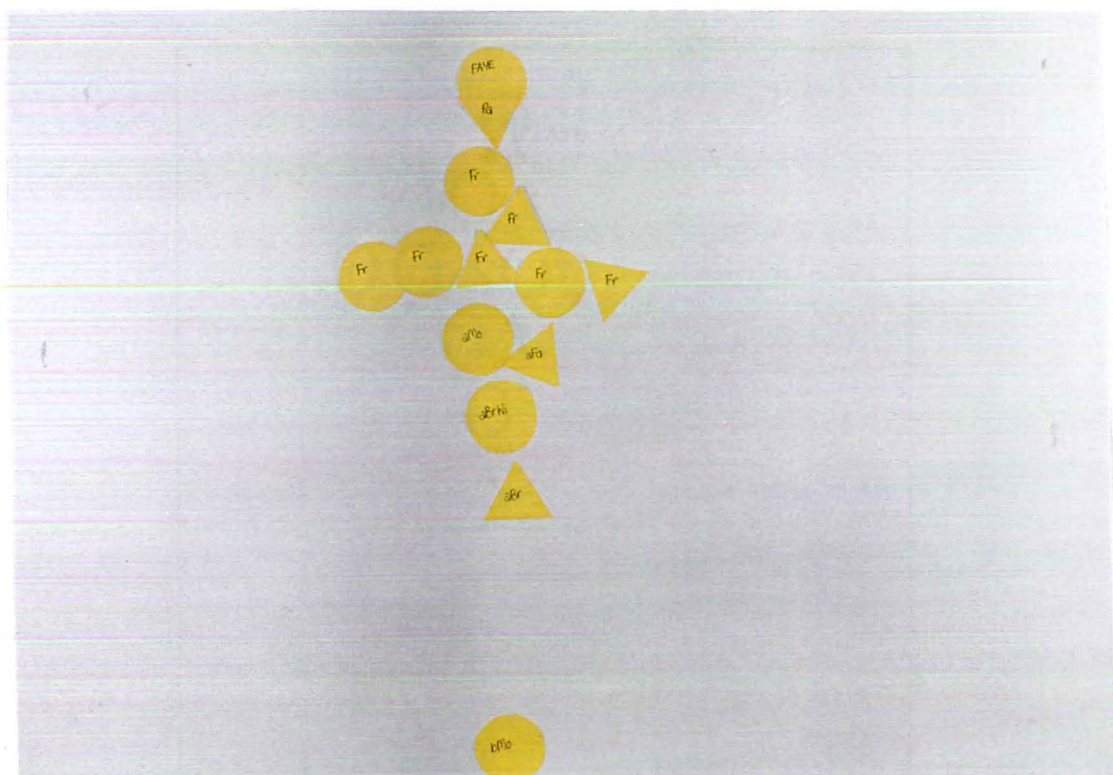
I guess I have to work out what I expect from her still, and I guess friendship's the way to go. But it's pretty hard to be a friend with someone that's not taking responsibility for having hurt you, you know, and I just think she's got to understand that it's fair for me to say that she has hurt me, that's the consequences of adoption. So I would like her to move, I'd like her to move up into this pile.

Faye does not include any of her birth siblings. Although she has met two of them and is aware of the other three, she does not feel their relationships have been sufficiently developed for them to be included in her family map.

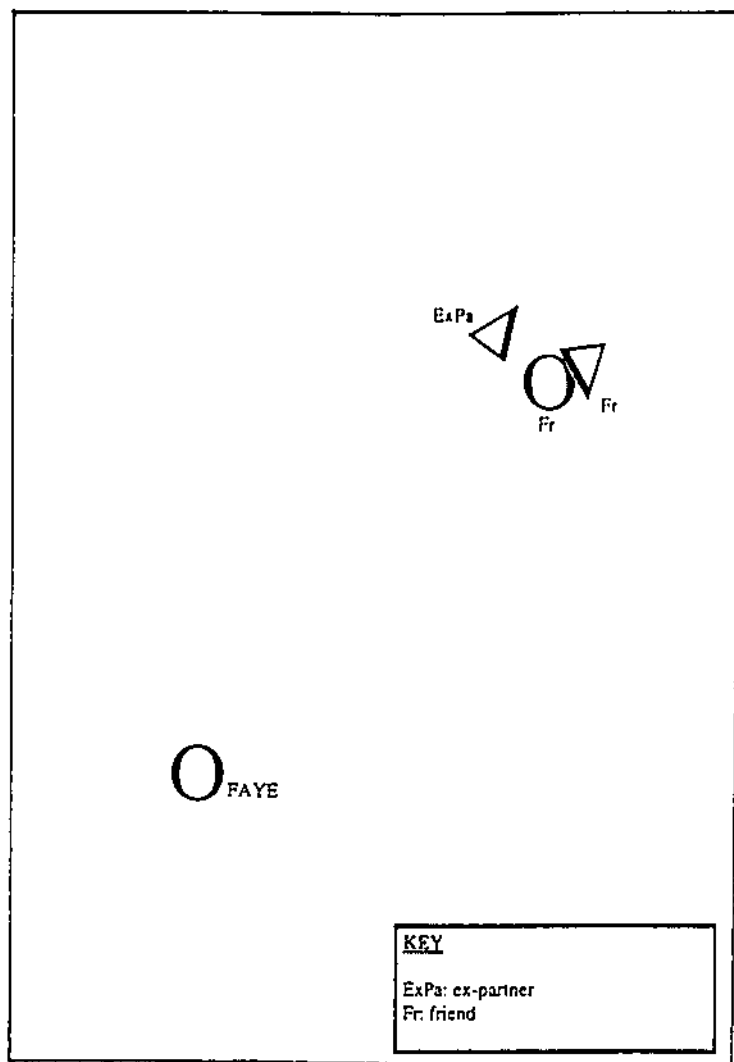
Contact for Faye has impacted on her construction of family as she now includes her birth mother. Her current family map reflects the changing dynamics of her family relationships. Making contact with her birth mother has made Faye reflect more on who she regards as family, and the effort she is making to reconcile differences she feels she has had with them.



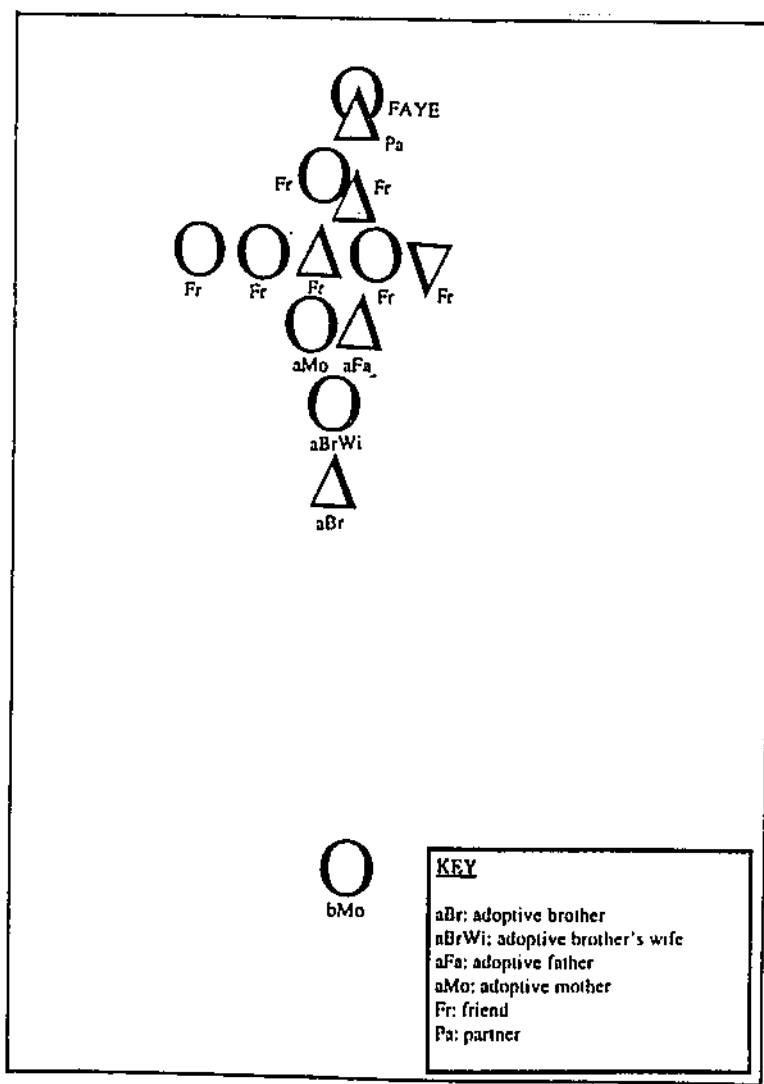
**(Fig 5A) FAYE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 5B) FAYE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 5A) FAYE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 5B) FAYE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)

## JENNY

Jenny is thirty years old and lives with her partner of three years. At the time of the interview she was undertaking study at Murdoch University, Western Australia, and working as a nurse. Her adoptive family live in Victoria and Jenny had been living in Perth for approximately three years. Jenny's birth parents live in Sydney, New South Wales and she had been in contact with them for approximately twelve months at the time of the interview.

Jenny was born at the Royal Women's hospital in Carlton, Victoria and adopted at three months of age from the Broadmeadows Baby Home. Jenny learnt of her adoption at the age of seven when the topic arose during an argument between her adoptive parents. In anger, she remembers her father saying to her "I'll send you back to where you came from". Her adoptive mother then attempted to explain the concept of adoption to her, and Jenny recalls her saying "I didn't have you, we couldn't have kids so, and we really wanted to so after a lot of thinking and planning and organising and rah rah, we arranged to find a child, you know to bring into our family and we chose you". Aside from this discussion, Jenny felt the subject was pushed:

...very much under the carpet. I felt like, how do I say it, bringing it up was sort of something I was really scared of. I was sort of scared, just the emotional intensity around it. Because it was something they were holding back on, obviously they didn't feel quite right about it so it's just the emotional energy associated with it.

Jenny has a brother two years older than her who is also adopted. Although she feels they have their differences, she stated that "if I had ever seen him in a hard time, getting a hard time from someone, I would have been bang straight there and likewise".

Jenny applied for and received her adoption papers when she was nineteen years old. She did not tell her adoptive parents what she was doing as "it really rocked them" when her adoptive brother had contacted his birth mother. Jenny felt she had "better hang back for awhile cause it's freaking them so much". She waited for almost ten years before reapplying for her adoption papers again, at which time she was able to obtain identifying information following the mandatory counselling. Jenny did this whilst on a trip to Melbourne and at this stage her adoptive family still did not know. Jenny recalls her reasoning:

I didn't tell my family then because I felt like somewhere they would throw some negativity or something on it and it was just...It was taking so much courage for me to do it any negative input for me would really, I just wasn't feeling quite strong enough to handle it.

Jigsaw, WA, conducted the search and made the initial contact with Jenny's birth mother. Jenny recalls how she felt after being informed that this had taken place, "I was just shaking and crying". The following day Jenny did not hesitate in complying with her birth mother's request to ring her directly as she felt "all this time has passed, there's no more time to waste". That afternoon in November, 1995, Jenny spoke to her birth mother on the phone.

Jenny's birth mother told her she had spoken to her birth father and said they were still close friends and saw each other quite regularly. He was anxious to talk to her and had considered trying to find her three years previously. A couple of hours after speaking to



her birth mother. Jenny returned from the beach to find a message on her answering machine from her birth father. According to Jenny she played it back "over and over...about fifteen times".

Jenny travelled to Sydney to meet her birth parents for the first time in May, 1996 and again in September of the same year. On the first occasion, she was met by both of her birth parents who "had their arms around each other and they were just beaming". She was overwhelmed by mixed emotions and felt "stripped bare, just completely, their attentions just focused, bang you know, I've never felt that kind of attention before". During her trip she stayed with her birth mother abandoning the booking she had made at a youth hostel as she states;

The hostel booking went out the window, [I] didn't worry about it, it was just instant, natural, why I don't need to stay in a hostel, this is, you know, the people I have been waiting to meet all my life, I want to stay with them.

Her birth mother has two sons aged seven and nine who are aware of the relationship Jenny holds with them. During the first visit they were not told because, according to Jenny, her birth mother felt "that being so young they would blurt it out to her parents" and at that time they were unaware of the contact from Jenny. Jenny's birth father has a daughter aged nineteen who Jenny met on her first visit to Sydney. Jenny describes holding a "natural affinity" with her birth sister and her two birth brothers. She felt that she shared much in common with her birth sister as she states;

We got along straight away, it was just instant like, sort of natural affection you know just natural, "how are you going?", just really genuine you know, big hug, it was really genuine.

Jenny speaks to her birth parents at least once or twice a week and letters have been sent regularly. According to Jenny her partner has developed "a kind of on the phone relationship" with them. Jenny speaks of an affinity she has with both of her birth parents, and describes life before meeting them as "like every breath was an adjustment...everything was just an adjustment to a level that wasn't me", and meeting her birth parents was "just like breathing out again".

Jenny told her adoptive family of her intention to contact and subsequent meeting with her birth parents at the same time she contacted Jigsaw to conduct the search. They have told her they are happy for her but she feels they have found it difficult to come to terms with, and refers to her birth parents as "that woman and that man". Jenny's only regret is that she did not do it sooner although she concedes it would not have been the right time.

Jenny's family map prior to contact represents her life seven years ago at a time when she was travelling around Australia (Fig 6A). Eleven people appear on her map including her adoptive parents who are placed at a distance. She felt they did not understand or support what she was doing in her life at the time. Communication was difficult and as Jenny states, "I suppose I didn't have much time for them then as I do now, that's for sure". She also places her adoptive brother at a distance and although she feels they would protect each other, she does not feel close to him as she states;

I would sort of put myself out for him and he would too like in the school yard or something like that or in a bunch of friends and someone was giving me a hard time or whatever, but we don't sort of get along and we're not really that close.

Positioned closely to her adoptive parents were Jenny's uncle and aunt. She describes them both as "pretty cool" and feels her relationship with her aunt has become closer as Jenny has got older because, "she always talks to me about it [her religious beliefs] out of everyone in the family and...she's only done that in the last few years, and now I consider her much more like family than what I did". Three friends of the family were included in her family map prior to contact because "they've always been around and they're sort of aunties and uncles without actually being so".

Jenny also included two friends in her family map prior to contact because of the time they have spent together and the travelling they have shared. Friendships are important to Jenny as is reflected in her current family map (Fig 6B).

I've always had an appreciation of the people around me and stuff and I always considered myself rich because of my friendships, you know like in that way very, very rich friendships.

Jenny's friends were placed closer than other members in her map and she describes them as, "two buddies of mine who have always been good friends, I consider them my closest, I consider them family, definitely".

A total of thirty-eight people were included in Jenny's current family map (Fig 6B). Jenny placed her partner closest to her, followed by her adoptive and birth parents. Although on the map the differentiation between her adoptive and birth parents was small, Jenny indicated she feels closer to her birth parents because she feels there is

just more affinity there, a natural affinity rather than this one which I appreciate more so that I ever have, and it's a deep appreciation, but this one is...there's a different kind of union sort of.

They are placed closer than her adoptive brother for Jenny feels she and her brother have little in common. Jenny feels she can talk to her sister-in-law more than to her adoptive brother but feels with both of them that;

we don't sort of share a close understanding or...we talk about you know the things that you can talk about to you know with anyone, apart from family things which are a little bit more personal but aside from that it's not a very, what's the word, personal sort of friendship relationship.

Also included in her current family map were friends of her adoptive family "who have always been close to the family and I consider them sort of family because they are very supportive, the family in Melbourne and I've grown up knowing them". They have been placed further away from Jenny, as she does not see them as frequently as when she was growing up.

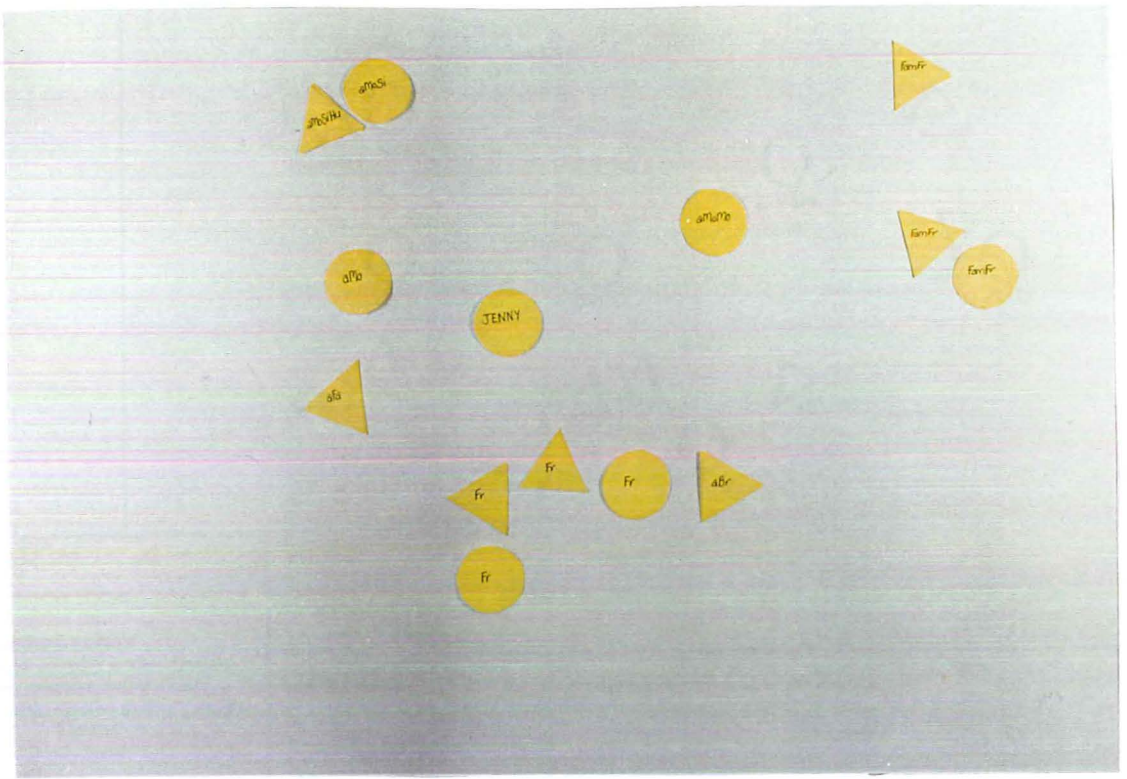
Jenny's aunts, uncles, and cousins were also placed further away from Jenny as she has little contact with them now and does not feel as close to them. The four cousins Jenny included stem from both her adoptive mother and father's side of the family. Although she has "lots of cousins in Melbourne...those four in particular I sort of get along with more so than the other ones who I don't have a great deal, you know, to do with". As Jenny has entered adult life and resided in Perth for the past three years, the contact she had with them has diminished.

Although her grandparents (her adoptive mother's parents) passed away in 1995, Jenny included them in her current family map as she feels,

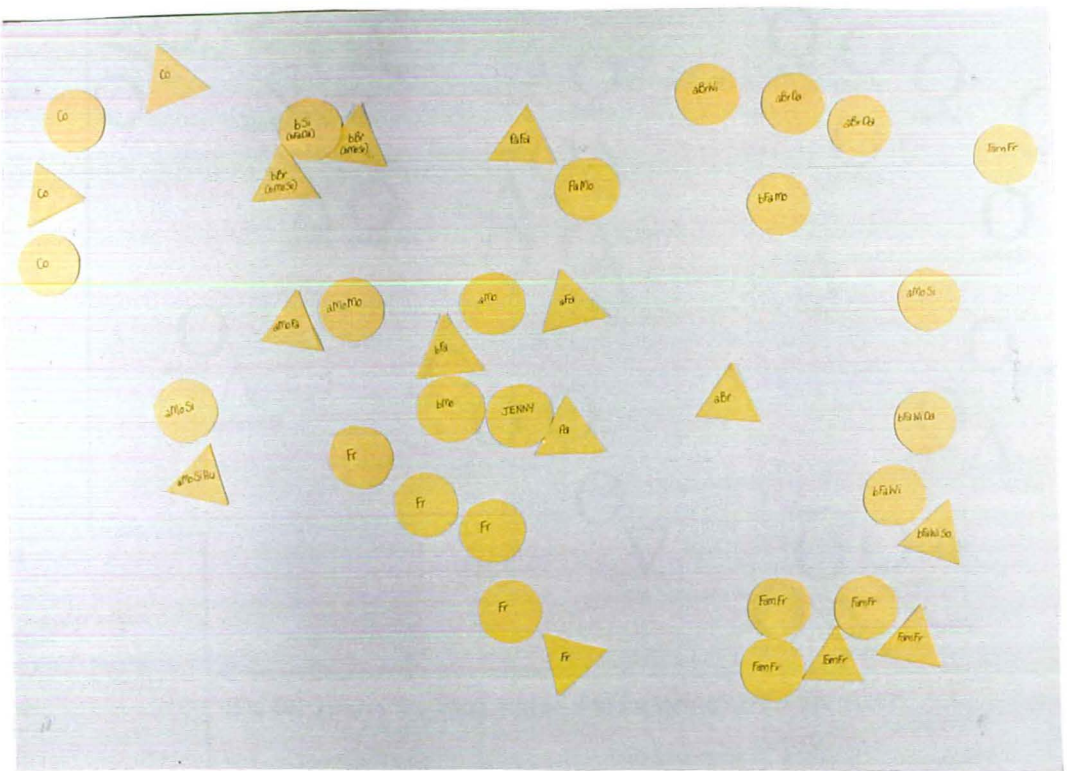
they were like really good older friends when I was growing up, they were really good fun to go over and see and stuff. I'd love their company and I still consider them family, big time.

Jenny also included her birth grandmother, her birth father's mother to whom she has written a few letters. Jenny feels she can identify closely with her and could "identify different things about (her birth father) and myself in her letter straight away so it was just instant". Jenny's birth siblings are positioned in a similar distance to her birth grandmother, and although she feels a connection with them, there has not been enough time yet to develop a close relationship with them.

