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Why Adoptees Search: An Existential Treatment Perspective

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This article frames the adult adoptee's search for his or her biological roots in an existential treatment perspective. This context offers depth of understanding of the adoptee's dilemma while allowing the counselor an expanded foundation from which to understand an adopted client's desire for personal historical information. An existential view of adoption allows the counselor to view the adoptee's struggle as a variation on the nearly universal human concerns of death, isolation, meaninglessness, being, anxiety, and freedom. Treatment approaches are suggested and discussed.

To many persons, the word *adoptee* resonates with some of the deepest and most fundamental issues of life—connection, identity, and meaning. Although these touch virtually all individuals (Frankl, 1984; Josselson, 1992; Yalom, 1980), the secrecy surrounding the adoption process intensifies these issues for the adult adoptee (Lifton, 1994). Past and current practices of adoption reach beyond the adoption triad—that is, the adoptee, birthparents, and adoptive parents—and extend into the domain of societal stigma and social judgments (March, 1995). The adoptee not only shares the universal search for answers to his or her daily existence, but often he or she must also struggle to overcome a multitude of secret entanglements set in place by others who believed that they were acting in the best interest of the adoption triad (Lifton, 1994; Rosenberg, 1992). Although many adoptees are correctly informed of their origins, this article deals with those who are uncertain.

To achieve a sense of reconciliation, such an adoptee is provided a set of stories that all too often include lies intended to protect participants from the emotional pain that accompanies each decision in the adoption process (D. Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Lifton, 1994; Schooler, 1995). The adoptee is further affected by the initial act of separation from the birthparent(s) and the hope or expectation of connection to the adoptive parent(s) (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1984; Rosenberg, 1992). The adoptee is asked to accept decisions made for him or her before reaching the age of reason. Nonadoptees may take for granted the accurate knowledge they hold about their biological heritage and family culture. In contrast, the adoptee is often expected to accept without question the

stories provided along with the truths and heritage of his or her nonrelated adopted family (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992). The adoptee is compelled to take on the culture of the adoptive family as his or her own in an attempt to acquire a sense of belonging, no matter how false the reality (McColm, 1993; Sorosky et al., 1984). Given these conditions, the adoptee's desire to search is quite understandable.

In this article, an existential perspective is proposed as a practical approach to understanding the complexities of the adoption experience and an adoptee's desire to search. An existential lens can bring into focus an adoptee's natural desire to seek out his or her roots, with the effect of normalizing the experience for members of the adoptive system. Whether an adoptee undertakes the actual physical act of searching or whether it remains a purely psychological longing, the desire itself can be seen as a natural aspect of each individual's struggle to reconcile fundamental existential concerns (May, 1983). In this article, crucial existential themes relevant to adult adoptees are explored, especially for those who, as infants, were products of traditional closed adoption practices. These existential themes are death, meaninglessness, isolation, anxiety, being, and freedom.

In addition to the existential lens, we also present a brief survey of current and historical adoption practices. This background information can assist counselors to be more aware of the dynamics involved in the adoption culture in the way of language, context, norms, laws, societal attitudes, and values. Counselors thus informed are better equipped to understand and respond to the needs of these clients (Axelson, 1993). The adoptee's desire to know more about his or her origins is more than a mere issue of adjust-

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ment. It is a movement toward mental health, wellness, and congruence (D. Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Hoopes, 1982; McColm, 1993; Sorosky et al., 1984; Stein & Hoopes, 1985). An existential approach to the adoptee's search provides a workable developmental framework from which to approach treatment.

BACKGROUND IN ADOPTION PRACTICES

The practice of adoption has been a part of recorded history for thousands of years. For example, Exodus (Good News Bible, 1976) tells the story of an orphaned Moses, who was separated from his ancestry as an infant. Moses was drawn to lead "his people" out of bondage to their homeland, where he felt he belonged (Exodus: 2, 1-10). For centuries, adoption has been linked to existential quests. Another example is developmental psychologist and "half-adoptee," Erik Erikson, who reported that his own development and identity was affected by not knowing his biological father (Lifton, 1994).

