

**Access to Information and Search and Reunion in Korean American Adoptions:  
A Discussion Paper**

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**Preface**

This paper is designed to stimulate dialogue about two critical issues that confront the international adoption community: the extent to which adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents should have access to identifying information about one another; and when such information is obtained, how search and reunion should be initiated and conducted. This paper examines these issues from the perspective of Korean adoptees, their adoptive parents, and their birth parents, as well as adoption practitioners and experts in the United States. Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2001 with a number of individuals to explore various perspectives on issues related to access to identifying information and search and reunion.

The Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network (KAAN) commissioned this paper because of its commitment to fuller discussion of these important issues. KAAAN hopes that this publication will provide a framework for ongoing examination of these issues by all parties touched by Korean-American adoption.

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, adoption has been transformed in critical ways – how it is viewed and how it takes place. One of the changes of greatest significance in adoption has been the shift from secrecy to greater openness. By the 1950s, closed adoption – in which the parties to adoption had and could obtain little or no information about one another – had become the prevailing form of adoption in the United States. Confidentiality, if not secrecy, was the hallmark of adoption until, in the 1970s, adoptees, birthparents, and, to some extent, adoptive parents, began to demand meaningful changes in adoption. Members of the triad (adoptees, birthparents and adoptive parents) began to insist on more information about one another, opportunities to connect with one another, and arrangements from the outset of an adoption that allowed birthparents to remain a part of the adoptee’s life as he or she grew up. Adult adoptees described the profoundly negative impact of secrecy surrounding information; the sense of something being “missing” from their lives despite the joy they felt in having loving adoptive families; and the need to connect with their histories and with birth family members to complete their sense of identity. Birthparents likewise described the pain of having no information about the children they had placed for adoption – whether they were happy, healthy, and safe and whether the difficult decision to place their children for adoption had provided their children with the lives they had envisioned for them. Adoptive parents also described the negative impact of secrecy, particularly their frustration at not being able to answer many of their children’s questions or provide them with the information that they needed.

As the impact of secrecy on all members of the triad came to be better understood, adoption gradually took on greater openness. “Open adoption” came to be recognized in the United States as an opportunity for birthparents, the child, and the adoptive parents to have ongoing contact with one another from the time that the child was placed with the adoptive family (Sorosky, Baran & Pannor 1984). At the same time, greater attention focused on the interests of triad members in obtaining information about and developing connections with one another.

This paper focuses not on open adoption but on aspects of greater openness that are responses to the former practice of closed adoption – access by members of the triad to identifying information about one another; and search and reunion. The paper first examines what is currently understood about each of these dimensions of greater openness, drawing on the work that has been done in the United States in this area. This knowledge base can provide a framework for considering these issues in the context of international adoptions. Care must be taken, however, to recognize the cultural differences between the U.S. and other countries and the ramifications of these differences when considering efforts to obtain identifying information and to conduct a search for birthparents in other countries. In the second part of this paper,

some of the more difficult questions about access to identifying information and search and reunion in international adoptions are raised. Based on interviews with a number of individuals involved in international adoption and Korean-American adoptions in particular, the paper examines a range of perspectives that have been brought to these issues and values that underlie each of these perspectives.

## **Part I**

### **Current Trends in Adoption: Access to Information and Search and Reunion**

An understanding of current trends in adoption related to access to identifying information and search and reunion necessarily must be framed in relation to past practices that ensured that birthparents had no information about or access to the children they had placed for adoption or their children's adoptive families; adoptive parents had non-identifying information about birthparents only to the extent that agencies or independent practitioners chose to provide that information; and adult adoptees could not obtain information that would provide them with opportunities to learn the identities of or meet their birthparents. In the United States, issues related to access to identifying information and search and reunion typically have arisen in relation to the needs and interests of adult adoptees and their birthparents. Although there have been changes in recent years, adoptive parents generally have not initiated efforts to find their adopted children's birthparents either because the adoptions were already open (with some level of contact agreed upon between the adoptive parents and birthparents) or because the adoptions were closed based on the wishes of either or both sets of the adult parties (birthparents and adoptive parents). More recently, however, growing numbers of adoptive parents have expressed interest in "opening" closed adoptions and are confronting issues related to obtaining identifying information and, in some cases, issues related to searching for their children's birthparents.

There are varying degrees of understanding related to the psychological and social impact of the traditional practice of adoption as a closed arrangement in which adoptees and adoptive parents, on the one hand, and birth parents, on the other, have little or no information about or access to one another. More attention has been given to the impact of closed adoption practices and the movement toward greater openness on adoptees than on birth parents and adoptive parents. It is also important to note that these issues primarily have been explored in the context of U.S. domestic adoptions and the cultural environment of the U.S. Because of these limitations, care must be taken in applying this knowledge base to international adoptions in general or to Korean-American adoptions in particular.