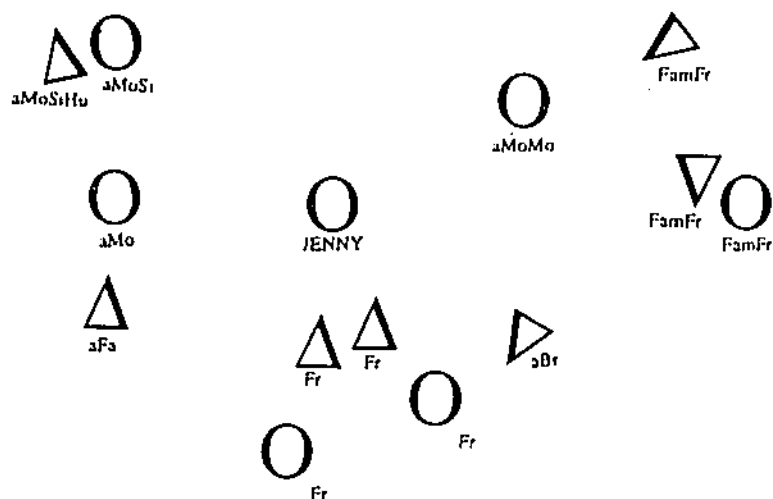
Contact for Jenny has extended her construction of family as new members have been added. As is evident in her current family map, her perception of family is fluid and the inclusion or exclusion of particular members is not dependent on the existence of a legal or biological relationship. Members are included because of the support Jenny feels they have given her.



**(Fig 6A) JENNY'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



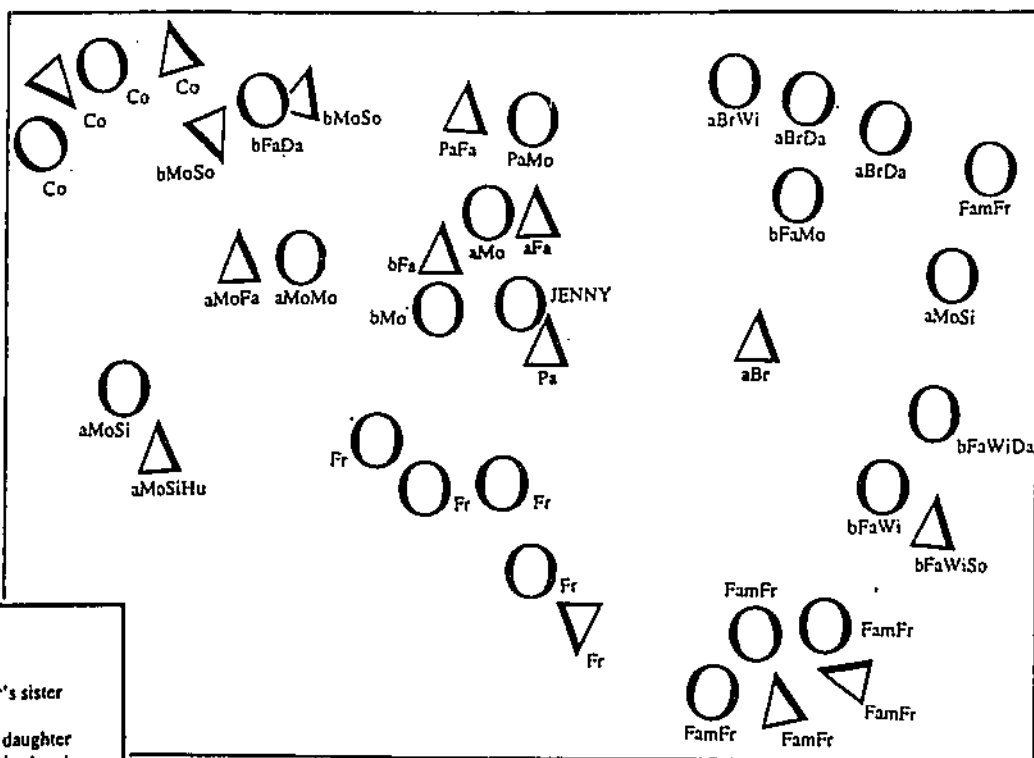
**(Fig 6B) JENNY'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



# **KEY- FIG 6A**

aBr: adoptive brother  
aFa: adoptive father  
aMo: adoptive mother  
aMoMo: adoptive mother's mother  
aMoSi: adoptive mother's sister  
aMoSiHu: adoptive mother's sister's husband  
FamFr: family friend  
Fr: friend

(Fig 6A) JENNY'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



# **KEY- FIG 6B**

aMo: adoptive mother  
aMoSi: adoptive mother's sister  
aSi: adoptive sister  
aSiDa: adoptive sister's daughter  
aSiHu: adoptive sister's husband  
bMo: birth mother  
bSi: birth sister  
Da: daughter  
Hu: husband  
StFa: step father  
StSi: step sister  
StSiHu: step sister's husband

(Fig 6B) JENNY'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)

## KATHY

Kathy is fifty-one years old and is married with three children. She has two sons aged fourteen and thirteen and a daughter eleven years old. Both of her adoptive parents are no longer alive, and she has a younger brother living in Canberra, who is the biological child of her adoptive parents. She has been in contact with her birth sister who lives in Queensland for approximately six months.

Kathy was ten days old when she was adopted in Brisbane, Queensland, in 1946. She remembers discovering she was adopted from the neighbourhood children who told her she was going to be sent back if she did not behave herself. Devastated, she ran home to her adoptive mother who confirmed that she was adopted, but also reassured her she would not be sent back. Adoption was not an issue in her life and although it was not spoken about very much, it was not something that was *not* spoken about.

Kathy began her search in April, 1996, and upon obtaining her identifying information, she discovered her birth mother was forty three at the time of her birth. As the age of her birth mother was much older than she expected, she moved quickly to locate her. The initial search of the electoral role and marriages failed and Kathy left it to Jigsaw, WA, to do some more investigating. Within a few days they rang Kathy to tell her that although her birth mother had died, her birth sister had been located. She is eight years older than Kathy and was a child her birth mother had to her first husband.

Kathy wrote to her birth sister in August 1996, sending photos as well as background on herself. Her birth sister replied to her letter, also including photos and background



information on herself and the family. Kathy then rang her and they spent the next couple of hours on the phone "chatting". Kathy found they had a lot in common and got along very easily.

As the contact had only recently been made at the time of the interview, Kathy had only exchanged one letter and a phone call. It is now her turn to return a letter and she intended to ring her the weekend following the interview. There are no other family members alive for Kathy to meet except for her birth sister's children and their children. Kathy intends meeting her birth family the next time they make a trip to Queensland and she can see their relationship getting stronger as they get to know each other more.

Kathy organised her family maps in a uniform fashion placing family members in lines or rows to indicate closeness and distance (Fig 7A & Fig 7B). Her family map prior to contact represents Kathy's life as a child growing up on a farm. The first line includes those closest to Kathy, her adoptive mother and father and her adoptive brother.

The second line contains her grandparents (on her adoptive mother's side) with whom she had a "wonderful" relationship as they lived very close to the family home in which she grew up. She also includes two uncles (on her adoptive mother's side) whom she was close to as a child. They would spend time with her and she has fond memories of them both.

Kathy placed her grandparents (on her adoptive father's side) on the third line. As they lived in a different town to her adoptive family, she did not spend the same amount of time with them as she did her other grandparents. However she had a good relationship with both of them.

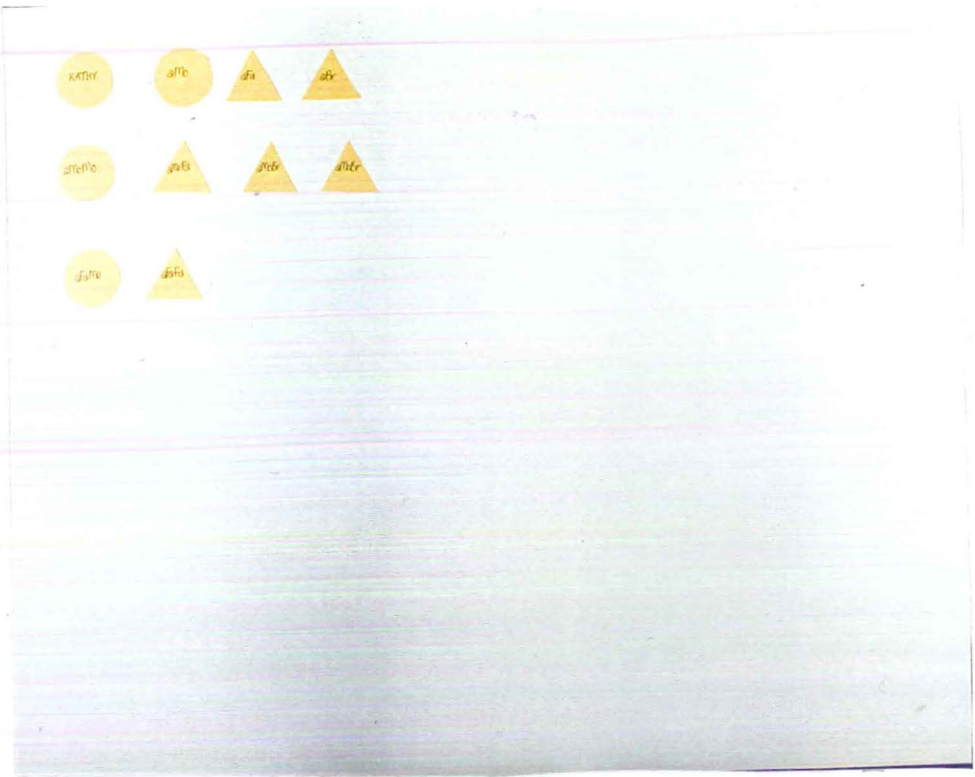
After establishing contact with her birth sister, Kathy's construction of her family extended to four lines. In her current family map Kathy placed her family of procreation, her husband, two sons and her daughter on the first line. She did not indicate any difference in closeness with members within this family, simply placing them according to age.

Kathy's adoptive brother, his wife and their two children are positioned on the second line. Once again closeness was not represented by the order in which they were placed, for Kathy indicated she talks more to her sister-in-law than her brother.

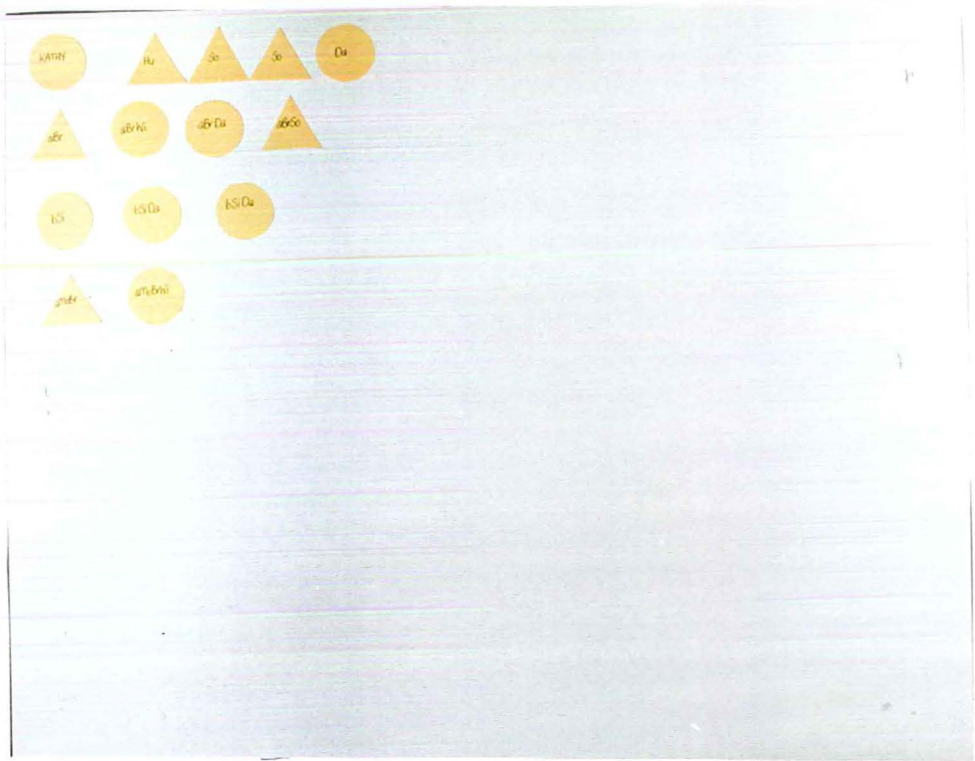
Kathy's birth sister and her two children were placed on the third line. As it had only been six weeks since first establishing contact, Kathy feels their relationship needs time to develop in order for her to place them closer. However, in the short time they have been in contact, Kathy feels very comfortable with her birth sister and she describes the first time they spoke:

I feel quite close to them, my sister and it's still been a very short time. The first time I rang her we just chatted, you know it's, she's so easy to talk to, we just chattered. I think that helped me feel that that's where you belong because there was no embarrassment, there's no, it's not like you are talking to someone you met at a party or something, you just chatted to people to be social, it was just, neither of us could get enough words in fast enough so that, you sort of felt, yeah, I fit right in here.

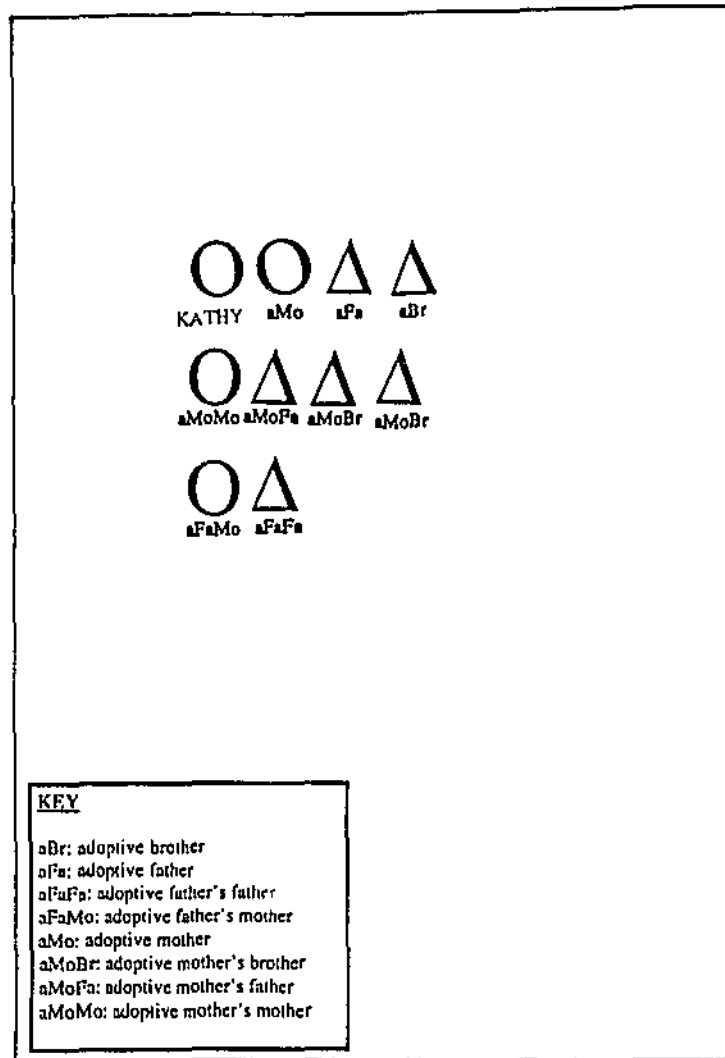
Kathy positioned her aunt and uncle on her adoptive side on the fourth line, both of whom she feels close to, and has throughout her life. Kathy does not have a lot of contact with them as they live on the Eastern coast of Australia. Kathy believes her aunt and uncle accept her and her family unconditionally and do not pass any judgments on the way they live. This is an issue she feels she has had with her husband's family.



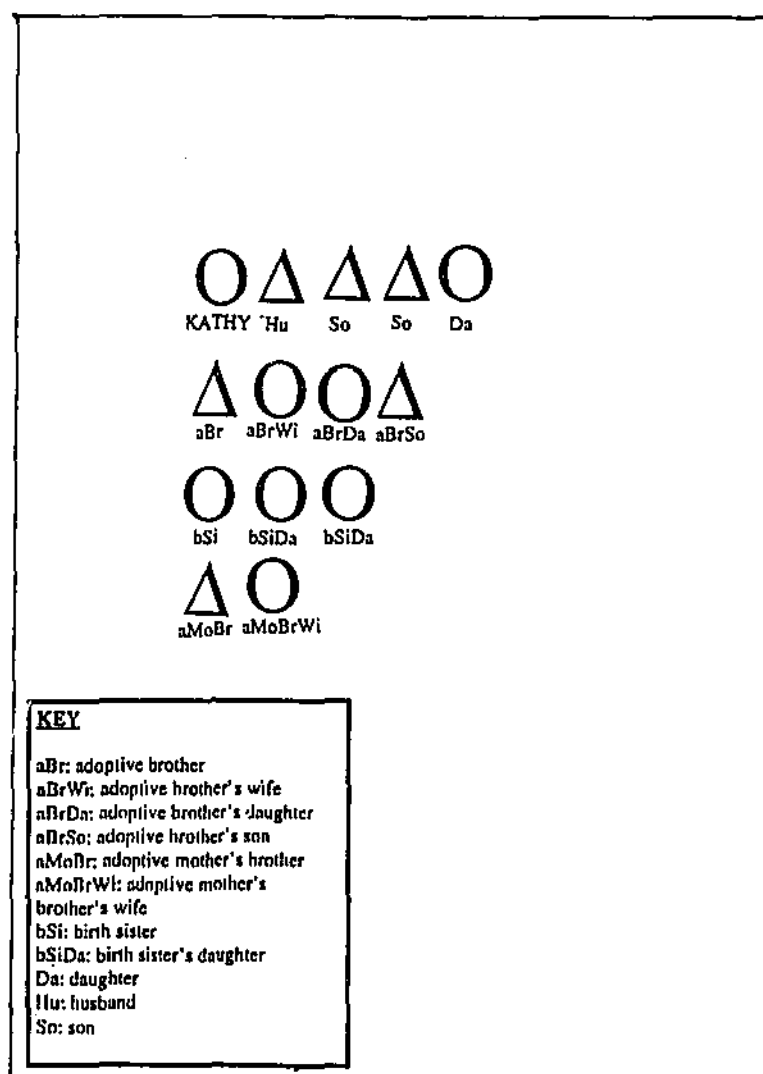
(Fig 7A) KATHY'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 7B) KATHY'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)



(Fig 7A) KATHY'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 7B) KATHY'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT(CURRENT)

## CHAPTER 5B MAPPING THE FAMILY

### DAVE

Dave is currently married with a step son aged fifteen and a daughter nine. Dave's adoptive mother and adoptive sister live in Victoria and he has very little contact with them. Dave established contact with his birth mother twelve weeks preceding the interview.

Dave was adopted in Scotland at the age of five weeks. His parents emigrated from Scotland when he was two, in order as he now understands, to protect him and his adoptive sister from "stirring" and "taunting" they may have received from other children because of their adoptive status. Adoption was not spoken about as he was growing up, and at the age of twelve Dave and his sister, aged ten at the time, discovered they were adopted before their parents told them. Dave describes the incident in detail:

I remember as if it were yesterday, my sister said to me 'something isn't right here, we don't belong, we don't fit in here' and I said yeah you're right, you know 'cause we were very close my sister and I 'cause we only had each other, and so we went home and went through mum and dad's wardrobe and found the adoption papers and about a year later we were told that we were adopted, and that was of no surprise to us at all.

Dave initially wrote to his adoptive mother in Victoria in 1995 to obtain any information she had pertaining to his adoption. Once she had sent the relevant information, she "wiped her hands of it (and)...didn't want anything to do with it". In the same year Dave then got in touch with an agency in Scotland to obtain his birth certificate, and upon receiving this information, he employed a genealogist in England

to search for his birth mother. Information was then sent from the genealogist about his birth mother and three possible contact numbers.

Dave began attending Jigsaw, WA, and they contacted his birth mother who then rang him at home. According to Dave, he knew it was her on the phone before answering it;

We were in bed asleep, the phone rang and my wife got up and answered it and I said that's my Mum and as soon as I got on the phone I said 'Hi Mum'. I was no drama with that at all, I said 'Hi Mum' and it was like I was talking to, my Mum.

Within twelve weeks there were many phone calls and letters, with his birth mother calling up to four times a week. It was at that time Dave's birth mother planned to come out to Australia in December 1996 for seven weeks. She subsequently came to Australia but the face-to-face contact did not go as well as Dave had expected. He found his birth mother to be very emotionally dependent and felt angry at her for not communicating honestly with him. His birth mother refused to reveal the identity of Dave's birth father to him and Dave feels she was "still blaming and dumping her guilt and shame" on to him.

Dave has four birth siblings who are unaware of his existence. His birth mother had five children, a daughter from her first marriage (who died at twenty-six from pneumonia), Dave whom she adopted out, another son whom she kept and who now lives in Perth, and two daughters from her second marriage. Dave feels she will tell them in her own time and is not concerned with developing a relationship with them at this stage.

Since making contact with his birth mother, Dave has attempted to communicate more with his adoptive mother. He felt compelled to do this as he was writing and communicating so much with his birth mother and had had very little contact with his adoptive mother. As a result he started writing to his adoptive mother in an attempt to "start...reaching out to her". Dave was reluctant to talk about his adoptive family. Having had a difficult childhood he did not mention his adoptive father, only to say "he was not a father".

Although Dave and his adoptive sister had been close as children, they drifted apart as they grew older, and have not shared any contact for a number of years. Dave feels now is the time to start trying to contact her again in order to share his experiences of being adopted, and to help her deal with any issues she may have that she does not recognise. For Dave, there appears to be a sense of reconnection with his adoptive family; he feels he has undergone so much healing relating to both contact and personal growth that he needs to reach out to them.