Ancient laws addressed the issue of adoption and set in place the practice of silence about origins, a practice that has long been a part of the adoption process. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi—the oldest known written laws—specifically stated that the adoptee's tongue would be cut out in the case of having declared that he or she was not the biological child of that family (Sorosky et al., 1984). It also stated that if the adoptee pursued a search for his or her biological heritage, he or she would be blinded (Lifton, 1988; Sorosky et al., 1984).

Adoption guidelines developed in the United States differed significantly from those ancient laws with the inclusion of a concept written into the law that adoption was to be "in the best interest of the child." Before this, the best interest of the family held priority (Sorosky et al., 1984). The desire to preserve familial ties dissipated as adoption reform practices moved toward legitimizing the adoptive family.

Reformers believed that the child's best interest would not be met if he or she unnecessarily carried the stigma of illegitimacy. Thus, the child's past was deliberately sealed as part of what was believed to be a beneficent act (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Lifton, 1988). Before the 1950s adoptive families were specifically instructed not to tell the child about the adoption, in the belief that the child and family were better served by maintaining the secrecy. The family could then act "as if" the child were born into the family (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Lifton, 1988; McColm, 1993).

Birth certificates and adoption records for agencies and private parties were amended and closed by government seal (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Lifton, 1988; Sorosky et al., 1984). This meant that no member of the adoption triad could access the information gathered in the adoption process. The adoptive parents could not find out the names or origins of the biological parents. The child could not gain information that would identify the biological parents. The biological parents could not obtain information about

the placement of the child. Without access and information, each member was believed to be spared the shame: The adoptive parents were spared the shame of infertility (McColm, 1993; Rosenberg, 1992), the birthparent was spared the shame of immoral conception (Rosenberg, 1992), and the adoptee was spared the shame of illegitimacy with its connotation of "bad blood" (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Lifton, 1988; Rosenberg, 1992). This was considered an act of kindness, and each member of the process was told that in time they would eventually forget about the transaction (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Rosenberg, 1992).

The secrecy appears to have arisen out of noble intentions. However, it did not diminish the natural developmental curiosity of the healthy adopted child who innocently and typically asked of his or her parents, "Where did I come from?" (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Thus, adoptive parents were encouraged to create and share a story about the child's adoption. This has been referred to as the "chosen baby" story (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton, 1988; McColm, 1993). An inherent part of that story was the message that it was out of love that the child was placed for adoption (A. B. Brodzinsky, 1993). Adoptive parents could only share what information they were given. The rest of the details had to be fabricated from the threads that remained, and mixed with assumptions and beliefs. Even though the actual records remained sealed and amended, the story served to plant a seed of interest in the adoptee's origins. This occurred despite the pervasive belief that the child's best interest was served by the pretense of his or her history beginning at the time of adoption (Lifton, 1994).

Traditional or "closed" adoption remained the standard of practice in agencies until the 1980s (Gross, 1993; Rompf, 1993; Rosenberg, 1992). The current trend is toward opening up the adoption process (Berry, 1993; Rappaport, 1992; Rompf, 1993; Silber & Dorner, 1989). The movement toward open adoption was initiated by adoptees in the late 1960s as an attempt to battle the secrecy surrounding their sealed records (Rompf, 1993). Currently, openness in adoption is quite variable, ranging from regular contact between the adoptee, the birthparents, and the adoptive parents to a single letter and picture exchanged (Berry, 1993). The continuum of contact options is based on the desires and needs of each member of the adoption triad (Rompf, 1993). Rompf's (1993) survey of Americans' attitude toward open adoption found that 86% believed adoptees would want to know their biological origins and thus favored the opening of the adoption process. Perhaps the individuals adopted through a more open system will benefit from their extended family structure (Berry, 1993).

ADULT ADOPTEES WHO SEARCH

An increasing number of adults adopted through the traditional infant adoption process have openly expressed a desire to break down the secrecy barriers to gain informa-

tion about their birth families (Adelberg, 1986; Auth & Zaret, 1986; Rompf, 1993). These searching adoptees have captured the attention of the popular press (Sachdev, 1992). Television talk shows are strewn with the ups and downs of reuniting lost loved ones.

The quest for adoptees to open their adoption records is directly opposed to the secrecy policy believed to be "in the best interest of the child" (Gediman & Brown, 1991; Lifton, 1988). The adoption laws of the 1930s and 1940s that required the sealing of records (Auth & Zaret, 1986) are being challenged by members in each group of the adoption triad (Sorosky et al., 1984). Adoption agencies and mental health professionals struggle with this controversial action by adult adoptees (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). It would appear that the movement toward searching may result in a paradigm shift as a greater number of helping professionals realize the impact of adoption on personal lives (Hartman, 1991).

What differentiates searching adoptees from nonsearching adoptees? Researchers are beginning to examine this phenomenon (Adelberg, 1986; Andersen, 1989; Aumend & Barrett, 1983; Kowal & Schilling, 1985; March, 1995; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). Searching adoptees appear to share only one commonality: being adopted (March, 1995). Searching adoptees also tend to be female, and there is no clear empirical evidence as to why the gender of searchers is skewed (Kowal & Schilling, 1985; March, 1995; Pacheco & Eme, 1993).

Theorists have approached adoptee search as an attempt at identity formation (Deeg, 1991; Humphrey & Humphrey, 1989; Lifton 1994; Rosenberg & Horner, 1991). The formation of a cohesive identity for any individual is a complex task. For the traditionally adopted individual, unknown origins can result in fantasies that may affect his or her identity formation (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Rosenberg & Horner, 1991). Deeg (1991) theorized that an adoptee's interest in his or her biological origins is an adaptational urge toward identity consolidation. Receipt of information about biological origins offers the adoptee an opportunity to identify with or belong to a history or time line. It is the understanding of how he or she belongs that offers the opportunity to recognize differences. It is through understanding sameness and differences that identity exists (Heidegger, 1969). Masterson (1988) noted that one of the characteristics of the real self is a continuous sense of identity.

There are a multitude of issues that arise from the transaction of adoption. These issues are as varied as are the individuals, but each holds particular importance for the adoptee. Questions raised by the adoptee stem from his or her internal desire to make sense out of this "other than natural" manner of becoming a member of a family. The adoptee is forced to develop a tenuous equilibrium that allows for existence in a world of which he or she is not a genetic part. A false sense of familial identity is established for the child. The new identity allows for the child to feel that he or she belongs (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton,

1988, 1994). The temptation to accept an "adoption story" (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton, 1988) may be fueled by the potential meaningfulness that the story offers.

It has been suggested that all adoptees search for their roots, even if it is only at a psychological level (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992). The motivation appears to be an attempt to ground oneself in the reality of one's origins and form a conceptualization from which one can construct one's own reality-based adoption story. The pervasive theme in all this is a fundamental striving for a sense of belonging (Blau, 1993; McColm, 1993).

EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

Existentialism deals with primary, inescapable, and transcultural (Vontress, 1988) aspects of human existence. It is concerned with an individual's struggle to come to terms with one's being-in-the-world. It deals with the authenticity of one's existence (Heidegger, 1927/1962) and the desire to attain meaningfulness and one's intrinsic freedom. The process of authentically being-in-the-world is the process of uncovering the truth of one's own being (Heidegger, 1927/1962) despite the anxiety encountered as part of this process. The primordial phenomenon of disclosing the truth of one's being offers a sense of grounding in one's own authentic being. It is through authenticity that one genuinely experiences being-in-the world (Heidegger, 1927/1962). For the adopted individual, the uncovering of his or her own truth begins with the awareness of the desire to search (Deeg, 1991) for his or her biological beginnings. Of course, searching does not lead automatically to authenticity. But it may be that the need for authenticity leads to the search.