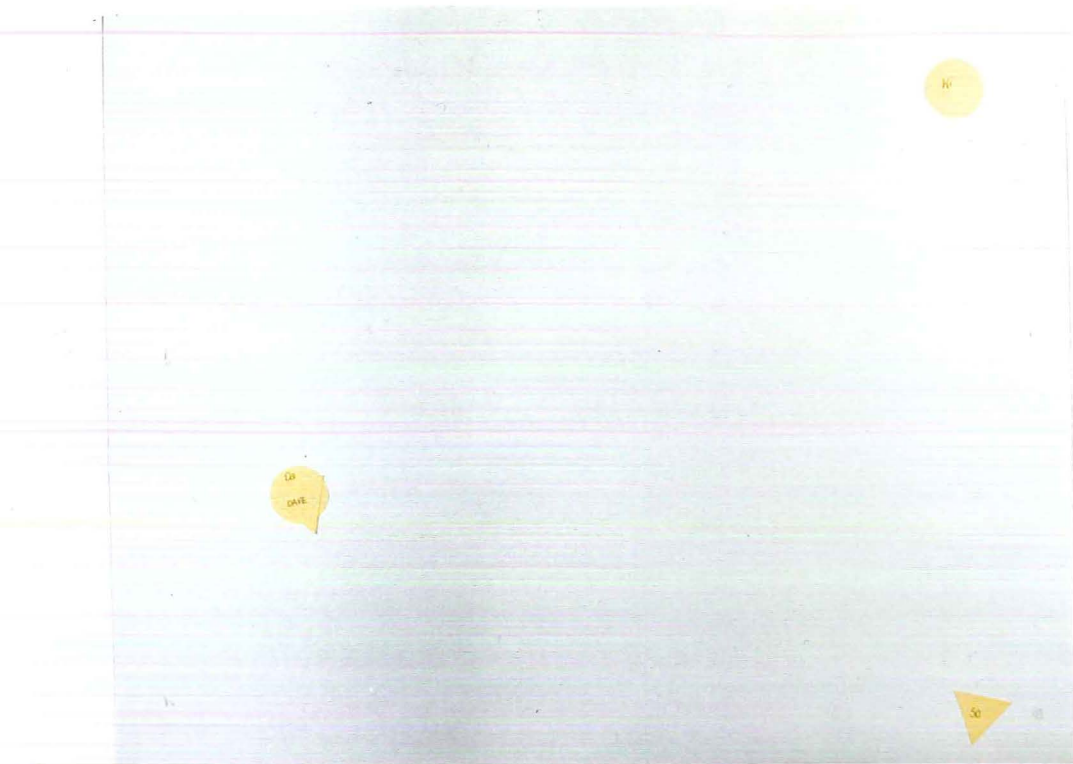
Dave has little reservation about who *his* family is, including only his family of procreation in both of his family maps (Fig 8A & Fig 8B). Dave's family map prior to contact depicts the period six months prior to his current family map. At this time in his life, Dave was attempting to overcome alcohol and drug problems. His daughter (nine years old) is placed closest to him as he sees her as providing unconditional love and refers to her as "his life". She is his "flesh and blood" and as such Dave views her as similar to himself. His wife is placed further away as she was also dealing with overcoming addictions and their relationship at that stage was not very close. His step-son is also placed at a distance as Dave felt he could not communicate effectively

with him. Dave feels at this time both his wife and step-son were placing demands on him as the *father and husband*. They were always looking to him for the answers without looking towards themselves.

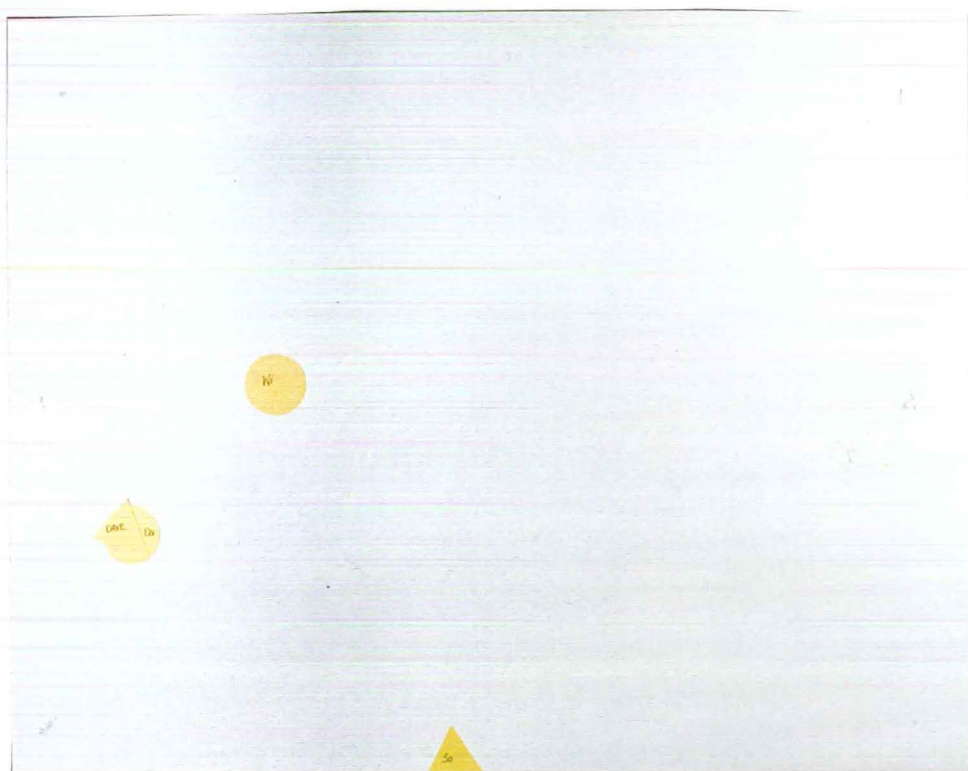
Six months later, after establishing contact with his birth mother, once again only his family of procreation are included (Fig 8B). His wife was placed closer as she has been a source of support, and although at a distance, it is a relationship they both have worked very hard at maintaining. Dave placed his step-son at quite a distance again as he is at an age of "rebellion" and is no longer at home. It has been a difficult relationship, according to Dave, as he has found it hard to 'father' a son who is not his biological child. Dave feels his step-son is dealing with the same issues Dave has had to in regards to not knowing his birth father. Dave sees many similarities to himself and his step-son and has found this difficult in guiding him in the right direction.

Although Dave has had contact with his birth mother he does not feel enough trust has developed in the relationship for him to include her in his family map. He is unsure where their relationship will go. Following her visit, Dave has backed away from her emotionally.

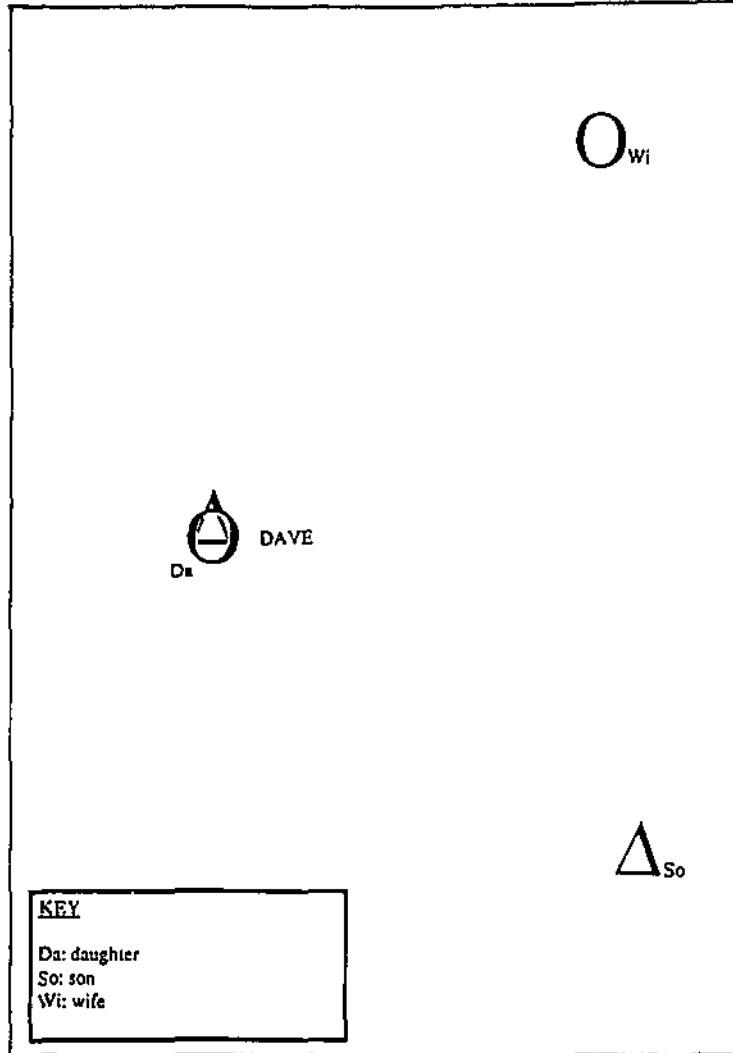




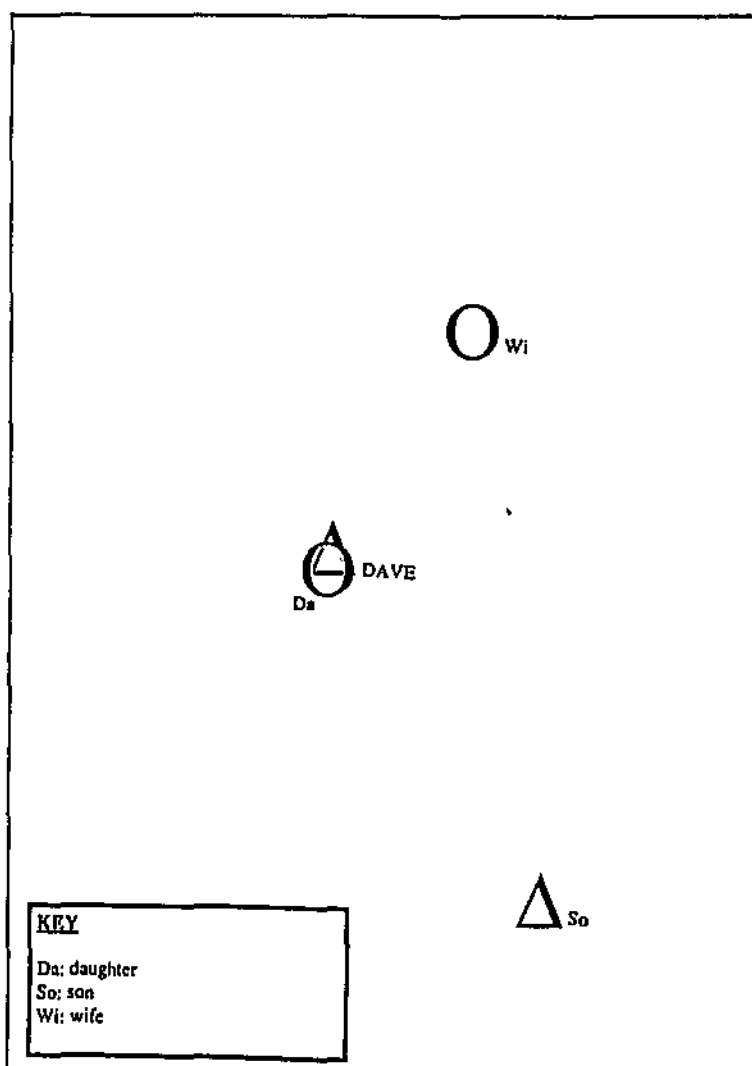
**(Fig 8A) DAVE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 8B) DAVE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 8A) DAVE'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 8B) DAVE'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)

## **MATTHEW**

Matthew is fifty-two years old and works as a consultant in the field of geology. He is currently married with two children, a son aged twenty-two who recently moved out, and a daughter aged twenty, still living at home. Matthew's adoptive mother and younger adoptive sister live in the United Kingdom as does his birth family .

Matthew was born in London in 1945 and adopted from South Wales at the age of thirteen months. His birth mother relinquished him when he was four months old. His adoptive mother has informed him that he spent the next nine months in a children's home, a home that was intended for older children rather than infants. Matthew has always known he was adopted and can not remember being told for the first time. To him it was not unusual as wartime babies were often adopted out.

Matthew started searching for his birth mother in 1982 using a genealogist in England. Matthew felt the genealogist was going down the "wrong track", and as this was quite costly, decided to do it himself in 1989. He went to the town he suspected would produce results and within two hours he discovered not only his birth mother's name and address, but also the fact she had died in 1984 two years after he had initiated the search. During this visit he also saw letters his birth mother had written to his adoptive mother which were held in his adoption file. Unfortunately he did not take these documents with him, as he was unaware he was entitled to, and now they cannot be located. This search did prove successful to a certain degree, for on the death certificate was the name of one of his birth brothers. After searching electoral rolls Matthew also discovered the name of his birth sister. The authorities advised him not

to contact the siblings but rather try and locate his birth mother's siblings first. The search for their names, however, was too difficult.

The first contact with Matthew's birth family was made by a friend of his family in Perth (WA) who was going to England on a holiday. She had been involved in social services for many years and had an understanding of the issues involved in adoption. For these reasons Matthew thought she may be ideal to make an approach to his birth family, which she did in 1993. Matthew's birth brother (the one who had appeared on the death certificate) was approached and shown documentation Matthew had sent, including a photo album of Matthew's family of procreation and childhood photos, a letter from each of the family members and a biography of himself.

After receiving confirmation from a family friend who had been aware of Matthew's birth and the circumstances surrounding the adoption, his birth brother proceeded to tell the rest of the family, which includes three other brothers and a sister. Matthew's birth brother wrote to him, as did the rest of the family and since then they have been exchanging letters and phone calls.

Matthew travelled with his wife and daughter to England in December 1995 to meet his birth family. Spending Christmas with his adoptive mother, her husband and his adopted sister, they met his birth family one by one over the New Year weekend.

Maintaining contact over thousand of miles can be difficult and according to Matthew they are "not good correspondents unfortunately, neither side". Letters are sent a couple of times a year and phone calls are made on certain occasions. Matthew's wife

is the letter writer in the family maintaining contact mainly with his birth brother's wife. They intend visiting them again the future, but due to the cost of such a trip will have to wait until a suitable opportunity.

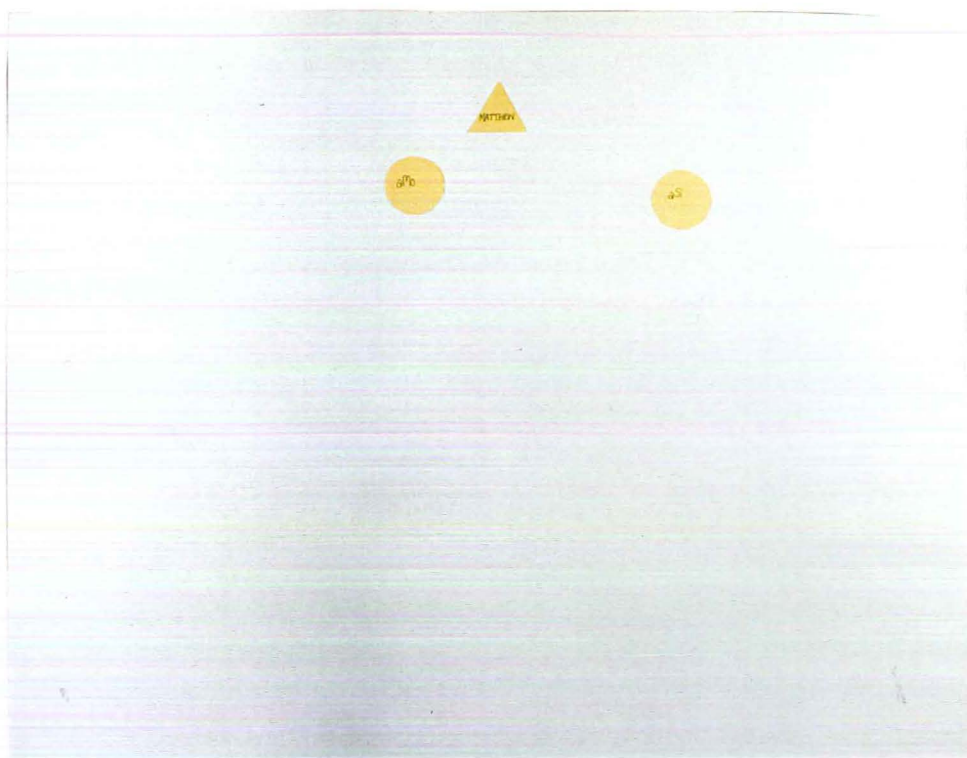
Matthew had a very precise definition of family including only those sharing a biological or legal relationship and located geographically close to him. Matthew's family map prior to contact (Fig 9A) is a reflection of when he was living in England over thirty years ago. His adoptive mother and adoptive sister, both of whom were living in the United Kingdom, were included based on residential rather than emotional factors. There is little difference between their position on the map. Matthew spoke very little of his adoptive father and was reluctant to talk about him at all. At no stage would he have included his father in any of his family maps.

Once again geographical location determined Matthew's current family map including only his wife, daughter and son (Fig 9B). According to Matthew each are equally close; and the only reason he places his son further away than his wife and daughter is because he no longer lives at home.

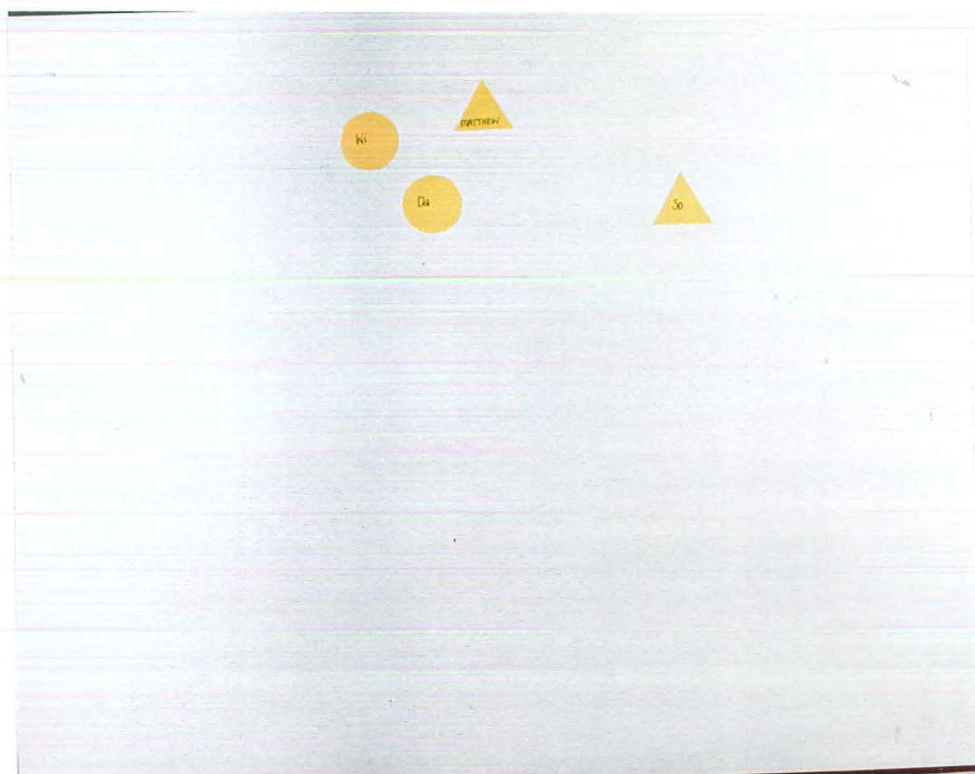
Matthew has had contact with his birth siblings for almost three years. When speaking about his siblings Matthew enthusiastically told me of the similarities in personalities, careers and other physical features. He also spoke of feeling part of the family and the immediate acceptance of him and his family of procreation into that family. As he states; "when we were there, we were just part of that family, there was no two ways about it, we were part of that family". The only reason they were not put on the map was due to the distance in miles rather than an emotional distance. The geographical

distance made the development of closer relationships difficult for Matthew as he was not able to see them on a regular basis and telephone contact was limited mainly due to cost. According to Matthew had I been interviewing him in the United Kingdom it would have "made a dramatic difference" and they would definitely be on the map. To him, *his family* was the one that was here in Australia, his family of procreation.

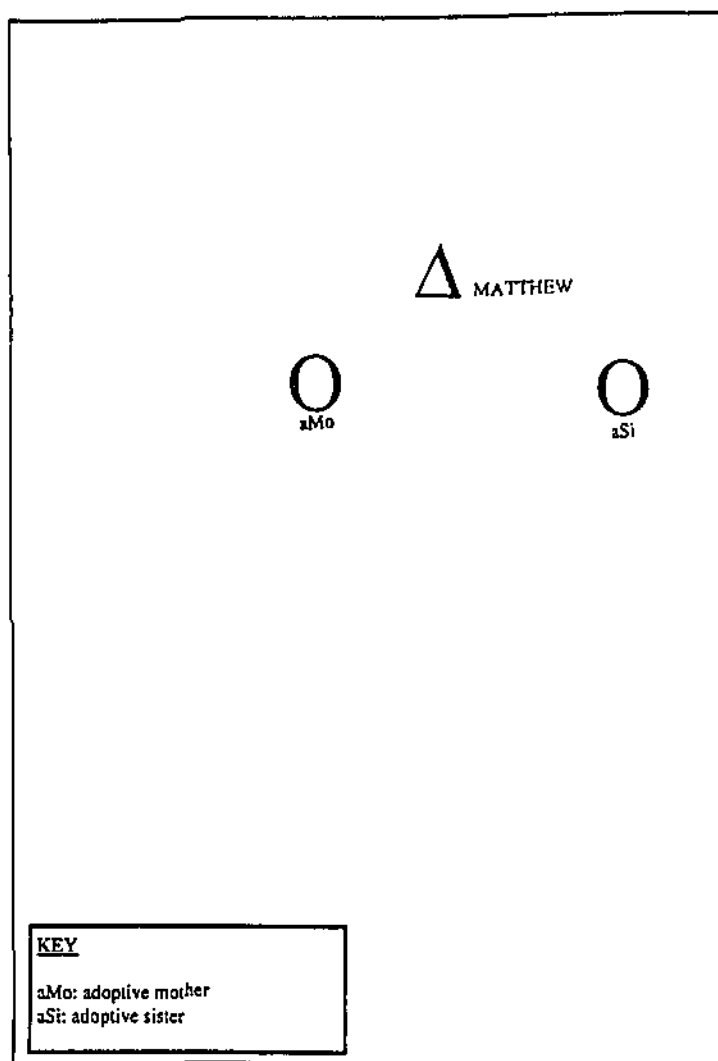
Matthew did not include his adoptive family on the map for more or less the same reasons. His adoptive sister may have been included (once again had he been living in the United Kingdom), yet his adoptive mother had died, so she would not have been included. Matthew indicated if he was being interviewed in England and included both his adoptive and birth family members, his birth siblings would have potentially been placed closer to him as he feels a stronger bond with them, because they share more in common.