If it is true that nearly all functional adoptees are curious about their beginnings and heritage, it is interesting to speculate as to why only a percentage of these persons choose to undertake a physical search (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Klunder, 1991; Sachdev, 1992). This may best be understood existentially. Contemplating one's own ability to choose can evoke existential anxiety (Yalom, 1980), especially in terms of what might happen as a result of one's choices. McColm (1993), for example, overcame her anxiety over whether to search, but her choice led to the discovery of profound unexplored emotion and an encompassing depression. Contemplating the search reveals core fears of being rejected, the threat of being alienated from society and family, and the fear that one might be from an "unsavory" background. These fears and apprehensions are further intensified in the searching adoptee because of the perception that he or she has already been rejected by the birthmother (Verrier, 1989). Consequently, the desire to search may be discouraged by the anxiety involved in what one may find.

From an existential perspective, the process of the search would begin with self-awareness of the desire or need, followed by a choice of whether to engage the anxiety that accompanies the struggle for existential freedom, choice,

and authenticity (Bugental, 1978). Embracing the choice to search has to do with the acceptance of responsibility for one's life and the acknowledgment that one's choices are laden with risks (Edwards, 1982; Sartre, 1985; Yalom, 1980). However, the quest for one's own personal truth is fraught with anxieties that resonate at the very core of each individual's being (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Facing the anxiety that stands in the way of discovering the truth of one's being is a necessary step toward authenticity (Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Yalom (1980) identified four central existential concerns: death, isolation, freedom, and meaninglessness. Each of these concerns are considered by existentialists as universal themes for all individuals and as a source of the primordial anxiety or angst that is intrinsic to being alive (see Heidegger, 1927/1962). These concerns aptly portray and describe the adoptee's struggle, as well as his or her process of contemplating whether to challenge the barrier of secrecy and the inauthentic way of being that this might represent. A deeper investigation of core existential themes in counseling may be of some utility in formulating treatment approaches for adoptees actively searching or who contemplate searching.

Death

One of the core themes of the existential perspective is the anxiety that surrounds death (Vandenberg, 1991). It is the uncertainty of death, both the lack of control of its occurrence and the lack of empirical data about its aftermath, that prompts the anxiety. Death brings about loss not only of life but also of relationships and the sense of the future (Hanna, 1991). Coming to terms with one's own mortality, as well as facing the ambiguity that death represents, is an important aspect of personal growth and development (Vandenberg, 1991). Death has a paradoxical quality in that the fear of it is paralyzing to the individual who avoids it, while at the same time acceptance of its inevitability can free the individual from the trivial life that results from that avoidance.

For the adoptee who searches, facing the certainty of death can help bring about a sense of the importance of a meaningful life, just as it does with many AIDS-afflicted persons (Schwartzberg, 1993). This leads to an ability to face anxiety and understand it as a universal issue rather than an adoption-related burden. Acceptance of death results in the realization that generations of human beings have come before and that future generations will continue to arise. This has the potential to place the adoptee into a general stream of time, temporality, and continuity that concerns human beings as a whole (see Heidegger, 1927/1962). This can serve as a springboard toward eventual transcendence of self. As noted by so many existentialists, confrontation with death has a way of bringing life into sparkling focus. Rather than a morbid preoccupation, facing death is an enhancement of being and the quality of life (Hanna, 1991; Heidegger, 1927/1962; Yalom, 1980).

The acknowledgment of death as the finality of physical existence also allows one to experience the poignancy of life's experiences (Yalom, 1980). If the individual is able to tolerate the finality of death and the ambiguity surrounding that experience, then he or she can act from a position of self-awareness and authenticity (Edwards, 1982; Yalom, 1980). Existential counseling strives to heighten the awareness of one's existence so that one can take responsibility for it in a way that enhances meaning and freedom. Its context is a here-and-now framework that deemphasizes the significance of a person's origins and past.

Anxieties about death and loss are intrinsic themes in the life of an adoptee. For the adoptee who has been placed for adoption at birth, loss becomes a profound reality (D. Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Lifton, 1988). Each milestone in the adoptee's life is shadowed or haunted by the knowledge that he or she has lost contact with his or her biological parents and heritage. His or her past is perceived as lost or shrouded in mystery, and birthparents are often thought of in the context of whether they are still alive. Adoptees are also denied the larger extended family history that might otherwise provide them with a sense of place and belonging (Lifton, 1988). This relates to an even larger scheme that would otherwise integrate them into the greater culture. For the adoptee who searches, resolving his or her biological origins reduces the extent of unfinished business, making acceptance of death look more like an exercise of closure rather than futility.

It is curious that, when learning of his or her adoption, the adoptee experiences the loss of something he or she often never knew about. This compounds that sense of mystery surrounding the question of origins (Deeg, 1991). For the adoptee to tolerate this profound loss, he or she often clings compulsively to wisps of information about his or her true family, trying to determine his or her place within the framework of the whole (Sorosky et al., 1984). These wisps can become material for unrealistic fantasies (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992), possibly leading to inauthentic attitudes and behaviors.

Isolation

Existential isolation is the concept that one is truly alone, that the space between human beings may be bridged but never completely removed (Josselson, 1992; Yalom, 1980). The fundamental anxiety surrounding the separation between the individual and the world propels one to attempt to traverse this phenomenon by endeavoring to establish interpersonal belonging with others. The anxiety that is felt by the individual as he or she struggles to develop and live in a relationship is part of the human experience (Josselson, 1992; Yalom, 1980).

In their attempt to quell the existential anxiety that stems from isolation, persons are drawn to finding or realizing their connection with others. When confronted by existential uncertainty, the individual seeks attachment with others as a strategy for coping (Vandenberg, 1991). This dialectic of separation and fusion is a constant theme in an indi-

vidual's development toward self-awareness. The desire to form profound attachments with others thrusts the individual into the realization that one can never fully merge with another (Yalom, 1980). To risk attachment means the individual also must risk the potential pain of loss, for "where loss is, attachment was" (Josselson, 1992, p. 55). Individuals build their life choices around opportunities for attachment or perhaps around means of avoiding rejection or abandonment. For the adopted individual, one of his or her earliest experiences was the pain of abandonment and contact with the reality of isolation.

From the beginning of the infant's life, he or she exists in relationship, seeking intimate attachment, and individuals search out attachment throughout the life span. Bowlby (1969) referred to attachment as the "hub around which a person's life develops" (p. 442). For the adoptee, the prenatal bond of attachment is broken as the infant is separated from his or her biological mother. This loss is experienced by the infant as what Verrier (1989) called the *primal wound*. In addition, the knowledge of one's being adopted often provokes a sense of loss, mistrust, and a lack of belonging or grounding (Schooler, 1995; Sorosky et al., 1984). "When the individual's place in the world is not fully grounded . . . 'adjustment' may be more difficult to achieve" (Vandenberg, 1991, p. 1283). It is through this sense of belonging that an individual is linked to the chain of existence (Josselson, 1992). Like anyone else, an adoptee is drawn to satisfy the need for belonging and yet establish his or her own separate identity.

Freedom

"Man is responsible for what he is. Thus, existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is and to make full responsibility of his existence rest on him" (Sartre, 1985, p. 16). Freedom in an existential context demands that the individual assume responsibility for his or her choices and act upon those choices (Yalom, 1980). Assuming responsibility for one's actions and their consequences can be a daunting task. The uniqueness of each individual is manifested in the choices that he or she makes. For the adoptee, initiated into existence under the premise that others make choices in his or her "best interest," the task of embracing one's inherent freedom contradicts his or her infantile experience and messages. Accepting that he or she is the only one who can truly make his or her own choices of significance may seem a daunting task. Embracing the concept that the adoptee has the innate freedom to search may press against the underpinning of existential guilt, creating anxiety and fear.