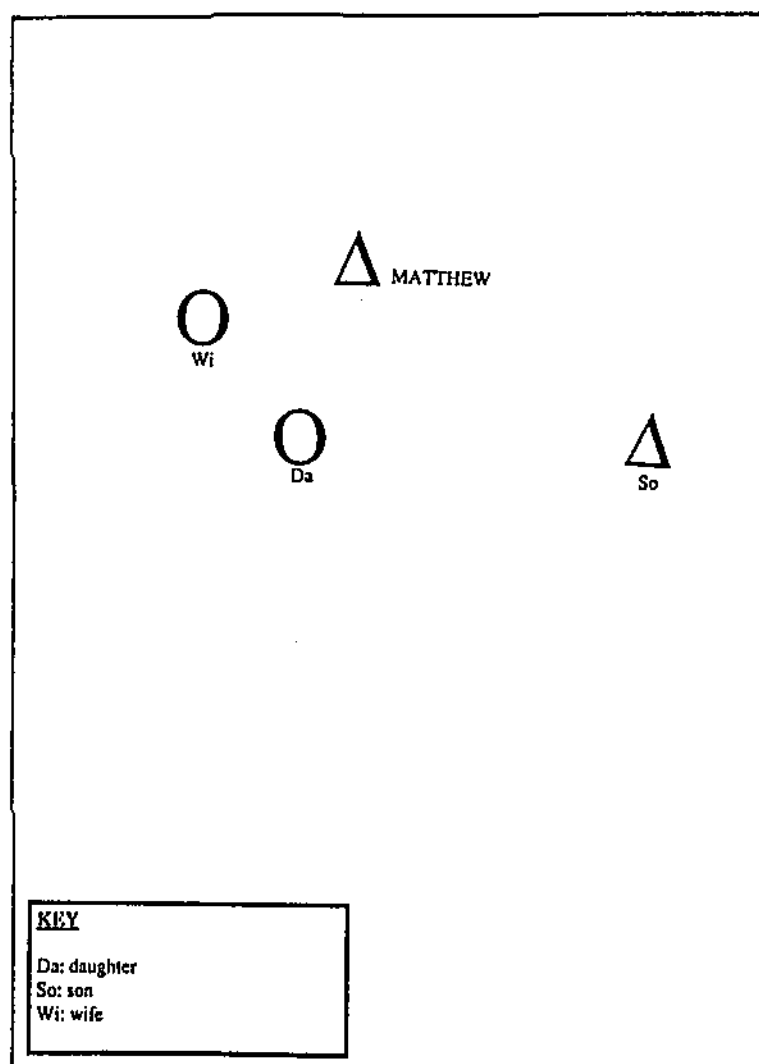
**(Fig 9A) MATTHEW'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 9B) MATTHEW'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 9A) MATTHEW'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 9B) MATTHEW'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)



## **HENRY**

Henry is fifty-three years old and works as a social worker. He is currently in a relationship but lives alone. Henry emigrated to Australia almost fifteen years ago and all of his relatives (adoptive and birth) live in the United Kingdom.

Henry does not have accurate details about his adoption as the records have been destroyed. He believes he was adopted at the age of two years in the United Kingdom in 1946. He has one younger brother who is the biological child of his adoptive parents. Adoption was explained to him at a very young age and he can remember being told he "was adopted and therefore that made (him)...special". Henry believes his birth mother was a friend of his adoptive mother, for at that time adoptions could be arranged informally. His suspicions stem from memories of a woman appearing in "the family scene of (his) adopted family" as he was growing up who was very interested in Henry's "progress". He has not, however, been able to confirm his suspicions.

Henry began his search at the age of thirty-four but found it difficult due to the lack of his papers. By luck, a colleague he was working with at the time looked at his birth certificate and noted the military number present. As Henry's colleague's father was the bursar for the Royal Marines, it only took a phone call to find out the information Henry had been searching six months for. It was the army who first made contact with Henry's birth father, informing him that his son was looking for him.

Henry was thirty-seven when he met his birth father in a small country town in England. They met in a pub halfway between where they both live. Henry made the arrangement so each party could opt out if it was too much. The meeting was "a moving experience" and they discussed the implications of Henry's birth father telling his son and two daughters, Henry's birth siblings. They were subsequently told of Henry's existence and accepted him as their brother. Henry has not searched for his birth mother (and believes he will not in the future) at the request of his birth father's wife, who felt it would threaten her relationship with Henry's birth father.

Henry has not told his adoptive family of the contact he has had with his birth family for the past fifteen years. He feels "it was too delicate a situation for (his) adopted mother to cope with; could be a sense of failure". He does not want to risk the impact it may have on his adoptive mother as she is now in her eighties and quite frail.

When he was living in the United Kingdom he would see his birth family and adoptive family on a regular basis. Now that he is in Australia he tries to "share (himself) around between both families". Henry goes to the United Kingdom about every three to five years and if it was not so costly, he would go more often. Depending on the time of year, such as birthdays and Christmas, Henry experiences "very heavy phone bills". He will often write or send something of interest to one of his birth family members, as they do for him. If there is a crisis, the contact is more frequent. Generally a regular contact is maintained.

Prior to establishing contact with his birth family, Henry perceived his family to consist of his adoptive mother and adoptive brother (Fig 10A). His adoptive father

was not included, for according to Henry there was no "bonding" in their relationship for him to include him in either of his family maps. Henry does not talk about his adoptive father very much, as he feels they have never had a father-son relationship, and he holds little affection for him. This map represents a time in Henry's life when he was living in England twenty years ago.

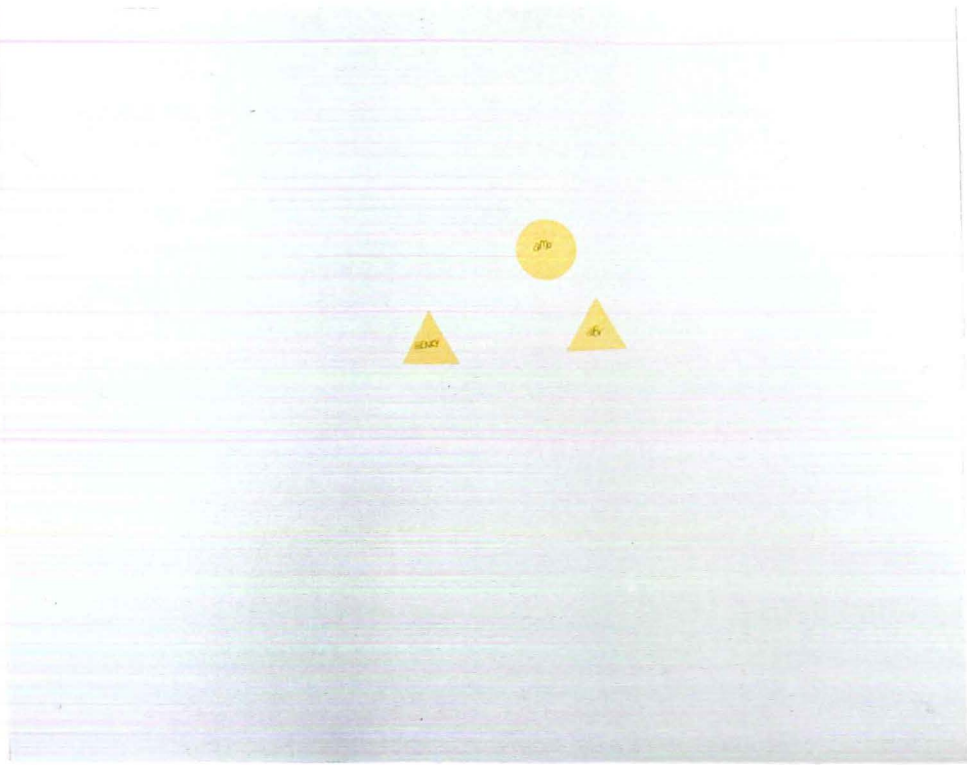
After making contact with his birth father and siblings, Henry's family was extended (Fig 10B). In his current family map Henry included both his adoptive and birth family, placing himself in the middle of the two. This is something he feels at times, as his adoptive family is unaware of the contact he has had with his birth family. There is no clear difference in regards to the space between Henry's adoptive family and his birth family on the map. He does indicate he feels a "greater affinity" towards his birth family.

Henry's adoptive brother is also unaware of the contact Henry has with his birth family. He views their relationship as reasonably good, sharing a bond based on the time spent together as they were growing up. However, Henry does not feel particularly close to him as he states "we're about as different as chalk and cheese" and only considers telling him about the contact after his adoptive mother is no longer alive.

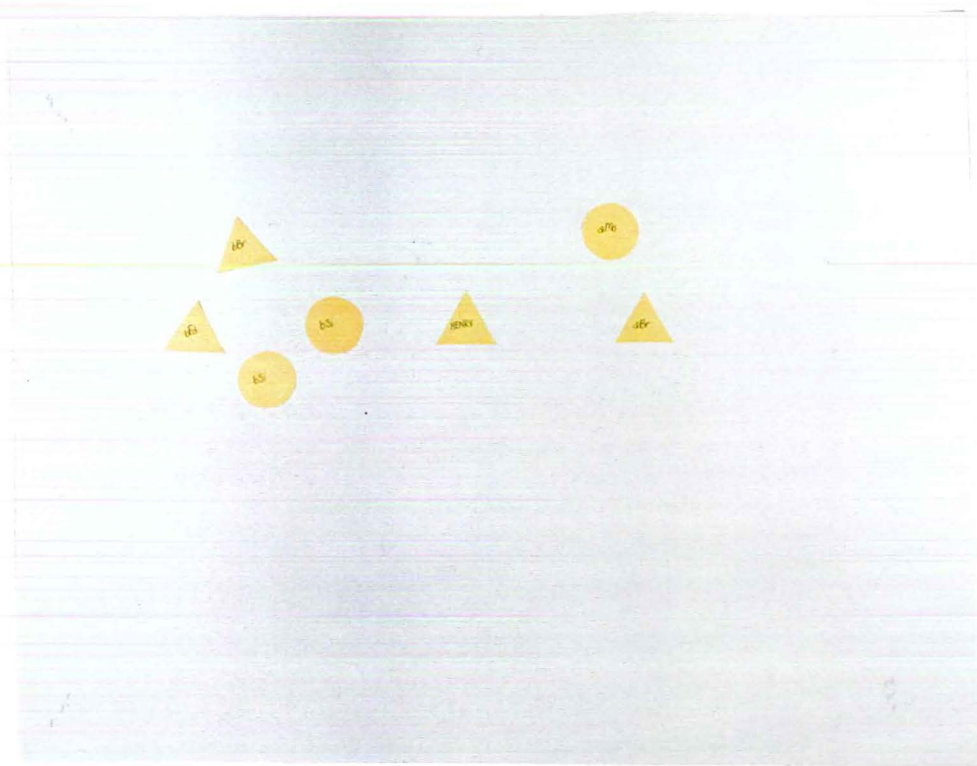
Henry feels closer to his two birth sisters than his birth father and birth brother. He comments, if the distance was to be measured there would "not be much in it". With the elder of the two Henry shares similar interests and career paths and feels he is able to communicate with her without needing to explain himself. Henry speaks of his

younger sister with affection, and enjoys her extroverted personality. Henry gets along with his birth brother but almost regrets not meeting him earlier in life as they could have had some "good fun" together. According to Henry he shares a lot of characteristics with his birth father, both physically and in personality.

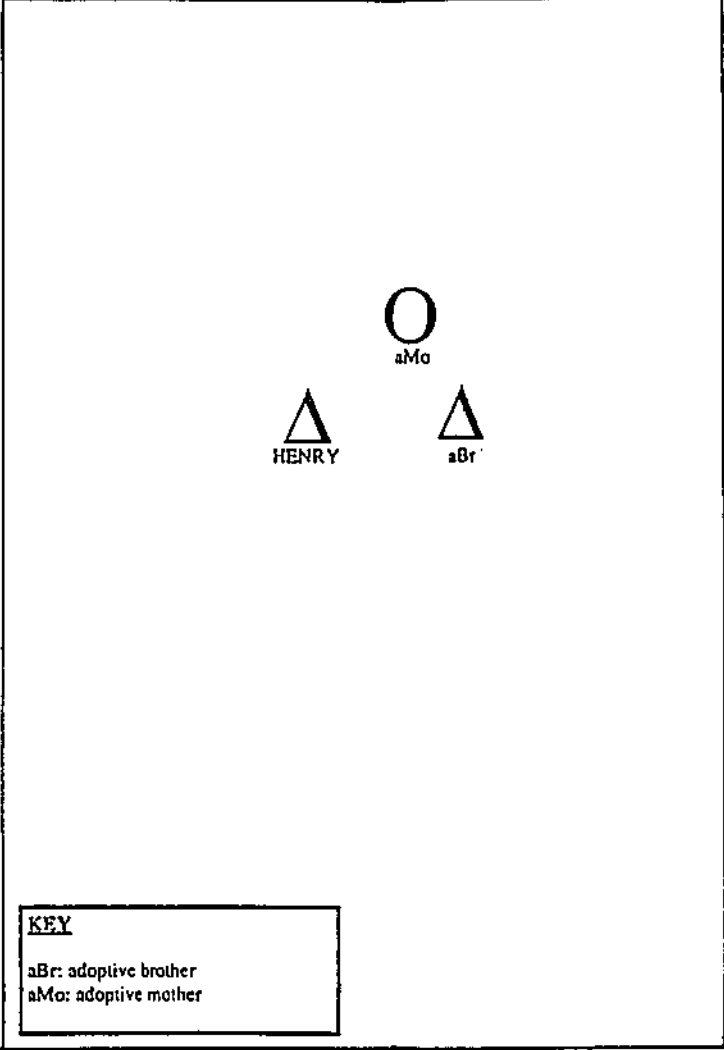
Henry feels he has to "cover" himself with his adoptive family, unable to tell the truth about where he is going when he is in the UK whilst visiting his birth family. He has to think before he speaks with his adoptive family to prevent hurting them in any way. Since the interviews were conducted, Henry's birth father died and he found it difficult to keep the pain of this loss to himself whilst on a trip to the United Kingdom. With his birth family, Henry feels he is able to communicate openly as they are aware of the situation. He does not want to take any "risks" with his adoptive family "that would disrupt harmony" while his adopted mother is still alive.



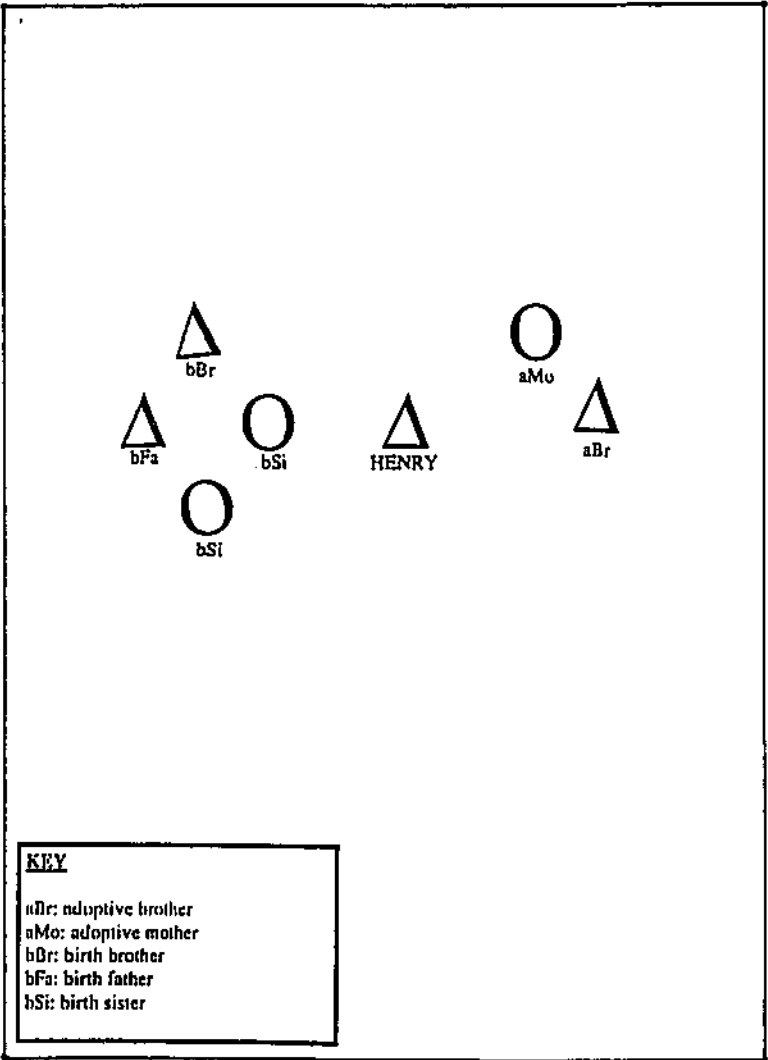
**(Fig 10A) HENRY'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 10B) HENRY'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 10A) HENRY'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



(Fig 10B) HENRY'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)

## ISABEL

Isabel is forty-five years old and works in the field of architecture. She grew up in South Africa and emigrated to Australia in 1978 with her husband at the age of twenty-five. They have one daughter, aged fourteen.

Isabel was born in 1952 in Cape Town, South Africa and adopted at two weeks of age. In her adoptive family, Isabel does not have any other siblings but refers to her cousin as her sister as she was cared for by Isabel's family from a very young age. Isabel describes their relationship as they were growing up:

There was an intense and bitter sibling rivalry from day one and I don't mean sibling rivalry like fighting over a tricycle. This was like a fight to the death because both of us had this need for total acceptance because both of us had experienced the same rejection. Hers probably more intense than mine and both of us wanted that total unanimous love, unconditional love and acceptance and we were, and it was sort of like almost at the expense of the other.

At the age of eight her cousin was sent to boarding school to contain her behavioural problems and from the age of three, Isabel was "brought up almost like an only child" and "hardly aware of" her cousin as she was only home during the school holidays.

Isabel remembers discovering at a young age that she was adopted from a girl a few years older than her living next door. Isabel recalls the incident:

One day I went over and I wanted to play the piano and I remember that Melissa saying "no you can't"...and I didn't know, she said "you can't play the piano, you're not allowed to play, you're adopted"...I said, "well that makes me different, it makes me special" and I ran home and said 'mum, what's adopted?

In order to explain the concept of adoption Isabel remembers her adoptive mother taking her to a store and told her to pick out any doll that she wanted. Isabel selected the desired doll and her mother told her that is what she had done when she was picking out Isabel, "I couldn't have a baby so I went to a place and I chose you". Isabel did not question her adoptive mother much further at that stage:

That whole complexity didn't arise at that point and didn't arise for a long period because what sort of seemed to subsume all of that was in actual fact the fact that I was chosen and everything that my mother did reinforced that. Her love was totally one hundred percent unconditional, it didn't matter what I did. The issue of adoption only came up when I brought it up and it was always the same, you were chosen you were special.

Isabel has known her birth mother's name since her late teenage years. Her adoptive mother's friend was the social worker who had counselled her birth mother at the time of her adoption. Isabel first became interested in searching for her birth mother in her late teens and early twenties. After the birth of her own daughter, Isabel's interest increased. She believes she "went through that incredible depression after the birth of Sally because I was actually reliving the trauma that Lyn had experienced prior to having given me up".

When her daughter reached the age of two, her adoptive mother encouraged Isabel to find out about her genetic background. Isabel expressed interest but was concerned about hurting her. Her adoptive mother assured her she felt it was important for Isabel to search and offered to assist her in any way she could, particularly as she was living in South Africa and Isabel was not. Isabel agreed and her adoptive mother attempted to obtain information through various government departments, but was unsuccessful.



Feeling "disheartened", she left it for twelve years until the beginning of 1996 when her adoptive mother rang her and suggested they use a private organisation in Cape Town called Adoptrace to conduct the search. In the first week of June her adoptive mother rang again to tell her they had found her birth mother (Lyn). Her birth mother had told her adoptive mother that she and her daughter had intentions of coming to Cape Town for a holiday in September of that year. As Isabel was returning to South Africa for Christmas, her adoptive mother thought it would be a good opportunity for Isabel to meet them. Isabel considered her options and felt "the idea of meeting my birth mother with my husband and my daughter in tow appalled me", so she decided to fly over early and meet her birth mother and sister in September.

Initially Isabel's husband "was absolutely adamantly against it...and... was very unsupportive and actually quite nasty about some of it and refused to have anything to do with it". Upon returning and reassuring her husband that her adoptive mother was fine, he has been more supportive. Her daughter was very supportive but as she was only thirteen she could not provide the support Isabel needed before leaving to meet them. Isabel went to Jigsaw to gain support and advice on how to approach the "reunion".

Prior to meeting her birth mother and sister, Isabel had sent them a cassette of her thoughts, rather than a letter. She feels she is not a good letter writer and that cassettes convey much more personal detail. Isabel has been using this style of communication with her adoptive mother for over eighteen years and feels it has been successful in maintaining their relationship in an intimate way.

Isabel flew to South Africa in September 1996 and spent five days with her birth mother and "full blood sister". Her birth father had married her birth mother seven years after she was born and had died the Christmas of 1995. Isabel has always been spoken about in her birth family. As she states "I've been a part of the family in this odd sort of way". She feels her relationship with her birth mother and birth sister will only get stronger as time progresses and regrets not living closer to them in order to see them more often.

In establishing who to include in her family, Isabel based her selection on marriage and birth links, listing them from "the people that were important all the way down". Isabel's map prior to contact (ten years ago) included her husband, daughter, adoptive mother and step father (Fig 11A). Her step uncle and step aunt are included as they constituted part of her family at this time in her life. They were placed reasonably close to her as was her cousin, her husband and daughter. Included in the 'outer region' were her adoptive uncle and aunt, her sister-in-law, her two step sisters and one of their husbands and her step brother. This map represents when Isabel was living in South Africa. Upon moving to Australia, she lost contact with some of these relatives as they are not important in her everyday life.

Isabel regarded her husband and daughter as *her* family and they were placed very close to her in the current family map (Fig 11B). Her adoptive mother and step-father, both of whom she spoke of very affectionately, were also placed close. Isabel overlapped these members to indicate the importance they hold in her life.

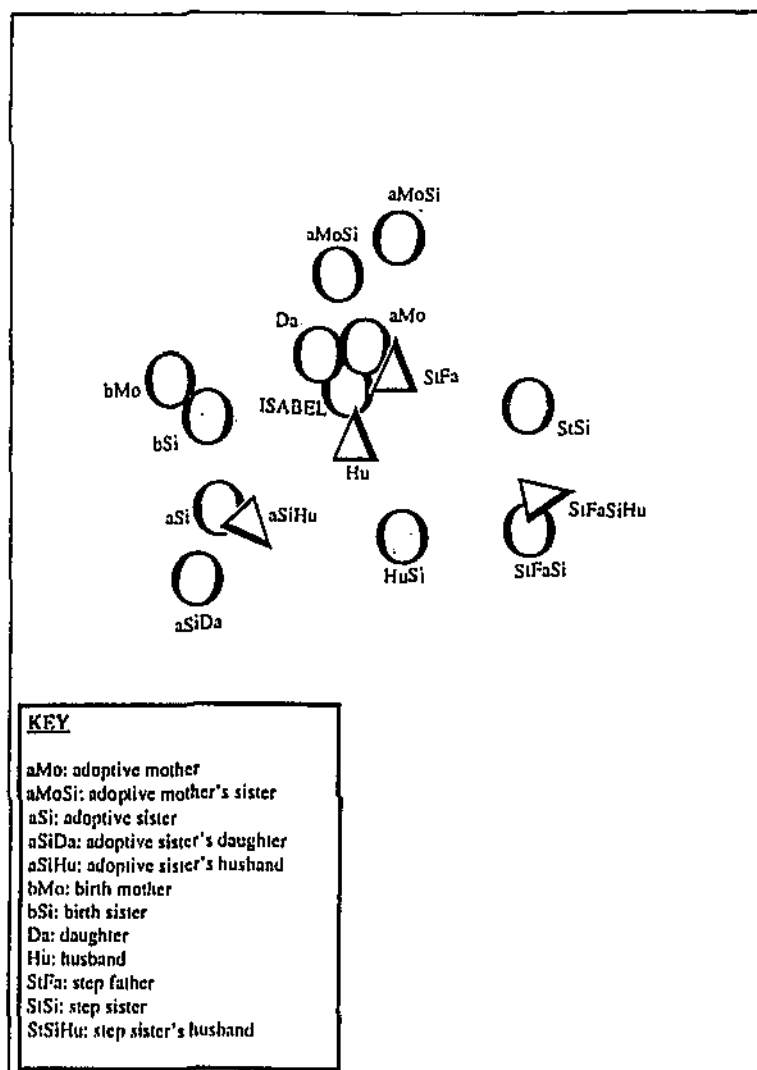
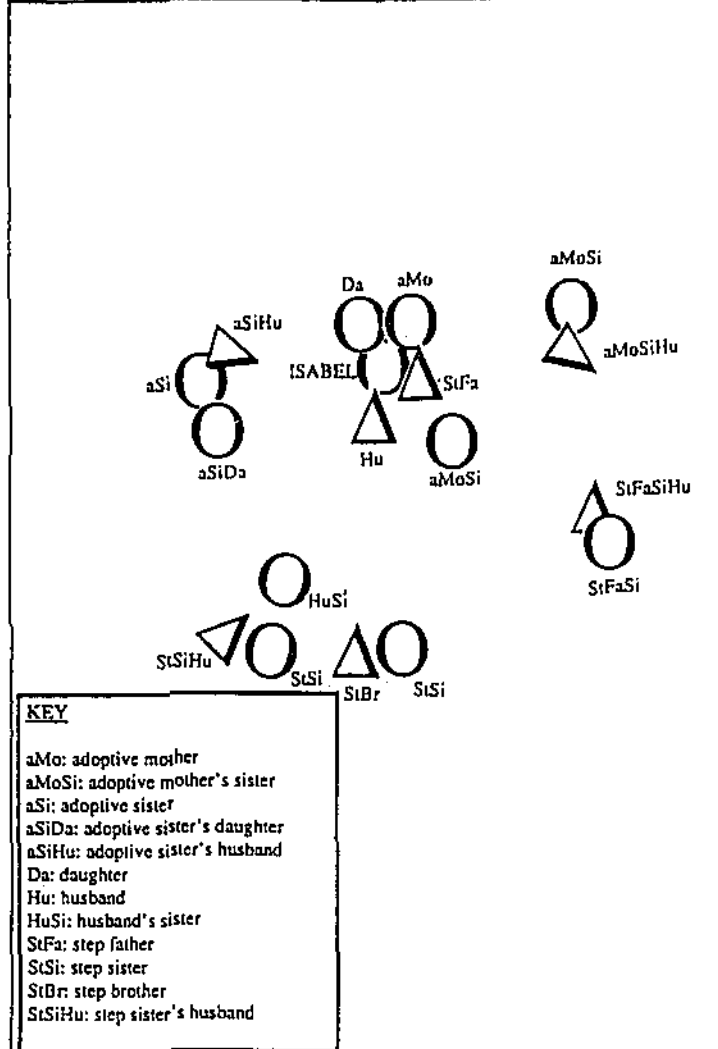
Isabel is not close to her cousin but has moved her in closer in comparison to the map prior to contact. Isabel puts this down to her own "perceived importance" of their relationship rather than an actual change. Isabel feels she needs to

...pursue that relationship because I believe that when my mother dies, Mary will be adrift and whilst it's all very well for me to say, "well that's okay because I've got another mother and I've got another sister", I think the realisation of what family actually means sometimes only comes when it's gone...When I go back this time I will endeavor to do something to re-establish a relationship with Mary but it's definitely going to be on my terms not on hers.

Isabel feels closer to her birth sister than her birth mother as she feels they have much in common and had "an immediate bonding and an immediate sense of understanding of each other". Isabel felt they were "quite direct and quite honest with each other and what transpired, [what] came out of that was a lot of comfortableness with each other, far more than I have found with Lyn" (her birth mother). Isabel placed her birth mother further away in her current family map as she felt "she was still totally wrapped up in the grief" and "while my reunion with her was very emotional, I was aware of the fact it seemed to be...she seemed so preoccupied with the loss of her husband" (Isabel's birth father). Her birth mother had become a "shadowy figure".

Isabel's two adoptive aunts (her adoptive mother's sisters) are included as both have given support to Isabel throughout her life. Isabel placed her step-sister, step-uncle and aunt in the 'outer region'. She holds affectionate ties with them but does not see them enough to place them closer. Isabel feels she has a good relationship with her sister-in-law and includes her in her family map as she sees her as a part of her family.





## LISA

Lisa is thirty-five years old and came to Australia when she was twenty-three. She is married with two children, a son aged three and a six month old daughter. Her adoptive family and birth family both live in the United Kingdom.

Lisa was adopted at six weeks of age in England in 1962. She has an adopted sister who is two and a half years younger than her. Lisa has always known she was adopted and did not have any concerns about her adoptive status as she was growing up.

She had mentioned to her adoptive family years prior to searching that she would be interested in doing so. When discussing it with her adoptive sister on one occasion, her sister felt her own birth mother had not wanted her and their adoptive parents did. Therefore as Lisa's sister indicated to her, she had no intention of searching for her own birth mother. Lisa kept her thoughts to herself as she did not want to argue with her sister nor upset her. It was the only conversation they have had about it.

Within a year of giving birth to her first son Lisa decided she would search for her birth mother. Before embarking on the search she felt she owed it to her adoptive parents to tell them of her intentions. She had previously had a discussion with them about it whilst on a trip to England and later wrote a letter to them explaining her motivations for searching, reassuring them that it would not effect the way she felt about them. Her adoptive parents told her that it was something they thought may happen as she got older and they had no problems with her doing it, their primary

concern being that Lisa did not get hurt. They also told her they did not want to be involved or know about it. Respecting their wishes, Lisa has not told them about the contact she has had with her birth family and her adoptive parents have not asked her since the initial discussion.

Lisa starting searching for her birth mother in 1994. After she received the information pertaining to her adoption she left it for about six months. She then employed a genealogist in England to search for her birth mother. Within nine months the name of Lisa's birth mother's brother was located, present on her birth mother's father's death certificate. With this information, Jigsaw (WA) then contacted him to see if he could tell them the whereabouts of Lisa's birth mother. After waiting another two weeks, Jigsaw, contacted Lisa's birth mother in March 1996.

On the advice of Jigsaw, Lisa wrote to her birth mother immediately. Four days after Lisa had sent the letter, her birth mother rang her and they spoke for forty-five minutes. Lisa's birth mother then rang her in the next couple of days and continued to ring her frequently in the early stages of their contact. She also sent many letters including photos and videos of Lisa's birth family. After a few weeks Lisa began to "panic" as she felt overwhelmed with the emotional intensity she felt from her birth mother. She was advised by Jigsaw that this would slow down with time and she should try and be patient with her mother. She did and it has.

The first time Lisa met her birth mother was in July 1996 when she flew to England to see her adoptive father who was extremely ill at the time. Originally her birth mother had planned to fly to Australia in the October of the same year but the sudden decline

of her adoptive father's health altered those plans. Lisa's birth mother and her husband met her at the airport as she flew in from Australia. As Lisa had to transfer planes, she only spent an hour at the airport with them. Lisa felt it "was quite natural, I felt like I knew them". This was due to the amount and quality of contact they had shared before meeting. Lisa then flew to the area her adoptive parents live before arranging to meet with her birth mother again. The second time they met, Lisa's birth mother and her husband came up to where Lisa was staying. Lisa told her adoptive parents she was going shopping for the day rather than telling them she was spending the day with her birth mother. After a few more weeks passed, Lisa went to London with her son to stay with her birth family for the weekend.

It was at this time Lisa met her two birth sisters who are both younger than she is. She got along with the youngest immediately and Lisa feels they share many things in common, both physically and in personalities. Lisa did not get along as well with her other birth sister and did not feel they had as much in common. Lisa believes her sister felt threatened by her presence as the "limelight was no longer placed on her" and she feels little affection or affinity with her. Contact according to Lisa "was all done very gradually, we had the hour, then the day, then the weekend".

Lisa does not know the identity of her birth father. Her birth mother told her he had forced himself on her when she was sixteen after walking her home from the local pub. Lisa's birth mother has told her not to feel bad about the circumstances surrounding her conception as it was not as bad as it may sound. She indicated to Lisa that if she wanted to find him then she could locate him for her or at least provide her with his name. Her birth mother also added that if she did contact him then it was



likely he would deny paternity. Initially Lisa did not want to know who he is because of the circumstances but now feels she does and will possibly attempt to contact him in the future. She reasons that, "he's still my father and it's still the other side of the coin that I don't know anything about".

Ongoing contact with her birth family has been constant for Lisa. Her birth mother's husband consistently rings her every Monday night at six o'clock, often contacting her more than her birth mother does. She has had some contact with her birth sisters, both have rung and sent letters. She writes and receives letters from her youngest birth sister and will probably see her in the near future in Australia for a holiday. Lisa's other birth sister does not keep the same contact and Lisa feels she rings more because of obligation than the need to talk to her. Contact for Lisa has not changed her sense of family in that she has always valued family ties. However, it has affected how many people she regards as family and now sees her birth family as an extension to her existing family.

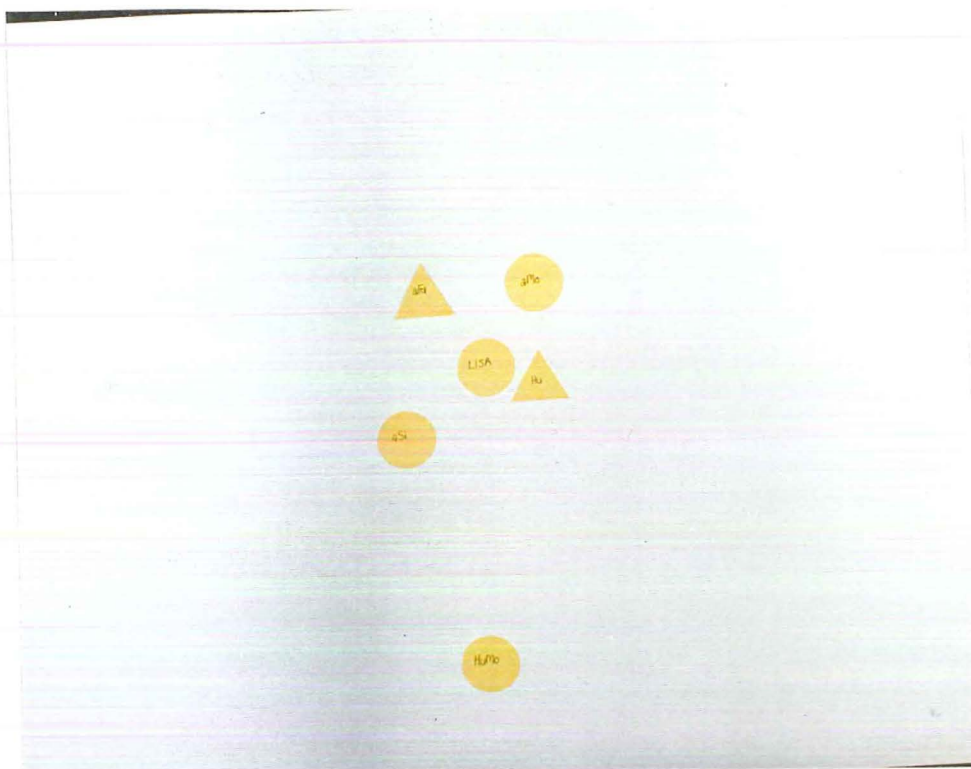
Lisa's family map prior to contact reflects her family before the additions (Fig 12A). Included in this family map was Lisa's husband who is positioned closest to her. Her adoptive parents are also placed close to Lisa as she shares a good relationship with them both. Her adoptive sister is placed further away but Lisa indicated they shared a close relationship growing up. Lisa placed her mother-in-law further away than the rest of the members as at this time her mother-in-law was living in New Zealand and Lisa had not had the opportunity to get to know her.

Lisa's current family map displays how her family has increased in size since contact with her birth family (Fig 12B). Lisa's family of procreation had grown and her son was a part of her family map (at the time of the interview Lisa was pregnant with her second child). For Lisa, her husband and her son are her family here and now, and as such they are placed closest to her.

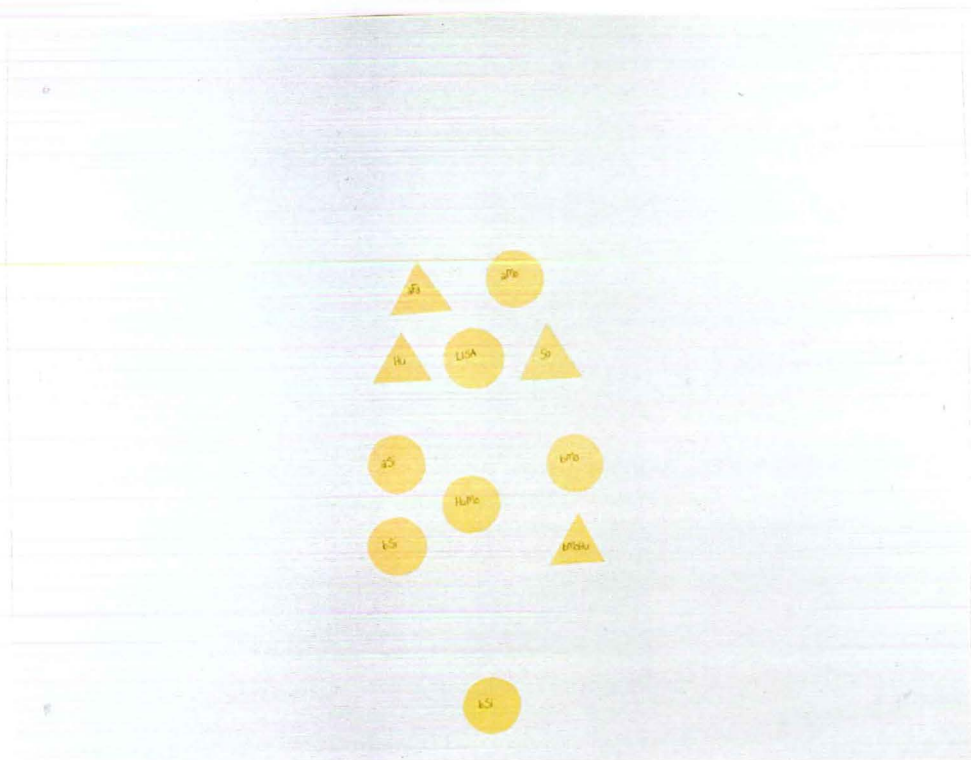
Her adoptive parents remain in a similar position as they did in the family map prior to contact. Lisa has a strong bond with them as they have provided guidance and support for her throughout her life. She is protective of her adoptive parents and will not tell them of her contact with her birth family out of respect for their wishes.

Her adoptive sister and her birth mother were placed in a similar position. With her adoptive sister, time spent together growing up has formed and retained a bond between them. As adults they share experiences such as marriage and pregnancy (although she has not told her adoptive sister about the contact for fear of hurting her and her adoptive parents). Lisa has a good relationship with her birth mother and they keep in regular contact. She feels she can call on her birth mother in times of crisis (although probably would not) and refers to her as "Ma", a term they both agreed upon. Her birth mother's husband, who she refers to as "Pa", refers to her as his daughter.

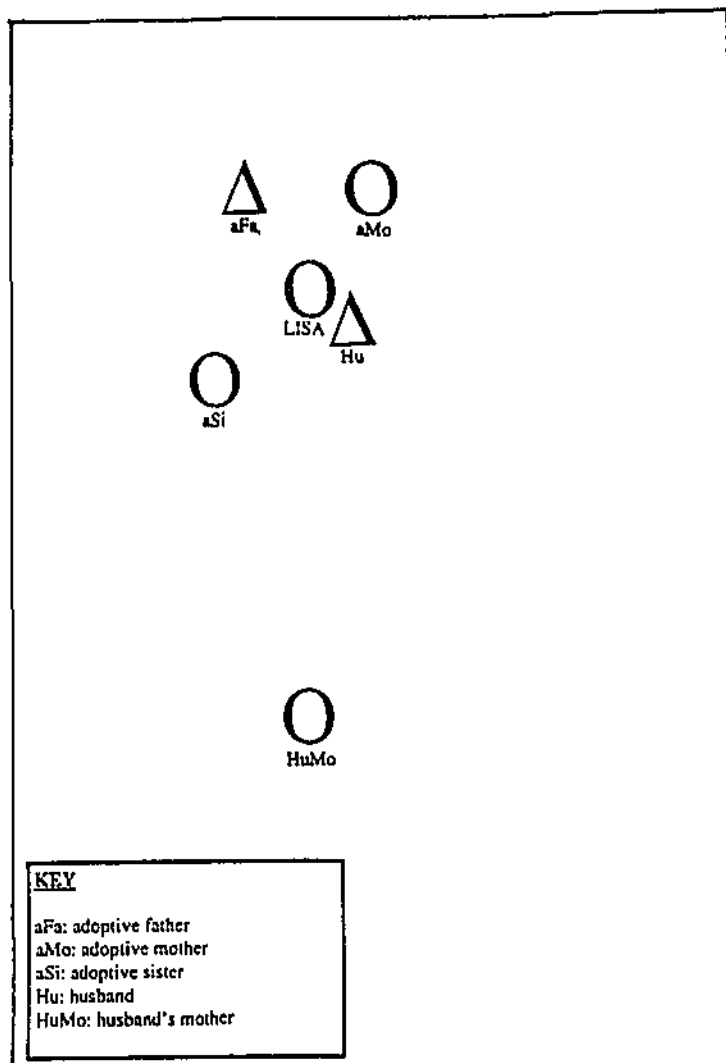
Lisa's mother-in-law was placed significantly closer than in her family map prior to contact. Lisa attributes the development of their relationship to the fact she moved from New Zealand to Australia enabling them to spend more time together. Her mother-in-law has also provided a lot of support to Lisa particularly in the caring of Lisa's young son.



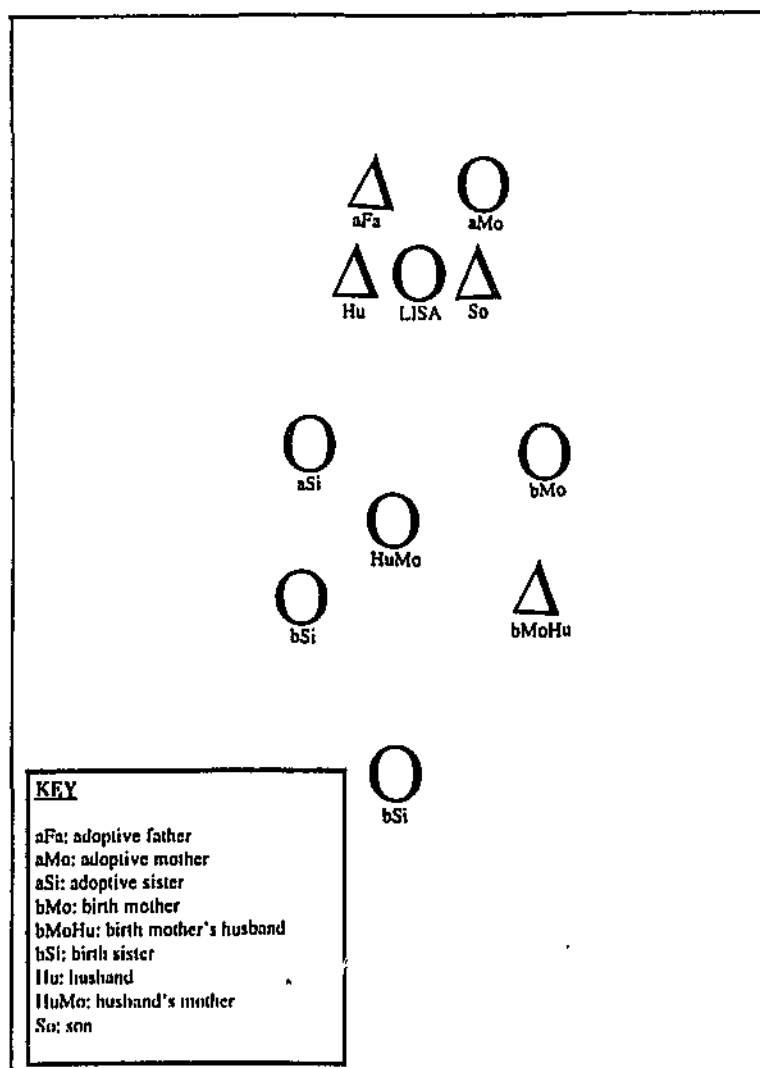
**(Fig 12A) LISA'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT**



**(Fig 12B) LISA'S FAMILY MAP AFTER CONTACT (CURRENT)**



(Fig 12A) LISA'S FAMILY MAP PRIOR TO CONTACT



## CONCLUSION

As Henry stated, "there is no blue print" and each experience is unique. There are many factors that impact on an individual's construction of family. These can include births, deaths, marriages, divorce, adoption, relocation or simply the passage of time. The contact adoptees have with their birth family appear to be another factor to add amongst the rest.