Encased in the concept of existential freedom and responsibility are the issues of guilt and will (May, 1983; Vandenberg, 1991; Yalom, 1980). Guilt derives its existence from the freedom to make choices. It is when one chooses to act against his or her chosen values and awareness that guilt often manifests. Existential guilt is when one has chosen to transgress against his or her own being or destiny (Yalom, 1980). Existential guilt is linked to the

manner in which a person conducts his or her relationships, as well as how the person minds his or her responsibilities (Vandenberg, 1991). The adoptee's choice to search may provoke feelings of guilt. Feelings of betrayal of the adoptive family, the adoption agency, and society may arise as a result of choosing to search for the very thing that he or she was warned against. Conversely, choosing not to search because of a perceived disloyalty to the adoptive family creates another kind of existential guilt arising from transgression against self. Thus, the adoptee who contemplates searching typically finds oneself between the proverbial rock and hard place, and this may become a treatment issue.

Evoking one's will is intimately related to individuation (Vandenberg, 1991). If the adoptee becomes conscious of an internal search process, it may appear as a wish for more information. The potency of a person's will is in its function to direct one's wish, to protect the wish, and to allow it the possibility to come to fruition (May, 1969). May (1969) characterized *will* as "the capacity to organize one's self so that movement in a certain direction or toward a certain goal may take place" (p. 218). The adoptee who fully accepts his or her existential freedom to choose is able to engage his or her will and thus choose to act upon his or her decision without guilt or regret. Treatment approaches can take this into account.

Meaninglessness

A coherent sense of meaning must exist for the individual if he or she is to withstand the incongruities of life. An individual's search for meaning is a primary motivation (Frankl, 1984). To experience meaninglessness in one's existence is to inhibit one's experience of life's fullness (Yalom, 1980). Meaning grounds the individual in his or her reality. Attributing meaning to one's endeavors provides structure and direction. Of course, the meaning system needs to be of one's own choosing to be authentic and fulfilling. The development of a meaning system is joined with one's struggle to make sense of his or her experience of anxiety, existential isolation, and inherent freedom. Meaning provides a holding environment for the individual (Josselson, 1992).

At each stage of the adoptee's development, he or she attempts to construct a meaning system (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992) in which the pain of loss from his or her adoption experience may be grieved. The formulation of the adoption story (D. Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton, 1988) provides an initial base from which to begin one's search for his or her identity. The adoptee's first narrative provides meaning for the transaction. The adoptee struggles, as do all individuals, to determine the "whys" and "wherefores" of his or her life. For the adoptee who begins his or her existence in a cradle of uncertainty, the attainment and enhancement of meaning becomes a matter of paramount importance. Existential counseling can help a person construct an authentic and fulfilling meaning system in accord with one's own unique character (Hanna, 1991). This can

help the adoptee determine the degree of necessity or importance of searching.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

Existential counseling provides a platform upon which other theoretical constructs may be placed (Hanna, 1991; May, 1983; Van Kaam, 1966). It offers emancipation from inauthentic defensive patterns resulting in the opportunity to create a new sense of self and identity from which to operate in the world (Bugental, 1978). The existential approach explores the limits and boundaries of awareness and human potentialities. "If no awareness exists or is likely to exist, that is death. Awareness is a tremendous spectrum of experience" (Bugental, 1978, p. iv). The searching adoptee's journey to self-awareness may be wrought with anguish, anxiety, and uncertainty as he or she works toward uncovering defenses he or she has developed in coping with existence. The reality of the search process, not to mention the potential reunion, often uncovers an extensive amount of unsuspected and unexplored affect (McColm, 1993). This is likely to catch both the adoptee and clinician off guard.

An existential counselor who is fully present for his or her client provides a safe, trusting environment in which growth and self-awareness can develop. Mutual trust enables the adoptee to confront his or her issues in a non-judgmental environment in which alternatives and outcomes can be weighed without pressure (Bugental, 1978). The counselor does not lead the client; he or she facilitates the client's process. The counselor believes fully in the client's ability to become self-aware and make choices and thus neither protects nor attempts to rescue the client from pain or anxiety (Van Kaam, 1966).