For the twelve participants involved in this research there are some issues which appear to be more common than others. These include; quality and quantity of communication, time shared between members, provision of support (physical and emotional), unconditional acceptance, existence of similarities, geographical distance, and the significance they play in their everyday lives. The existence of a legal relationship formed part of the criteria employed in constructing the family list and map, extending to in-laws and step-relatives created through marriage.

Communication was identified as a crucial element in the inclusion of members and played a key role in determining the distance between members and participants. Central to the issue of communication in family relationships is perceived honesty, an element some adoptees felt was not being fulfilled by both adoptive and birth relatives. Some adoptees who did not include birth relatives in their family map attributed this to a lack of communication. Others who did not include them had children of their own and regarded their family of procreation as *their* family. In most cases, birth family members did not play a significant role in their everyday lives.

Time shared between individuals was another element identified as important in establishing and maintaining relationships. In cases where birth family members were placed at a distance on the map participants indicated there had not been enough time to develop closer relationships. Others, such as adoptive family members, were placed on the map because of the fact they had shared time with the adoptee throughout their life. Time can serve as a base to build on with past experiences and shared life histories forming the building blocks.

Combined with communication and time was the provision of support (both physical and emotional). Members included and placed in close proximity to the participant were significant people in their lives who provided (and received) some kind of support. The significant people included were not always 'family' members but were in some instances friends, family friends or mentors. In some cases friends were placed before family members as they were said to provide unconditional acceptance and support, another element in the construction of family. Friends can fill a gap when the family of origin fails to provide support.

Similarities also played a role in the inclusion of members. These similarities ranged from the sharing same experiences to having similar physical features, traits and mannerisms. Many participants spoke of a "natural affinity" with their birth relatives and see these similarities as a bonding agent.

Those included in the construction of family are the significant people in their lives at a certain time. As Anne told me, if I had been interviewing her at the time of contact over ten years ago, then she would have most likely included her birth family in her map, to use her words "family is where you are at, what you are at and who you are at, at that time, at that particular time". This will be explored in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 6 WHO IS FAMILY?**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore issues raised in chapter five about the ways individuals construct their meaning of 'family', and the way these constructions conform to traditional and 'normative' constructions. The chapter is divided into two main sections: what is family? and who is family? The first section concentrates on the representations of 'family' or the ideal 'normative' definitions used by the informants; this is what they think 'family' should consist of, but do not always achieve in reality. The second examines who participants regard as 'family' and the reasons they are regarded as familial. This is the reality of family as it is lived, constructed and defined in everyday life.

The adoptees involved in this research ranged between the ages of fifty-three and nineteen. Some had had contact with their birth family for over fifteen years, whereas for others it had only been twelve weeks. As Henry stated "some are just beginning and some of us are old hands". As each were at different stages, there were a variety of factors influencing who they included in their constructions of family and the position in which they were placed. In exploring these differences more will be revealed not only about adoptees and the impact of contact on their constructions of family, but also the individual construction of families themselves.

Throughout the sociological literature 'family' has commonly been referred to as those legally or biologically related individuals who share a common residence. By limiting definitions of 'family' to those holding a legal relationship, other relationships bonded by emotional ties between people who are not legally related are not recognised as

'familial'. Within this framework there has been an underlying assumption that there exists 'a family' that can be defined and described.

## WHAT IS 'FAMILY'?

As discussed in Chapter Three, some sociological definitions of 'the family' and those employed by government agencies do not adequately describe family life as it is experienced by individuals. As Levin (1993, p84) states:

Definitions of family should draw from the everyday world of the person. Yet traditional definitions exist apart from the social reality of everyday life. The label *theoretical* adds to this separation by giving these definitions the status of 'truth', a sometimes unintended effect of research.

There are two main issues that have been discussed in regards to sociological definitions of 'family'. The first is the assumption that there is 'a family' or one model of the family that can be defined and discussed. This has contributed to the view that the nuclear family is the dominant and 'normal' family structure, with others not conforming being viewed as being on the margins. However, 'the family' cannot be defined or discussed in terms of a singular entity; it "cannot be treated as a static entity defined according to traditional structures or moral preferences" (Edgar, 1993, p29).

The second issue raised is the criteria by which 'family' has commonly been defined. These include two central components, the existence of a legal or biological relationship, and the need for members to live together. These two components combine to produce the definitions employed by government agencies for example, the



definitions used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in carrying out the Australian census. These definitions however do not reflect the lived experience of family life, and the emotional ties held between people beyond the household need to be taken into account to develop a better understanding of family life.

The way individuals think of 'family' influences whom they regard as their family. In some cases, individuals think of those not legally related to them as family because of the support and care given and received. It is possible then, to argue that 'family' represents care, nurturance and support. 'Family' becomes an idea, based on ideal notions of what its constituent members should do for each other. Those living up to the ideal are counted as 'family', regardless of the legal familial relationship held.

## **REPRESENTATIONS OF 'FAMILY'**

The word 'family' carries with it a variety of meanings depending on the purpose to which it is put or the context in which it is used. Although it is true each individual defines their own family differently, it is important to recognise "that there does exist in everyday usage a clear concept of 'the family' which is not individualistic or particularistic" (Bernardes, 1986b, p597).

The word 'family' not only describes a group of people belonging to a common kinship group, but extends to a particular *kind* of relationship that exists due to the presence of emotional ties. According to some writers (Bernardes, 1987; Bourdieu, 1996; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990), when individuals use the word 'family' to describe relationships in everyday life, there is a collective understanding of what is meant by the speaker. By

this I mean, when a person refers to someone as being 'like my sister or like my brother', there is an assumption that the importance of this relationship will be understood by the listener (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). People refer to others 'as family' because of the emotional connection they have with that particular person, and the kind of relationship they share. Faye's comments illustrate this when speaking of a friend; "she would be I think my closest family. We're like sisters, very, very close, like soul mates". Anne also refers to "girlfriends who are sort of like sisters". Both of these comments raise questions about what it means to be a sister, what does a sister do and what kind of relationship do sisters share? It appears in Faye's comment, there is an underlying assumption at work whereby it is a given fact that sisters are close and share a special bond (i.e. "like soul mates"). In using the phrase "like sisters", Faye is expressing both the significance of that relationship in her life and the kind of relationship they share. It is here we can see an example of not only the ideal representations of 'family' relationships at work, but also the presumed collective understandings of these relationships and what it means to be a 'sister'.

Ideal images of what family relationships should be are reflected in the expectations individuals have of 'a family'. When referring to expectations many participants were cautious about expecting too much. During the discussion Mandy<sup>1</sup> suggested replacing the word expectations with desires. Rather than expecting her family to behave in a particular way, Mandy argued these were desirable traits, what they would want their family to do but would not necessarily expect them to do. As her expectations had not been met in the past, Mandy feels she should not hold high expectations for fear of being let down. For others, this was a way of protecting themselves from being hurt.

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<sup>1</sup>Mandy participated in the focus group only.

particularly when their expectations had not been fulfilled in the past. This sentiment highlights the gap between ideal representations and the reality of everyday family life.

Dave supports this in the following statement:

I get questioned like what's my expectation of a family, it's like going into a dream world, like mummy and daddy take me to the zoo and so, my expectations, I am better off having no expectations and get back to reality and have no expectations and its not rosy, it hurts, its painful.

Collective understandings of 'family' impact on individual conceptions of what constitutes a family. Dominant definitions of 'family' as Bourdieu (1996, p19) states, "while seeming to describe social reality, in fact construct it". I will argue collective understandings of 'family' have three aspects, structural (Ford, 1994; Levin & Trost, 1992), functional (Bould, 1993; Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982) and emotional (Bould, 1993; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990). These three levels of understanding will be discussed to explore how adoptees construct their individual meanings of 'family'.

### **Structural Understandings of 'Family'**

In exploring the definitions of what constitutes a 'family', both Levin and Trost (1992) and Ford (1994) found that the majority of respondents in their studies, defined 'family' as composing of a heterosexual couple living together with a child (marriage was not crucial). Although there were significant differences between the results of these studies, both support that "the general notion of 'family' may still be associated most frequently with a married couple and its biological children" (Ford, 1994, p72). On a general level then, as these studies show, the view held by individuals of who constitutes a 'family' corresponds with the dominant definitions found in the

sociological literature, and those employed by government agencies; that is, family is constructed as 'nuclear'.

Dominant notions of 'family' are evident in this study as the majority of participants included their family of origin and family of procreation where applicable. Although in many of these cases their construction of family extended beyond these two categories, Anne, Belinda, Dave, Henry and Matthew conformed to traditional nuclear notions in different ways. Anne may have spoken about others as being "like family", but they were omitted from her family maps. Including only her adoptive family, Anne felt, "family is *your* family, family of where you come from", and in her case this was her adoptive family. In Belinda's scenario, the nuclear family to which she belongs is the only family present on her map prior to meeting her birth family. However, as Belinda's current family map shows, her birth family have been added reflecting the impact of significant life events on constructions of 'family'. Henry's family maps also reflect to a certain degree dominant definitions of 'family' as his family of origin were the only ones to appear on his family map prior to contact. Similarly to Belinda, Henry included his birth family in his current family map, reflecting the changing definitions of family over time due to significant life events, such as the contact with birth family members.

Dave and Matthew's family maps distinctly portrayed nuclear notions of family. Dave included only his family of procreation in both of his family maps, as he felt "this is *my* family". Others were not included as Dave did not see them as being a part of *his* family, the family he has created. Matthew also included only his family of procreation in his current family map, which he attributed to residential and geographical factors. Basing his definition on those legally related to him and co-resident, Matthew's

construction of 'family' corresponds to dominant or traditional notions of who constitutes 'family'. These examples lend support to the idea that 'family' are those who are legally related to one another and, as Matthew's case highlights, co-reside or live in close proximity to each other. However, the way in which family was defined within the interview setting and the way in which participants spoke about 'family' did not always correspond. Dave, for example, spoke of his birth mother as "mum", and refers to her by this name in his everyday life. Matthew referred to his birth family as "the family" and expressed feeling a part of this family. Structural understandings of 'family' can contribute to understanding the way in which family is constructed on a more general level, but these understandings reflect only one aspect of an individual's construction of family. What 'families' do and provide is an important aspect of how individuals define who is family and who is not.

### **Functional Aspects of 'Family'**

How individuals define 'family' and who they include in that definition is influenced by what families do, or more specifically what particular individuals do for the person defining their family. In deciding whether to include her birth family or not, Belinda reflected on the behaviour she had shown towards her birth sister;

I thought well if I ring her up and think of her as my sister and (she's) able to come and stay then they must all be my family. Really, whether I see them or whatever, they are my family.

Belinda's reasoning here reflects what she feels family should do for each other. Provided she thinks of her birth sister as 'her sister' and confirms that through the action of having her come and stay with her, Belinda feels they must be 'family'. It was not

simply the act of asking her sister over but the way in which she viewed their relationship.

Families are expected to provide financial, material and emotional support for those deemed to be family members, with each member playing a different role in the provision of support. Women, for instance, in the role of mothers, are deemed to be providers of nurturance, care and emotional support. The expectation that family members will provide each other with support and care, is only clear in the case of minor children where the responsibilities of parents to their children is legislated. In the case of adult family members however, the line is not as clear and it "varies depending on the nature of the relationship" (Bould, 1993, p138). The immediacy of the relationship both in terms of emotional closeness and physical distance influences who individuals ask for support and the kind of support shared (d'Abbs, 1991).

Utopian notions of a 'functional family' that primarily fulfill the prescribed material and emotional needs of an individual are a reflection of the ideal images of families rather than the lived experience. In everyday life, those legally defined as 'family' do not always provide support for individuals as Faye's comment suggests:

Yeah, adopted and birth, adopted family is supposed to be there to call for emotional support when you needed it...and I've just had to do it myself...[In the case of illness], I haven't expected my [family], because I guess they don't really provide it...I've just got through so much by myself and with friends and partners, that,...I wouldn't expect my birth family or my adoptive family to do that, I would just be happy with whoever turned up.

Conceptions of 'family', as reflected in Faye's comment, incorporates what 'family' is supposed to do, that is provide emotional and/or physical support. In the event these

expectations of 'family' are not met, individuals call on those around them for support, and in many cases those not legally related to the individual, as was found in Faye's case (Bould, 1993; Gubrium & Buckholdt, 1982). As d'Abbs (1991, p77) suggests; "decisions about seeking help are shaped not only by consideration of who is available to provide help, but also by who is to be avoided". The nature of a relationship influences the kind of support sought and received and particular needs are met by particular people.

Fictive families describe situations in which those not legally or biologically related assume the role of 'family' when the family of origin or procreation (those legally and morally obligated) does not or cannot provide support and care (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982). The geographical distance between family members impacts on the ability of members to provide particular kinds of support. In situations where family members live overseas or interstate (as was the case for many participants), others fulfilled the role of 'family' for different purposes and reasons. Anne and Isabel's comments suggest this in their discussion of "pseudo" and "surrogate" families:

I establish new families everywhere I go...like I always seem to pick up an elderly friend type or a couple of elderly friends that are sort of are this pseudo type of mother type...I've shifted around, I have these sort of pseudo families, I guess you could call them cause whenever...I get a crisis in my life sort of thing, I turn to my friends first before I actually ring my family...But then if mum was still alive, see it's difficult to say because if mum was still alive, yes I would have rang her first but because she's not there anymore (Anne).

The people I probably would have added into the list are actually not family at all and they are the people who have become a surrogate family to us in Australia...The commitment and loyalty and acceptance is total and that, for that to occur, the importance of that relationship to the rest of the family needs to happen and in both those cases it has happened...So there's that kind of acceptance...[I]consider them to be family because they are very supportive (Isabel).

These comments highlight the fact that others not legally or biologically related can assume a similar role to that of 'family', based on the support and care shown and the kinds of things shared such as activities or outings and advice. The following comment from Elsie suggests that in some cases, friends assume the status of 'family' as they provide support in the absence of legally defined family members and/or emotional distance as the intensity of these relationships differ to those legally defined as 'family':

My friends are my family and they've been the support network when my family was too far away or my family was here but I needed...we all need our friends, our peers at our age that don't have blood, relation stuff. If you're not really close to your family, I think your friends become your family.

This is evident in the family maps constructed by Elsie, Faye and Jenny, as each included those not legally related to them due to the support they have received. Faye's map in particular displays the way in which her 'family of friends' play a more important role (at this stage) in her everyday life than both her adoptive and birth family, as her comment suggests:

Yeah, I'd put my friends, I have a family of friends that are probably my number one family and then, and I have a hierarchy,...but my friends are kind of there before my adoptive family really. But I am aiming to get them all on par, that's my life goal.

Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982, p880) suggest "one hallmark of family is that those assigned the status show *concern* for whomever they are considered to be family". Those expressing genuine concern rather than "going through the motions" are those attributed with "acting like family" (pp880-881). To act like 'family' is to behave in a particular way, and once again, individuals who are not legally related are included because of the care and support they had given. Informants in this research included those not legally related to them such as friends, friends' parents, family friends, and



mentors in their construction of family, due to the support (material and emotional) they had received from and given to them. Furthermore, beyond the behaviour displayed is the manner in which support was (and is) transferred or the emotion attached to it. Not only is the behaviour itself important but also the emotion felt by those included in the transfer. Elsie's scenario illustrates this point as she describes particular relationships she developed whilst in America:

F's mum...her mum was my, we call 'mia mama carina', she's like my Italian mum in Italy, she really looked after me, she's very much a model figure for me...Those professors who took me under their wing...I was really taken into [their] families, I got to meet their children and their parents and their cousins and aunts and uncles and they always really included me in family events, [like] Thanksgiving ...So the criterion really is mentors, people who sort of adopted me in the sense of you know they're not my children, you are not my child but you're the best friend of my child or something and really create a very warm, loving family type of environment and then the legal status stuff.

As displayed in Elsie's comments, the physical act of provision is not enough for members to be classified as 'family', but rather it is the manner in which particular acts are performed. 'Family' then, is not perceived by some individuals simply in terms of material and emotional support given, but as suggested by Gubrium and Buckholdt (1982), is dependent on the spirit in which it is given or the emotion attached to the act. This distinction is important in establishing who is family and who is not. For instance, community agencies may be able to provide support for individuals, but do not have the same sentiment attached to them. 'Family' in contrast is perceived to provide support for individuals in a genuine and unconditional fashion.

Functional understandings of family relationships need to extend beyond the act of providing particular needs. It is crucial to explore the emotional intensity involved in

the provision of needs to develop an understanding of the way in which individuals construct their own family and what it means to be 'family'.

### **Emotional Ties**

The intensity of emotional ties held between people influences who individuals perceive to be 'family' and the significance they play in an individual's everyday life. When asked what 'family' was, many participants in this study used emotional language to convey what they thought family to be, citing "love, unconditional love" (Jenny) as central to family relationships. As Faye stated, "I think love and I think hassle, and automatically they're about love and all the things that make up love". These comments highlight the importance individuals place on emotional ties in regards to 'family'. Bould (1993, p136) supports this point using an example of a placard displayed at a lesbian and gay rights demonstration conveying the message "love makes a family - nothing more, nothing less". The importance of emotional ties that exist between people is in no way restricted to those legally or biologically related, which once again calls into question the official definitions employed.

It has often been assumed that functional questions of care will be attended to by those legally or biologically related, that is the individual's presumed 'family'. However, to perform familial care responsibilities, a legal 'familial' relationship does not have to exist and those performing these duties are "tied by the bonds of affection" (Bould, 1993, p140). According to Bould (1993, p142),

it is primarily the emotional tie that leads the responsible party to sacrifice some or much of his or her personal goals and self-fulfillment in order to provide such care. If the emotional tie is insufficient, the party will be judged not to 'act like family'.

Those who show "genuine concern" are deemed as "real family", and those not showing this are seen to not "act like family" (Gubrium and Buckholdt, 1982, pp880-882). This 'genuineness' can be a determining factor in the inclusion of those that are not legally related in an individual's construction of 'family' on the basis of the support and care shown. To display genuine concern is to act without feelings of obligation that is, to provide support because they *want* to and not because they *have* to. It can be argued then, that this is done in an unconditional fashion. Unconditional means that it is "not subject to conditions or limitations" (Turner, 1989, p881), and many participants believed 'family' should (and do) make provisions in an unconditional fashion. For many of the participants in this study, 'family' ideally represents a source of unconditional love, acceptance and support.

Unconditional love, according to Fromm (1956, p42), "corresponds to one of the deepest longings, not only of the child, but of every human being". As it is a love that is given without conditions, and has not been "earned", it cannot be lost. Anne's comment expresses this sentiment:

Family are the ones that have listened to my tears and listened to all my stupid ideas and my wonderful brilliant ideas...and sort of have stuck by me through thick and thin and when you've made a complete dork of yourself, you know they're still there to love you, that's family to me.

Henry, in particular, expresses the importance of unconditional love and identifies his birth family as his "real family" because of the presence of unconditional love:

I think I really honestly can say I really see my natural family as very important to me ...I just see them as my family as my real family. I have got a lot of respect for my adopted family but my feelings don't run as deep, as they do with my natural family even though I've known them less...because I do believe there is unconditional love from them...there is that unconditional love, cause with my adoptive side there has always been sort of conditions. (I) can't actually put my finger on them but there's always these conditions...I think when you live with that and then you come across a group of people who are connected to you through blood and there's a natural bonding...we've never been that close in the sense that for thirty eight years we didn't know each other and yet we have the same name and we do things the same way and we have the same sense of humour etc etc and I think there's a bigger bond in that.

Henry feels the conditions placed on him from his adoptive family do not exist in the same way with his birth family. As a result, Henry feels a stronger bond with his birth family due to the unconditional acceptance he has felt combined with the perceived "natural" bond that exists.

'Family' is seen as consisting of not only unconditional love, but also unconditional acceptance as Lisa suggest; "I think families are just total acceptance, that they won't judge you, you know, they just accept you for what you are, who you are". Anne's comment suggests that unconditional acceptance and support were important features of her construction of family:

Sort of as a safety net thing I guess...You can go out and do what you have to do, and search and find and destruct and construct and that family will still be there, acceptance no matter what.

'Family' then are those who provide acceptance without requiring individuals to conform to their expectations. Individuals are accepted for who they are by 'family' and allow for the freedom of individual expression. Faye feels her friends accept her for who she is and this plays a major role in including these people as a part of her 'family'.

They are in fact placed closer to her than her adoptive family because Faye feels they accept and support her unconditionally.

Unconditional elements of 'family' including love, acceptance and support, contribute to relationships being viewed as 'familial'. Although it is difficult to say whether unconditional elements do in fact exist, it is the perceptions held by individuals that are important. If an individual feels support and love is shared unconditionally, they are more likely to view their relationship as 'familial'. Evidence of this exists in Jenny and Faye's constructions of family as they include friends because of the unconditional support and acceptance they feel they have received from them. 'Familial' relationships are ideally represented as providing unconditional love, support and acceptance, elements that join together to distinguish between those who are family and those who are not. The following quote from Henry describes what he feels 'family' does for each other in providing unconditional acceptance and support:

You tolerate anything your family throws at you and you won't tolerate it from anybody else, it's as simple as that...I think you take on the least amount of resistance with your family because they are going to be around for long time, and if you pursue an issue you could destroy that or you could complicate it. Therefore, I think you tend to take more flak or put up with more from family than you do from friends or the man in the street.

Individuals assign particular people as 'family' and in exploring the way in which individuals construct their meaning of family, the assignment process itself informs the discussion (Gubrium & Lynott, cited in Bernardes, 1987, p691). Rather than attempting to define 'family', discussion should "explore how, why and when actors define particular aspects of their lives as 'family life'"(Bernardes, 1987, p682). The next

section of this chapter will explore why some people are regarded as 'family' whilst others are not.

## **WHO IS 'FAMILY'?**

### **Selection Criteria**

As McDonald (1992; 1995) argues, individuals define their own family for different purposes and these definitions change over time. In agreement with others (Edgar, 1993; Sarantakos, 1996; Bernardes, 1986a; Bould, 1993) he criticises the inadequacies of legal or census definitions of 'family', in using the household as the basic unit. In everyday life people do not define their families by this criterion. According to McDonald (1995), individual definitions of family are influenced by a number of factors including cultural norms, personal circumstances and the perceived sense of obligation. In addition to these, he suggests three common criteria are used by individuals when defining their family including: co-residence, the relationship held, and emotional affinity or closeness felt. For the informants in this research each of these characteristics came into play in their construction of family in different ways.

### **Co-residence / Geography**

Co-residence is the narrowest criterion used by individuals in defining who is to be included in their construction of 'family' (McDonald, 1995). The geographical location of family members can impact on both their inclusion or exclusion, and the closeness of their relationship. With the exception of Matthew however, most participants in this study did not cite geographical location as a part of their criteria for including or

excluding family members. For Matthew however, some family members were excluded purely because of their geographical location and others were included based on co-residence:

I suppose partly this centers around the fact that they're the people who are here, and because everybody else is a considerable distance away, they don't count, it doesn't count in the same sense, even though they're my relatives, they're not my family...I think in this, distance makes a lot of difference to what it would be compared to if you were interviewing me, and I was living in England or if the relations were all here living in Australia...The fact that they're here I suppose was the main factor.

In his current family map, Matthew placed his son further away than his wife and daughter, only because of the physical distance rather than an emotional distance, as his son no longer resides in Matthew's household. When referring to his birth family, Matthew spoke of them *as family*, but as they reside in the United Kingdom they were not included in his family map. This was also true of his adoptive family.

For many participants, geographical distance can make establishing and maintaining relationships difficult as their adoptive family and birth family lived interstate or overseas. However, most found ways of maintaining and developing intimate relationships with those people who were seen as important to them through telephone, letters and tape recordings. This concurs with Bould's (1993) reference to "intimacy at a distance" in which it cannot be assumed distance will inhibit intimate relationships.

Lisa's comment supports this:

We have a very, very good relationship despite the distance between us. We speak at least once a fortnight, with a letter every week and this has gone on for twelve months.

According to Millward (1992, p15) "the more immediate the relationship, the more frequent was personal or telephone contact" (although she found this did not apply to letter writing). This suggests that the perceived importance of a relationship will impact on the frequency and type of contact between family members. The quality of communication over long distances was more crucial to many of the participants rather than the quantity.

### **Relationship Held**

The inclusion of particular people in participants' construction of family was related to the relationship they held with that individual. As the following comments from Isabel and Elsie show, part of their construction of family was based on the existence of a legal familial relationship:

Those are blood family or connections through marriage...I'm very aware of the fact that this is all marriage and birth linked so they're, the sense of them as family is in the conventional sense of family.  
(Isabel)

Either legal familial status, was I raised with them and if they're all of my adoptive family's family, did they marry into the family...[and] biological connections. (Elsie)

These comments suggest part of their constructions of family do in fact conform to dominant notions of 'family' and the conventional way of defining 'family'. Most of the participants did indeed include those legally related (family of origin and family of procreation) but in many instances, excluded others because of the *kind* of relationship they held with a particular member. Henry and Matthew are two examples to draw upon to illustrate this point, as neither included their adoptive father because they felt a



'father-son' relationship had never existed between themselves and their father. Henry comments:

I haven't included my adoptive father in either scenario, whilst I've got all the empathy with his situation, the relationship there is not, not one of any bonding which is most unfortunate, which is mostly his doing there more than anything...I mean he was affectionate in his own way [but] there wasn't that bonding that there was with my adopted mother.

This supports the point raised earlier that although people do include those legally related to them in their construction of 'family', it cannot be assumed the existence of a legal relationship ensures their inclusion. The kind of relationship held needs to be explored and the factors contributing to the view that these relationships are familial. This then leads us to look at the affinity or closeness felt in a relationship and what factors influence relationships as close.

### **Affinity / Closeness**

Before discussing the impact of affinity and/or closeness on constructions of 'family' it is useful to define these terms. Affinity can be thought of as "a strong natural liking or attraction [and/or] similarity, close resemblance or connection" (Turner, 1989, p12). The affinity felt in a relationship contributes to the closeness or emotional intensity attached to this relationship. Not only does this contribute to the emotional distance people place themselves from others, but it also impacts on the inclusion and exclusion of particular family members. Jenny's current family map reflects both of these elements as she positioned her birth parents slightly closer than her adoptive parents.

Jenny referred to feeling a "natural affinity" with her birth parents as the following comment reveals:

the reason they are a bit closer is...it's just a more an affinity there, a natural affinity rather than this one which I appreciate more so than I ever have and it's a deep appreciation and, but this one is...there's a different kind of union sort of.

The lack of affinity or closeness in family relationships results in the exclusion of particular people. As the following comments from Belinda, Faye and Lisa suggest, there is a distinction between who they see as 'relatives' and who they see as 'family';

That's just my close family, not any of the others (Belinda)

I thought of all my relatives that are mum and dad's family, but I don't know, you know I knew them as a kid but I don't consider them my family (Faye)

I was going to go on to uncles and aunties but I thought this is what I class as close family...whilst they are family, this is what I class as my immediate family (Lisa)

Their reference to an "immediate" or "close" family suggests that these are the people who play a significant role in their lives either now or as they were growing up. Relatives are seen as being a part of their larger 'family' and would possibly be the ones they would see at special family gatherings such as weddings and funerals, but are not significant people in their lives. The importance people play (or have played) in an individual's life impacts directly on the inclusion of these people in their construction of 'family' and how close they feel to those particular people. In many cases, participants have known or met relatives as a child but have not maintained any contact in their adult life. For instance, as Jenny was growing up, she spent time with many of her cousins but includes only four because as she states:

I consider them family more so than the other ones who I don't have a great deal...to do with...I just sort of don't know them that well and sort of haven't shared anything of too much of a personal consequence with them as I have obviously with these people who are in here.

The relatives that participants have heard about, but have not met, are often excluded as there has not been the opportunity for a relationship to develop. The affinity or emotional attachment does not exist in the same way, as Elsie's comment reflects:

"I've heard about them but I just don't, nothing happens here when I think of them" (pointing to her heart). The inclusion of people in an individual's construction of 'family' is related to "who [is] in your heart space" (Jenny) and "the people who are important" (Kathy).

The importance of the closeness felt in a relationship on constructions of 'family' is evident in the inclusion of family members who are deceased. Although not all participants included deceased family members because, as Kathy states "I can't really include them if they're not around", others did because of the affinity or closeness they felt whilst they were alive (Anne, Elsie, Jenny). Jenny's comment reflects this:

My nan and pop who both recently passed away in the last year or so, and I was, they were like really good older friends when I was growing up. They were really good fun to go over and see and stuff, I'd love their company and I still consider them family big time.

We can conclude from the various comments made by participants that the affinity and closeness felt in relationships contributes to the inclusion and exclusion of certain members in their construction of family, and affected their position on their family maps. Factors that appear to have an impact on the intensity of these feelings include the quality of time shared together and the existence of common bonds such as belonging to the same kinship group.

## IDENTITY

Families provide more than material and emotional support as Wallman (cited in Finch, 1989, p203) states; "families provide certain basic resources for their members, including a sense of identity and belonging". Historically, 'the family' into which an individual was born determined to a large degree the social position ascribed to them. However, in modern Western societies, an individual's social position is not dependent on the family to which an individual belongs, and the value on family ties differs as Calhoun (1995, p195) suggests:

Kinship still matters to us as individuals; we invest it with great emotional weight, but kinship no longer offers us an overall template of social and personal identities.

Although there are other influences that contribute to the formation of an individual's identity (such as peer groups and mass media), 'the family' is viewed (in functionalist terms) as the primary socialising agent in which social rules and prescribed roles are taught and learnt (Parsons, 1951; Parson & Bales, 1955). It is here children model their behaviour from primary caretakers and significant others. According to Mead (cited in Calhoun, 1995, p197), "our sense of self is constituted in relations to both significant others and a more generalized social order". From this perspective, individuals develop a sense of themselves or a sense of self consciousness from seeing themselves as others around them do. 'The family' is the first significant group individuals belong to, signified by the sharing of a common name. It is from 'family' that individuals learn 'who they are' i.e., 'a Moloney' as distinct from 'a Jones' or 'a Smith'. A distinction is made between 'my family' and 'your family', and as individuals grow they learn which is which. Having 'family' means individuals 'belong' to a particular group of people, they

have an historical backdrop against which to place themselves. This enables individuals to develop an understanding of the influences (both environmentally and genetically) that have contributed to their identity.

An individual's identity is made up of both genealogical background and the social environment in which they live. Most people living in non-adoptive families are able to access their genealogical background, a luxury adoptees have not had. As Picton (1980, p7) concluded in his research on reunions; "the overwhelming impression is of a group of adults who have a need to know facts about themselves that others not adopted take for granted". Both the adoptive family and the birth family play a role in an individual's perceived identity. Henry supports this feeling:

Sense of identity, I think that's what family does where it's adopted or if it's natural there's a sense of identity, and as an adoptee we choose which we need to find.

In most cases adoptees are aware of their adoptive status, and of the absence of their genealogical background that exists outside of their adoptive family. They are unable to draw any biological similarities from anyone immediately around them. Many writers, predominantly in the field of psychology, have argued as Van Keppel, Midford and Cicchini (1987, p10) have, that without information about their genealogical background, an adoptee "has very little information to base his/her own identity" upon and, as a result, may feel a "sense of incompleteness" (Picton, 1980, p7). According to VanKeppel, Midford and Cicchini (1987, p10),

there is a 'safeness' in knowing where you belong in a family heritage and in knowing where the good and bad traits you manifest as a person originate. Lack of this information isolates an adoptee. We are a blend of both environment and heredity.

The majority of adoptees in this study felt that the knowledge they had gained about their genealogical background impacted on their identity in different ways. Lisa describes her motivations for searching and the impact it has had on her:

I think that was always a big part of wanting to know who am I? Where do I come from...I can't put it into words...I feel more whole, I feel more complete...because my whole life has changed, because it hasn't, I'm still me and that's not going to change but, at least I can start piecing bits of the puzzle together and start seeing where I come from and yes I look like this person and I can see where I get certain little traits from and temperament and humour and things like that.

Lisa's comment highlights the importance of knowing her genealogical background in understanding herself. Although she feels her identity has not changed ("I'm still me"), knowing her genealogical background has given her a place from which to draw pieces of herself. Kathy's comment reflects this sentiment:

I don't know how to explain it, but you just don't feel like you are a loose thread floating around in outer space, you've got a place and I just feel much happier in myself and just more content, more confident.

In a sense, Kathy is now able to 'place' herself in her genealogical history. Drawing from his research, Sachdev (1992, p64) argues the majority of adoptees share a similar experience as they are

able to connect themselves for the first time with their generational line and to share physical resemblances and interests with someone related by blood. This experience contributed to a more cohesive identity.

Although as Elsie stated "identity has always been changed and moulded by your experiences", having contact with her birth family has enabled the development of

a stronger sense of identity and it's little things like, oh that explains why I've always loved horses, and that explains my wicked and wacky sense of humour, and why I'm always a practical joker.

After making contact with their birth family, some adoptees felt they were able to draw similarities in their character and personality from various birth family members. The discovery of similarities based on perceived shared genetics are unique only to this group of people (i.e., birth family) and contributes to a sense of belonging to that 'family group'. Jenny's comment reflects the importance of 'belonging' to both her adoptive and birth family, achieved in different ways:

I think it's belonging for me because both families...that seems to be the common denominator for me at the moment anyway, there's one I'd say the adoptive family at the moment's more supportive to me, it would seem that way but yeah, the common thing seems to be belonging because when I met my birth parents I felt like I belonged, that that was them you know they were the ones that you know, I came via them.

Each 'family' has, in a sense, fulfilled a different role for adoptees in constructing their identity. Adoptive families have contributed through the process of socialisation and associations with significant others. After making contact with their birth family adoptees are able to access information on their genealogical background and, as such access another facet of their identity. The result of the reunion experience, as consolidated by other research (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1974; Sachdev, 1992; Picton, 1980; Post Adoption Resource Centre, 1992; VanKeppel, Cicchini & Midford, 1987), is reflected in the following quotes from Jenny and Faye:

[Identity], that's been the main thing 'cause, it's just sort of foundation wise, just feels like my feet are sort of more firmly planted when I'm walking and I know, just knowing your roots and your background and sort of different influences, biological influences, that make you up and also you know different psychological influences and from a cellular memory perspective as well that's you know just, profound the involvement there, just the different behavioural and thinking patterns that you have and you find out that sort of, where they came from (Jenny).

In terms of identity, I feel that, I am who I am, I'm more assertive about who I am, therefore I'm forcing them to accept me and I feel a little bit more accepted, more because I'm more assertive than the fact they're accepting me (Faye).

The sentiments expressed by Faye were supported by others and some indicated feeling stronger within themselves, coupled with a higher self esteem. Many felt they were more assertive and confident in their life and relationships. The reunion experience resulted in not only an expansion of their construction of family for some, but also an expansion of their identity.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication is an important element in developing and maintaining any relationship. To develop intimate relationships, people must communicate with each other in order to get to know one another. Important features of communication include: the nature of the communication shared, whether intimate or peripheral; what kind of information is shared in that exchange; the amount of communication; and the consistency of communication over time. The kind of relationship held between individuals impacts on all of the above features of communication. According to Sieburg (1985, p71);

family communication differs from other human communication only in its emotional intensity. Because of the intimate nature of the relationships involved, any miscommunication in the family is likely to be more painful and the consequences more serious than in other human groups.

Communication was reported by many participants as crucial in the development and maintenance of family relationships both with their adoptive and birth family. The kind



of communication shared was important to most, with "honesty" ranked the highest by most adoptees, particularly in reference to their birth mother (Anne, Belinda, Dave, Faye, Isabel). This was conceptualised in the different kinds of communication and information shared.

Different information is shared with the adoptive family and birth family. Many participants reported that they had told their birth family things about themselves their adoptive family had never been told. Often the kind of information shared was related to more intimate and deeper issues, rather than day to day activities. Two participants in this research, for instance, told their birth mother about a pregnancy they had terminated, information not shared with their adoptive mother (Mandy and Natalie). They both felt they had done this in order to as Mandy expresses "very quickly to get an intimate relationship so I opened up very quickly". Natalie added that she would not have shared this information with her adoptive mother as it may have hurt her, but by sharing it with her birth mother, Natalie felt she was attempting to hurt her birth mother for adopting her out in the first instance. In a sense, by sharing this kind of information, Mandy and Natalie were attempting to establish an open relationship based on honesty and intimacy. If they share an intimate part of themselves then potentially their birth mothers will also share an intimate part of themselves.

The differences in the kind of communication shared is also related to the fact that relationships with their birth family are new and in order for them to develop, they need to get to know each other. For instance, an adoptees' adoptive family is already aware of the achievements they have made in their life such as academic or sporting achievements. This type of information is unknown to an adoptee's birth family and it

takes time to share the memories of over twenty years. Not only are each getting to know one another, there are also issues that need to be discussed that are only relevant to adoptees and their birth family, or more specifically their birth parents. Lisa attempts to describe the differences:

I write to my mum and dad about once a fortnight and sometimes once a week and it's just, my little boy Tommy is doing this, Tommy's doing that, just day to day stuff whereas with my birth mother cause it was still new yeah it was deeper because we're sort of going over a lot of issues, she's very psychic as well actually, and we sort of, and I can write things and she knows but you know exactly, yeah I do write on a different, and I speak to her differently on the telephone too...and like we said earlier I've probably told her things that I wouldn't tell my adoptive family.

Not only was the kind of communication important but so was the consistency of the communication between adoptees and their 'family'. It was felt by some that communication should be initiated from both parties and some adoptees felt this was not happening with their birth family. Anne highlights the importance of communication in maintaining relationships, particularly with 'family' and the consequences of limited communication:

A good girlfriend that I'm still in contact with, she would probably be closer than they [birth family] are, but probably because of the keeping the contact. Keeping the communication that's where...to me that's family,...but because that communication isn't there with my birth family.

Maintaining communication, as Anne sees it, is crucial in maintaining close relationships, particularly over time. To develop a close relationship with her birth mother, Anne feels that communication needs to be more consistent. 'Family' then for some, or at least 'close family', are those who maintain communication in a consistent fashion. Quantity is not the crucial element here, but rather consistency, such as contact on birthdays, Christmas and special occasions. Communication is influenced by the

relationships held. As Sieburg (1985, p65) states "every communication has a content and relationship aspect, such that the latter classified the former". This is particularly clear when looking at the differences between the communication participants share with their adoptive family and birth family.

## **DIFFERENT KINDS OF COMMUNICATION**

Many adoptees reported communicating differently with their birth family than with their adoptive family both in regards to the content and the nature of the communication. Often certain information was not shared with their adoptive family in order to 'protect' them from being hurt, a 'risk' some adoptees did not want to take (Lisa, Henry). The risk of hurting established relationships at times overrode the desire to share information with others. Another reason cited for the difference in the kind of communication shared was that nature of the communication with their birth family was reported as being on a "deeper level" than with their adoptive family (Faye, Lisa, Jenny, Henry). This was related to the existence of a 'natural' understanding shared which was based on biological similarities.

### **Risk factor / Risky Communication**

One of the most stark examples of the difference in the information shared with birth families and adoptive families was in two cases where participants had not informed their adoptive parents and family of their 'reunion' (Lisa, Henry). These are not isolated cases as most research on adoption 'reunions' report incidences of adoptees who

have not told their adoptive family about the contact they have had with their birth family (Campbell, Silverman & Patti, 1991; Picton, 1980; Slaytor, 1986; Sorosky, Baran & Pannor, 1974; Webber, Thompson & Stoneman, 1980). In most cases, the reasons cited included the ill health, fragility and age of their adoptive parents and more importantly, the fear of hurting their adoptive parents or of being disloyal to them. Two adoptees interviewed in this research, Lisa and Henry, share these sentiments, both reasoning that they did not want to take the risk of hurting their parents and the relationship they share with them.

Henry feels his adoptive mother would not cope very well knowing he had searched and located his birth family. He does not want "to take the risk" of hurting her and feels that "it is that you owe them something in the sense that they did adopt you, and they've done well by you, and that makes you a little bit more protective". In Henry's eyes, by not telling his adoptive family about the contact he has had with his birth family, he is protecting them from feeling hurt and inadequate. Henry feels he is able to be more open and honest with his birth family because (amongst other reasons) they are aware of the situation, and support him in his decision not to tell his adoptive family.

In Lisa's case, her adoptive parents had asked her not to tell them anything of the search and feels she must respect their wishes. She feels the communication with her birth mother is

more open in a way because it, maybe again because it boils down to at the moment, there isn't that risk, you can be more open because you know, I don't feel as close, maybe that's what it is, I don't know.

This comment suggests that in developing relationships, the 'risk' of harming or losing that relationship is minimal in comparison to those that are already established. The closer the relationship, the higher the 'risks' are in potentially jeopardizing the relationship.

In both cases, Lisa and Henry express a sense of loyalty they hold towards their adoptive family. This is evident in Lisa's comment as she describes her visit to the United Kingdom:

I was very torn between wanting to be there for my adopted parents and there's no way in the world I'm going to hurt them, but I've got this other life going on and I've got to go and see them too... I just can't take that risk, I would sooner, I would hope it would never come to this but I would sooner not have contact with my birth mother, and I, that's an awful thing to say but I would sooner not have that than give up my adoptive parents.

Lisa expresses a desire held by many adoptees; the desire not to hurt their adoptive parents nor have their reunion impact negatively on their relationship (Post Adoption Resource Centre, 1992). The extent to which the reunion experience is shared with adoptive parents (and family) depends on the kind of relationship that has existed between them. The relationships adoptees have already established with their adoptive family follow particular communication patterns that have been developed throughout their lifetime. As time has passed and members have matured, the boundaries of support and communication have also shifted and each member is aware, to a certain degree, of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Upon meeting their birth family, as in other relationships, there is a need to establish boundaries and the extent of obligations by those involved. As most adoptees are adults

when meeting their birth family and their relationship is only new, they are in a better position to decide the nature of their relationship and the impact that it will have on their everyday lives. Whether they be adoptive or birth family members, as adults, adoptees choose the level of significance they will play in their lives. Elsie's comment highlights the choice individuals have in selecting who is to be significant in their lives: "blood makes a difference, but you choose your family when you get to a certain adult point, and that's what I've done".

Individuals "weigh up the risks" (Henry) and the consequences of sharing certain information with particular people. The impact it may have on their relationship is taken into account particularly when these relationships are important to the individual. As relationships with their adoptive family have been established over time, there is an awareness of the impact particular situations will have on these relationships. The presumed negative consequences of informing their adoptive parents about the contact they have had with their birth family for Lisa and Henry prevents them from sharing this important information with them.

### **Biological Connection**

According to some psychological theorists, a biological bond exists between genetic parents and their children and as such, a natural understanding of each other (Verrier, 1992). This belief has underpinned many arguments about the 'naturalness' of mothers and the biological connection they have with their children (Badinter, 1981; Ross, 1993). Some participants in this study argued that they communicated differently with their birth family because of the "natural affinity" they hold with them and, the 'natural'

understanding of them that follows from this (Faye, Henry, Jenny, Lisa). These participants saw themselves as not only biologically related to their birth family but also connected on a deeper level of understanding. Both Faye and Lisa referred to their birth mothers as being somewhat "psychic" and believed they knew when they were not feeling the best. In both scenarios their birth mothers had either called them on occasions at a particular time when they were feeling low or during a conversation were able to detect there was something wrong.

The existence of a 'natural' understanding referred to by some participants was based primarily on their biological connection and shared genetic make-up as Henry's comment suggests;

The way I see it I feel they understand me better than...because they are, we are blood related, because with my adoptive side I have to go through and do they understand what I am talking about so you go about it a different way.

Some participants expressed feeling their communication was "on a deeper level" with their birth family (Jenny, Henry, Faye). Jenny feels this is the case in her situation and referred to the exchange of particular gifts to highlight the 'natural' connection she feels with birth parents. She cited receiving gifts wrapped in her favourite colour, unknown to her birth mother, and receiving a book from her birth father written by her favourite poet, information unknown to both of her birth parents. Jenny feels connected to her birth parents not only because they pinpointed her 'favourite' things but also because they share a liking for these things. It is both the recognition and the similarities shared that warrants Jenny's feelings of "natural affinity".