It is not the role of the existential clinician to present adoption as an issue. Rather, if the adoptee sees this as an area of concern, it is important to allow the issue to unfold so that the clinician can begin to push against the adoptee's defenses. On the other hand, although it is the adoptee's choice to pursue this as an issue, it is the responsibility of the clinician to monitor any avoidance or defense against exploring the issue. It is the mutuality of the relationship that allows for such intense self-exploration (Bugental, 1978; Josselson, 1992). The existential counselor does not collude with the client's defenses but will work within them. He or she will challenge the perceptions of the adoptee in an attempt to further awareness (Bugental, 1978) and explore any resistance to awareness.

The thrust of this approach to counseling leads to the exercise of free choice along the lines of personal growth and an authentic existence. Along the way, many existential issues are dealt with, including determining the kind of life one wishes to lead and what is personally meaningful to the person, as well as taking responsibility for the intrinsic power of choice held by the individual. Let us now explore a few examples of how this can be accomplished. The following three case examples illustrate adoptees struggling

to find their birthparents. Each example demonstrates several existential themes as part of both the content and context of their stories. The first author served as the counselor with each of these clients.

CASE EXAMPLES

The Story of Jim

Jim, a 25-year-old man, had made an attempt to search for his birthmother when he turned 18. The search had been unsuccessful. He spent the next 7 years in and out of various colleges and jobs. He presented to the community mental health center with panic attacks. He stated that he had a history of depression and anxiety and that his panic attacks seemed to be increasing in severity. During his initial interview he stated, "I just don't know what to do with my life, I feel like I have no direction."

His parents had informed him that he was of Native American descent. His adoptive parents had no actual proof of Jim's heredity, only verbal information reported by the lawyer handling the case. Because Jim's records were sealed, he was unable to get minority grants or scholarship monies for his education. Jim felt he had no choice about his life or his future. He felt that "things had been done to me and for me without anyone ever asking me." Jim did not understand the context of his life. He said that "life makes no sense without knowing who I am and what my life is really about." He wanted to know why he had been rejected by his birthmother and if he would "ever fit in." During counseling Jim confronted the lack of meaning in his life. He explored the fear that his "story" of adoption might be false and that he might be "living a lie." Through exploring the meaning of all this, he eventually came to the insight that it was his own power of choice—his will—that truly determined the results of his life. As he put it, "If I don't live my life for me, who will?" He then resumed his search for his birthparents.

A year later, just after he received a phone call from the search agency announcing that his birthmother had been located, Jim experienced a profoundly disabling panic attack. Jim was later able to identify his fear that upon meeting his birthmother he would find out "once and for all" that he "really didn't belong." He was afraid that "the threads I had held onto were all a lie." Jim and his birthmother initially sent pictures and letters. Jim reported a "wave of calmness" overtaking him when he saw her face for the first time. Jim stated he had never seen anyone with similar features to his own before seeing the picture. Jim eventually met his birthmother and her family and learned that his heritage was indeed Native American and learned of his place in tribal lineage. His birthfather was not convinced that Jim was indeed his son. Consequently, they never met. Nevertheless, Jim reported feeling "more whole and connected" as a result of his search. His panic attacks subsided.

The Story of Karen

Karen, a 32-year-old mother, stated that she had always known that she had been adopted as an infant. She loved her adoptive parents and siblings, never questioning her roots until the birth of her first child. Karen reported melancholia around her birthday and holidays, but figured that was "typical." Karen described her role in her family as "the pleaser." She stated, "I always wanted everyone to like me. I was always the one calling friends and arranging get-togethers." She also reported that "I couldn't stand to be alone" and that isolation was very intimidating to her. Karen stated that as her desire to search developed, she was caught between a sense of "having the right to know" and the feeling that "I could never hurt my [adoptive] parents that way." After examining her anxiety about searching for her birthmother, Karen verbalized that "my [adoptive] parents loved me and took me in, I can't disappoint them or hurt them. I can't risk them rejecting me." Through this approach, Karen came to recognize that she often made choices out of guilt and her fear of being alone.

Her fear of losing relationships manifested itself as actions that were counter to her own desires. Karen may not have been able to exercise her choice about being adopted, but she was able to embrace the notion that how she responded to her situation is her choice. She began her search in earnest and was successful. Karen eventually met both of her biological parents, as well as her extended family. Once she acquired information about her origins—the secrecy having been removed—she stated that she felt even closer to her adoptive parents. She reported knowing that "I really belong with them, that we no longer have to fear some unknown facts." Karen's external search had ended although her internal search continues in the existential sense.

The Story of Donna

Donna, a 45-year-old woman, first presented for counseling after a 10-year relationship ended abruptly. She had been adopted when only 3 days old by a childless couple in their early 40s. She reported that "being adopted" was never an issue for her and that she had never been interested in searching for her birthmother. She was, however, worried about her adoptive parents dying as there were no siblings and she "would be left all alone." She stated she had grown up feeling that her parents did not quite understand her but that she nevertheless felt a sense of obligation to them for having adopted her. The initial phase of treatment focused on her history of self-defeating behaviors, particularly in the way of finances and education. Just when she was on the verge of success she would sabotage the process. Another issue was how she seemed to consistently triangulate herself into relationships with men who were already involved with other women.

As counseling progressed, Donna reported that she often thought about her birthmother but was "afraid of what she might find." Donna was able to link her continued self-

defeating behaviors to her existential fear of being free to choose. For Donna, freedom of choice was intimately entangled and associated with failure. She avoided completing projects, believing that if she were to choose then she would certainly fail. Also entwined in her self-defeating behaviors was her choice of relationships. Donna believed that she had no power in any of these relationships. As she explored her internal beliefs about her birthmother, she came to the insight that her birthmother had exercised her own choice by rejecting Donna. In Donna's eyes, her birthmother had "chosen to give me away" rather than be in a relationship with her. Donna was able to view her triangulated relationships with men as a way of defending against intimate relationships and the possibility of loss. She viewed the other women in her men's lives as all-powerful, holding Donna's fate in their whimsical hands—just as her birthmother had. By focusing on her issues of isolation, death, and freedom, Donna was able to accept that it was she who held her own power of choice, even if those choices lead to failure. To date, Donna's physical search for her birthmother has been unsuccessful.

CONCLUSION

The desire to search for one's biological roots has been reported throughout history as a characteristic typical of adoptees. Such a transcultural and fundamental need in an adopted client cannot be ignored, neglected, or dismissed without the imminent possibility of negative consequences. The need to search for origins can be existentially reframed for an adoptee as a quest for authenticity, meaningfulness, and a sense of being, freedom, and belonging. The desire to know one's roots also can be reframed as an attempt to cope with a mysterious past that is fraught with anxiety, ambiguity, and uncertainty. The sheer act of acknowledging a desire to search can be empowering in and of itself. The counselor's support of the adoptee's search can be a source of consolation and comfort because it places this controversial action into a natural framework of existential development (see Vandenberg, 1991). Through a search—successful or unsuccessful—an adoptee can place his or her existence and origins in proper context as a normal aspect of personal growth. The end or beginning of a search is never clearly defined (Auth & Zaret, 1986). In any case, being deprived of the option to gain knowledge of one's origins can be a source of great anxiety and alienation.

Existential counseling offers a useful and illuminating perspective on an adoptee's motivation to search for his or her biological roots. The search can be seen as a unique manifestation of any individual's compulsion to tame his or her existential anxiety and give meaning to the unknowns and ambiguities of life. The incorporation of an existential perspective into the conceptualization and treatment of an adopted client may greatly enhance the counselor's effectiveness and understanding of the adoptee's predicament.

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