The communication shared between individuals contributes to the establishment and maintenance of all relationships including those regarded as familial. The kind of relationship held impacts on the kind of communication shared and, presumably the closer the relationship, the more intimate the communication will be. As adoptees attempt to develop close relationships with their birth family, the kind of information shared will influence the kind of relationship they will hold in the future.

## CONCLUSION

Sociological definitions of 'family' and those used by government agencies and the ABS do not adequately describe family life as it is lived. 'Family' is not restricted to a singular household nor are relationships perceived as 'familial' because of the existence of a legal or biological relationship. The importance of emotional ties between people is central to an individual's construction of 'family' as the bond shared can be stronger than legal or biological links. What people do and how they do it impacts on how individuals view their relationship. Individuals fulfilling tasks commonly attributed to the 'family' such as support and care, can be seen by those being cared for as 'family'.

Ideally, 'family' relationships consist of unconditional support, care and love. Although this was not always the case in reality, many participants felt it was a crucial element in allocating particular members as 'family'. The notion of 'unconditionality' with respect to support and love, I believe, relates to the ideal representations of 'family' and what 'family' should do and provide. In this context, the provision of support is given because of the emotional tie that exists between individuals and is provided voluntarily, detached from feelings of obligation. Based on the intensity of the emotional ties that



exist, 'family' members care for one another because they want to, not because they have to. Those who are regarded as 'family' are those who fulfill this ideal.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the way in which the meaning of 'family' is constructed is influenced by a variety of factors and does not have a fixed criteria. 'Family' means different things to different people at different times. Depending on the situation or purpose to which the definition is being used, individuals decide who are 'family', who are relatives and what relationships in their lives they regard as familial. For instance, the context in which 'family' was discussed for the purposes of this study influenced the way in which adoptees constructed their meaning of 'family'. Discussions in this setting enabled them to explore their notions of 'family' and to discover for themselves how they define family and why they include particular people. The significance particular people play in the everyday lives of individuals influences who they regard 'as family', and through the process of this study, adoptees established the significance others hold in their lives.

The term 'family' is commonly used to describe a particular relationship held between people. Generally what has constituted this relationship has been the existence of legal or biological ties. However as this study demonstrates, 'family' extends further than simply the presence of these ties. The individuals in this study used two broad categories to define others as 'family' namely, the relationship shared and the acts individuals perform.

'Family' are those people who are connected by both legal or biological links and/or emotional ties. The inclusion of particular members is dependent on the closeness felt in a relationship and the tasks performed by individuals. 'Family' can include legally defined

members or others such as friends, due not only to the support given but also the way in which it is transferred. Individuals can define others as 'family' because they fulfill needs their legally obligated family are unable to meet. To distinguish between those who are family and those who are not we must look at the support that is shared and the emotions attached to that support.

Particular acts individuals perform for each other and the way in which they carry them out distinguishes 'family' from 'non-family'. Individuals in this study felt family members should provide support both physically and emotionally, maintain communication openly and honestly, and spend (or have spent) time with them. Support given is an important aspect in allocating them as 'as family'. Not only is the physical act of support important but also the way in which it is done. The sentiment attached to particular acts is a distinguishing feature of family and, ideally, family members perform these tasks unconditionally. This expectation placed on 'family' highlights ideal notions surrounding the meaning of 'family' and what families do. Individuals in this study recognised that this ideal is not necessarily reproduced in reality. What 'family' means to individuals on a general level is not necessarily interchangeable with their individual experience of family life.

Significant life events influence an individual's construction of family, which highlights the fluid nature of family relationships over time. The way in which an individual sees family on one particular day may not be replicated the next. Anne's comment reflects the dynamics of family relationships as time passes and different situations arise; "I've felt joy,

I've felt bitterness and I've felt anger and felt relief. I've felt everything and it's at different times, yeah it depends".

The impact of contact on individual constructions of 'family' was more evident in some cases than others. For many adoptees contact with their birth family members made them address their meaning of family in a new light and existing family ties were reconsidered. In many cases participants suggested that they gained a new appreciation for their adoptive family and felt their relationships with their adoptive families had strengthened because of the process. It appears contact with birth relatives was significant to adoptees in relation to their identity and impacted on the relationships they hold with others.

The way in which adoptees in this study constructed their meaning of family, I would argue, does not differ to those not adopted. Family relationships are complex and the twelve examples in this study reflect the complexity and diversity of individual definitions of family. The lived experience of 'family' is not structured according to specified boundaries and categories rather it is the emotional tie held between people that constitutes a 'real' family relationship. I believe individuals draw on two sources to define 'family'. The first is semantic as the word 'family' has ideal notions of unconditional support and acceptance attached to it. The second is the lived reality of 'family' which is based on not only legally defined relationships, but also who provides support to them in their everyday lives. These two sources intersect and it is at this intersection we find an individual's construction of family.

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# **APPENDIX A**

## **Glossary**

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

**adoption triangle / triad:** an adoption triangle/triad consists of adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents.

**contact:** any communication including letters, telephone and personal contact.

**contact veto:** "once veto is placed, an applicant cannot receive any identifying information about the other person until he or she signs and agreement not to contact that person. This is a legal agreement" (Department for Community Development, 1994, p22). Depending on which Australian state, it can be placed for lifetime or specified time and can be cancelled or altered at any time.

**family of origin:** the family in which an individual is raised.

**family of procreation:** the family created through bearing of children.

**identifying information:** "any information which identifies, or may identify, a person who is part of an adoption. For example the information may include court records - these are from the Family Court and have details of the adoption - or birth registration records from the Registrar General's Office" (Department for Community Development, 1994, p13).

**information veto:** "will stop identifying information from court records or birth registration records from being released to another person involved in the adoption" (Department for Community Development, 1994, p20). Depending on which Australian state, it can be placed for a lifetime or a specified time and can be cancelled or altered at any time.

**non-identifying information:** "information from adoption records and files which provides details about a person who is part of an adoption but does not identify that person. For example the information may include physical description, education, medical details, interests, etc." (Department for Community Development, 1994, p13).

**reunion:** the meeting of an adult adoptee with their birth parent and/or relative.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Introductory Flyer**



## **ARE YOU ADOPTED?**

**HAVE YOU HAD CONTACT WITH YOUR BIRTH PARENT(S) &/OR BIRTH FAMILY MEMBERS?**

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET AND TALK WITH OTHER ADOPTEEES?**

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO ASSIST ME IN A PROJECT I AM INVOLVED IN LOOKING AT ISSUES FACING ADOPTEEES?**

**IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO THE ABOVE QUESTIONS, I NEED YOU!!**

I am currently undertaking a Master of Arts in Sociology and Anthropology at Edith Cowan University. The focus of my thesis is on what 'family' means to adoptees.

As an adoptee who has met both my birth parents and many of my birth family members, my idea of 'family' has changed. I am interested in how other adoptees who have had contact with their birth parent(s) and/or birth family members view 'family' and how this contact has affected them.

All I ask of you is 2 separate one hour interviews and possibly participation in a group discussion with other adoptees. Any information shared in the interviews and group session will be treated with anonymity and confidentiality outside of these settings.

If you are interested please contact me, Adrianne Moloney on 371 0829.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Consent Form**

## CONSENT FORM

Research Title: 'Family' as constructed by an adoptee after contact has been made with birth parent(s) or birth family members.

The research has two main purposes:

- to examine how adoptee's construct the meaning of family
- how these constructions are altered after contact with birth parent(s) has been made

As the purpose suggests, participants in this research are adoptees who have made contact with their birth parent(s) or birth family members. Two interviews (1 hour duration each) will be conducted with volunteering participants. The interview will follow themes pertaining to your meaning of 'family'.

A group session will be held after all interviews have been completed to share thoughts, ideas, and stories. The underlying theme is on the meaning of family, and how you as an adoptee view this concept. You are under no obligation to share any information or details about your life and any information shared will be treated with anonymity, respecting your privacy.

The interrelated topics adoption and family are extremely personal and as such, discussing these topics may cause some discomfort. I will endeavor to ensure this is minimal, but the nature of the topic is emotional and participants should be aware of this. On a more positive note, sharing ideas with others you have a common link with, may lead you (and others) to a better understanding of what family means to you and perhaps through discussion, ideas may occur to you that had previously not been contemplated.

Any information shared in the group session and interview will be treated with anonymity and confidentiality outside of these settings. If quotations are used in my final research, these will not be identifiable as there will be no identifying evidence on disks, cassettes or transcripts. Access to the data is only available to myself and my two supervisors John Duff and Sherry Sagers.

Participation in either the interview or group discussion is performed on a volunteer basis. If at any point you no longer wish to be involved, you are free to withdraw from participating.

After analysis has been done on the data collected, I would be interested in receiving feedback from you, the participant. It is at this point you will also have an opportunity to express thoughts and ideas about the research and how reflective my analysis is of your experience.

Any questions concerning this project can be directed to myself, Adrienne Moloney on 371 0829 or my supervisors John Duff 400 5747 and Sherry Sagers 271 4050.

Thank you for your time and consideration in participating in this research project.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I (the participant) have read the information above and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not indentifiable.

I agree to participate in the in-depth interivews

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I am willing to participate in the group discussion

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Interview Schedule #1**

## **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE #1**

### **Introductory Comments**

Hello, as you know my name is Adrienne Moloney and I am a full-time student at Edith Cowan University. As you have read in both the flyer and consent form, I am interested in how an adoptee views family and how contact with birth family members alters that view.

I can assure your anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, for the duration of my project, you will be referred to as \_\_\_\_\_ throughout the interviews and the data produced.

Would it be all right with you if I record the interview? If you would like, I can give you a copy of the transcript to keep for your own reference. Once again regarding confidentiality, your real name will not be present on the tape or transcript, and only myself and my two supervisors have access to them.

### **Warm Up**

We could get started if you like. As I said earlier I'm interested in how adoptees view family and how this view changes after having contact with any of their birth family.

The purpose of this first interview is to give me an idea of your life history in one sense and we'll be talking about your life as an adoptee before and after contact with your birth relatives.

### **Circumstances of Adoption**

I would like to begin with talking to you about growing up as an adoptee.

Perhaps we could begin with a little background to your adoption.

- how old were you when you were adopted?
- when and where did the adoption occur?

Could you tell me what you knew about your adoption prior to having contact with any birth relatives?

- when did you find out you were adopted (age adoption was disclosed)?
- how did you find out you were adopted?
- how was it explained to you? By whom?

## **Adoptive Family**

Can we talk about your adoptive family a bit more...what can you tell me about them?

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

- Are they younger or older?
- Can you describe your relationship with them as you were growing up?
- How would you describe your relationship now?
- Are any other siblings adopted?

How was the subject of adoption treated by those around you as you were growing up?

- adoptive parents
- friends / peers
- siblings
- others
- family members

Can you give me any examples of what they would say?

Did you talk with any members in your adoptive family of your intention to search / contact your birth relative? How did they react?

- are they aware contact has been made?
- have they been aware from the onset?
- how did they feel when initial contact was made?
- how does your adoptive family feel about the ongoing contact you have with your birth family?

Has contact with your birth family members changed your relationship with your:

- adoptive parents?
- siblings?

In what ways has it changed?

Have they met any of your birth family? Do you want them to meet?

## **Circumstances of Contact Experience**

Can we perhaps talk about the contact you have had with your birth relatives.

Can I begin by asking you who you had the first contact with and how did that contact occur?

- How long ago was contact first made?
- Who initiated the contact (adoptee, birth parent, sibling, aunt/uncle)

Can you describe the way you felt after the first contact/meeting happened?

Did you have any doubts or fears before the contact? What happened to those doubts/fears after contact was made?

Did you have any prior images of your birth parents/relatives before contact?

How different were your images?

Who else have you met since the initial contact with \_\_\_\_\_?

Can you tell me the events which led you to have contact with other family members?

How much contact do you have with them?

Who do you maintain contact with?

Would you like more or less contact?

### **Birth Family**

Do your birth parents have any children? Have you met them?

How did they react upon knowing your existence / meeting you?

Do they want to meet any of your adoptive family?

### **Family of Procreation**

Can I now speak to you about your own personal relationships;

- are you married or involved in a relationship? How long?
- have you got any children? How many, ages and gender.
- do they (partner / children) know you have made contact with your birth parent(s) or/and birth family members? How do they feel? How did you tell them?
- how does your partner / children feel about the contact made with your birth family member(s)?
- have they met any birth family members? Do they want to, do you want them to?
- has it affected your relationship with them in any way? {positively or negatively}
- how have they been affected by the contact made with your birth family members?

### **Cool Off**

Have you found it difficult to describe how you have felt / feel?

Do you have any regrets about making contact with you birth relative(s)?

If you could change anything, what would it be?

Do you think your relationship will remain the same to what it is now or will it change in the future? In what ways do you think?

### **Closure**

I want to thank you very much for giving me you time today and for sharing with me some interesting and intimate details about your life. Time for second interview set.



## **APPENDIX E**

### **Focus Group Schedule**

## **FOCUS GROUP**

### **GREETING** (prior to sitting in group formation)

Refreshments, name tags.

### **WELCOME (GENERAL)**

As you are all aware, tonight we are talking about 'family'.

Assurance of anonymity, use of pseudonyms.

Everyone's comments are both welcomed and I'm sure we all agree everybody's input is valuable. For the sake of courtesy and the recording of this discussion, I encourage only one speaker at a time.

In order to get to know each other a little better, can we go around the circle, introduce ourselves and tell us who you have met in your birth family and when that contact occurred.

### **INTRODUCTORY QUESTION**

When you think of 'family', what sorts of things come to your mind?

### **TRANSITION QUESTIONS**

What sorts of things do we expect from a family?

In general, what do families do? (meant to do or actually do? - both)

What are we obliged to do for our family?

### **KEY QUESTIONS**

Who are the important people in your life? (the special or significant people)

What reasons are there for those particular people to be important?

How do we distinguish between those who are family and those who are not?

What makes us call certain people family?

Are there any differences between adoptive and non-adoptive families?

What are some of these differences?

I have spoken to many of you about your relationship with your adoptive family, has contact with your birth family affected how you think about your adoptive family?

If you reflect back on what we said about what it is that families do and are, can you tell me how has contact with your birth family affected your ideas about what families do and are?

## **EVALUATION OF METHODS**

During the interviews, I asked you to write a list of those you considered to be in your family. The purpose of the list was to get you to think about your current view of your family and to get you to think about the topic we were discussing. Following this I asked you to construct two family maps, placing each member according to how close or how distant you felt those in your family were to you. The first represented your current view and the other prior to contact with your birth family. The aim of the map was to get a visual representation of relationships you hold with your family and to explore who and why some members are closer than others.

What I want to ask you is how did this work for you?

Do you think it achieved the purpose I had in mind?

Did the list allow you to think of who your family is?

Do you feel the map was an accurate picture of the relationships you hold with your family members?

## **ENDING QUESTIONS**

Of all the things discussed this evening regarding what families do, what do you think is the most important?

Summary Question: (after providing short summary) Is that an adequate summary?

Final Question: Have we missed anything?

## **APPENDIX F**

### **Personal Adoption Records/ Personal Identifying Information Received**

# PARTICULARS OF MOTHER

Full Name FRANCES MARY BAZELEY, Age 15 Rel. Catholic. Not English/Austrian  
 Place of Birth 26.1.1955 - Kimba, Occupation Nil  
 Date of Adm. 25.7.70, Adm. from 100 Seaview Road, West Beach, S.A.  
 Date of D/ch. D/ch. to FAMILY AWARE OF PREGNANCY  
 Parents' Names: Father William Joseph, 45 years, Catholic, Pharmacist  
 Mother Margaret Mary, 43 years, Catholic, Part-time casual work  
 Remarks: SIBLINGS: Anthony - 21 years, Elizabeth - 19 years, Mark - 12 years, Education: Kimba State School, Henley High - Secondary. Left 15 years - for 3 - intends to return to school. HEALTH: Self - asthma, hayfever. Father and brother - hayfever. Mother - Nervous breakdown. Brother - glasses for reading. First pregnancy - well throughout. INTERESTS: swimming, cooking, reading. APPEARANCE: 5ft. 5ins. slim build, brown eyes, black hair, fair complexion. P.F. Australian - 17 years - Baptist - known 1 1/2 years prior to pregnancy - sense of humour, strong character, selfish - 5ft 8 ins. well built, brown eyes, light brown hair, fair complexion. Leaving left at 16 years - labourer - 2 brothers, 1 sister - seemed healthy. Football, motor bikes, cars. Aware of pregnancy, no contact. No marriage plans, no financial help. GENERAL. Pleasant young girl of good intelligence. Plans adoption. Unlikely to revoke. Wants good Catholic home for babe.

FEMALE

ST. JOSEPH'S FOUNDLING HOSPITAL, BROADMEADOWS

Child: BAZELEY.

Full Registered Name: Urgula Lee

Date of Birth 27th November, 1970

Birth Wt. 5 lbs 9 1/2 ozs.

with

Adm. without Mother

Place of Birth R.H.H. Carlton

A little premature and not 6 lb. about 2 weeks

Particulars of Birth Illegitimate

Rel. Catholic

Date of Baptism 19.12.70

Place of Baptism B.Meadows

Rev. F.P. Murphy

If Verified  
YES NO

Sponsor

Wary

Date of Adm. 15.12.70

Wt. on Adm. 6 lbs 4 ozs. Condt. on adm.

Manson

Adm. to Nursery

"D"

Wt. on D/ch. 8lb 5 oz. Condt. on D/ch.

Schick Test

Wasserman

P.K.U. 21.12.70. Negative

Swabs Throat  
Nose

Prev. Illnesses

Placement Through S.M.T. S.J.H.

Reason for Adm. Unmarried mother

Adoption: Yes No

CONSENT WIT

3.12.70

Remarks

R.J.W.

On admission: Deep pink birth mark on left cheek

VISITED BROADMEADOWS 13.8.71 SEEN BY SISTER M. AMBROSE. WEIGHT. 22lbs. LENGTH 28" TEETH 2 lower CYRC. None. INJECTIONS. 3 T.A. 1 Sabin. Regular health centre visits. Good medical report. APPEARANCE. Auburn hair, hazel eyes, fair complexion. OBSERVATIONS. Sitting, crawling vocalizing, responding to family. Sitting with support, rolling, gooing and laughing. GENERAL COMMENT. A beautiful Babe. Family delighted with her. DOCTORS LETTER. This is to certify that Adrienne Moloney is in my opinion suffering from no disease or disability. She was examined by me on 2.8.71. SOLICITOR Byrne Jones & Torney, 38 Lydiard St, BALLARAT 33. New name: Adrienne Papers to Solicitors, 4.11.71. LEGAL ADOPTION ORDER: 8.2.72. Ballarat, Judge Gorman. Leg name: ADRIANNE MOLOONEY. Amended baptismal certificate posted 10.3.72

## BIRTH CERTIFICATE

<p><b>1 CHILD</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Family Name Christian or Given Name(s)</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sex Date of Birth Place of Birth</p>	<p><b>BAZELEY</b> <b>Ursula Lee</b></p> <p><b>Female</b> <b>27 November 1970</b> <b>Carlton</b></p> <div style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin-left: auto;">ADOPTED</div>
<p><b>2 MOTHER</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Family Name Maiden Family Name Christian or Given Name(s) Occupation Age Place of Birth</p>	<p><b>BAZELEY</b> <b>Bazeley</b> <b>Frances Mary</b></p> <p><b>15 years</b> <b>South Australia</b></p>
<p><b>3 FATHER</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Family Name Christian or Given Name(s) Occupation Age Place of Birth</p>	
<p><b>4 MARRIAGE OF PARENTS</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Date of Marriage Place of Marriage</p>	
<p><b>5 PREVIOUS CHILDREN OF RELATIONSHIP</b></p>	
<p><b>6 INFORMANT(S)</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Name Address</p>	<p><b>F. BAZELEY</b> <b>447 Camp Road</b> <b>Broadmeadows</b> <b>Mother</b></p>
<p><b>7 REGISTRATION OFFICER</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Name Date</p>	<p><b>G. R. Stanford</b> <b>30 November 1970</b></p>
<p><b>8 ENDORSEMENT(S)</b> <b>ADOPTED</b></p> <div style="border: 2px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin-left: auto;">ADOPTED</div>	

46636 run

-9 FEB 1972

FORM OF ADOPTION ORDER

IN THE COUNTY COURT AT BALLARAT

1972 19 No. 1

IN THE MATTER of the Adoption of Children Act 1964

and

IN THE MATTER of the County Court Act 1958

and

IN THE MATTER of a child proposed to be adopted

ADRIANNE MOLONEY and

FRANCIS JAMES MOLONEY and

CARMEL ELIZABETH MOLONEY

Applicants

UPON READING the summons herein issued the

, 19

, and UPON READING the affidavits of

day of

Francis

James Moloney and Carmel Elizabeth Moloney

the applicants herein, and

Paul Ralph

(Names of other Deponents)

sworn and filed herein and the exhibits referred to therein, and upon hearing the solicitor for the said applicants and the evidence of

PRINCIPAL OFFICER, CATHOLIC FAMILY WELFARE BUREAU

(Name of guardian)

of

466 ALBERT ST. EAST MELBOURNE

(Address and occupation)

the guardian of the child herein.

And the Judge being satisfied that it is for the benefit of the said child that (s)he should be adopted by the said

Francis James Moloney and Carmel Elizabeth Moloney

(Names of applicants)

and that all the requirements of the Adoption of Children Act 1964 have been complied with :

It is ordered that the said

FRANCIS JAMES MOLONEY, Painter

(Names of male applicant) (Occupation)

and

CARMEL ELIZABETH MOLONEY

(Name of female applicant)

his wife, both of

4 Walker Street, Ballarat

(Address)

in the State of Victoria, be authorized to adopt the said child.

And it is directed that the Government Statist shall make an entry recording this adoption in the Register of Adoptions.

And it having been proved to the satisfaction of the Judge that the said child was born on the 27th day of November, 1970, and is identical with

Ursula Lee Hazeley (Name as in birth certificate)

to whom an entry numbered

66935/70 (As in Column No. 1 of certificate)

and made on

the 30th day of November

at

Malbourne

(No. 10 of certificate)

relates it is further directed that the Govern-

ment Statist shall cause such birth entry or entries to be marked with the word "adopted", and shall include the above date of birth in the entry recording the adoption and that the said child shall be registered in the name of

ADRIANNE MOLONEY (Adoption names and surname)

DATED the

8th

day of

February

1972.

Judge.