### *Greater Openness and Adoptees*

There has been considerable debate regarding the effects of closed adoption practices and of greater openness on adopted children. At the same time, various views have been expressed in connection with adult adoptees' efforts to obtain identifying information about their birth parents. In this connection, the debate has become highly public as efforts have been made to change state laws in the U.S. to allow adult adoptees access to their original birth certificates and other adoption-related information. Just as perspectives vary on the right of adoptees to obtain identifying information about their birthparents, there are varying perspectives on the rights of adult adoptees to search for and contact their birth parents.

### Greater openness and adopted children

There are conflicting views on the impact of greater openness in adoption on adopted children (whether through the exchange of identifying information or some level of interpersonal connection among birthparents, adopted persons and adoptive parents). On the one hand, greater openness has been seen as highly beneficial to adopted children because it provides an important avenue for meeting their identity needs, promoting self-esteem by providing a sense of continuity with their histories, lessening their feelings of powerlessness, allowing them to resolve questions about themselves, and assisting them to feel more secure in their adoptive families (Gritter 1997 Grotevant & McRoy 1998; Kirk 1985; Melina & Roszia 1993; Ryburn 1995; Silber & Dorner 1990; Triseliotis 1993). Others, however, have expressed concerns about the trend toward greater openness, particularly when information leads to birthparent-adoptive family connections. The critics of greater openness argue that it can create divided loyalties for children, jeopardize their secure attachments to their adoptive parents, and produce anxieties because children do not have the cognitive capacity to understand the permanence of adoption (Kanuiik 1994; Rushton et al. 1993; McWhinnie 1994).

The research on the effects of greater openness on adopted children has been somewhat limited. The major longitudinal research on openness in adoption, conducted by Grotevant and McRoy (1998), however, recently has yielded some preliminary findings in this area. In their study, the researchers found that the majority of children in the study (all of whom were adopted as infants and were between 4 and 12 years of age at the time of the interviews) were curious about their birthparents and birth siblings. The researchers found that children with less information about their birth parents were more likely to wonder about their birth parents' physical appearance, health, and well-being; and children with more information tended to wonder about what their birth parents had done since they last had contact with them and when they would meet again, or if they had had no contact with their birth parents, whether they would meet. Grotevant and McRoy specifically considered concerns that openness may create a confusing and anxiety-

provoking environment for adopted children but, based on their findings, they concluded:

It does not appear that providing information about a child's birth parents will confuse the child about the meaning of adoption or lower the child's self-esteem, but neither will it move the child to levels of understanding that are beyond her or his cognitive capabilities to reach. Access to information gives adoptive parents an opportunity to facilitate their child's understanding of adoption (1998, pp. 104-105).

This research has contributed to a better understanding of the positive benefits of greater openness for adopted children, although some continue to criticize the practice as against children's and adoptive families' best interests.

#### Adult adoptees' access to identifying information about their birth parents

The issue of greater openness as it relates to adult adoptees' access to identifying information about their birth parents has generated a very different set of considerations than those raised in connection with greater openness as it affects adopted children. One key aspect of the debate has been the extent to which adult adoptees have genuine psychological needs related to obtaining information about their origins and connecting with members of their birth families. One school of thought holds that access to information about and contact with birth family is not critical to adoptees' sense of personal identity and, in fact, may simply reflect curiosity on their part. Lieberman (1998), for example, rejects the notion that an adoptee's ability to form a strong personal identity is connected with feelings of "being given up," a sense of loss and rejection that accompanies a developmental understanding of adoption, or a desire to know the identity of birthparents. The other school of thought is that the ability to obtain information about one's origins is critical to a sense of identity (Arndt 1986; Frisk 1964; Wieder 1978). Triseliotis (1984, p. 118), for example, has written that:

There is a psychosocial need in all people, manifest principally in those who grow up away from their original families, to know about their background, their genealogy and their personal history if they are to grow up feeling complete and whole.

The research on adult adoptees' access to identifying information has been relatively limited. The studies that have been conducted, however, suggest that adult adoptees benefit from the information that they obtain, irrespective of the nature of that information. In a recent small scale study, for example, Pugh and Schofield (1999) reported on the experiences of individuals who sought and received background information about themselves from an English adoption and foster care agency. The researchers found that "whatever the nature of the information which people uncovered, it almost always generated powerful emotions in them," ranging from excitement and catharsis to pain and anger, particularly when they discovered too late that a birth family member had recently died (1999, pp. 13-14). They found that despite

the initial shock that some individuals felt, there was a consistent sentiment that “even unpalatable information was preferable to living with ignorance” (1999, p. 14).

In the United States, adult adoptee access to identifying information regarding their birth parents continues to be debated at the legal and policy levels. For the most part, adult adoptees do not have access to identifying information about their birthparents as a result of barriers posed by state laws, administrative and social factors, and agency policy. The controversy exists within a broader environment that, since mid-twentieth century, has viewed the sharing of background information with adoptees as unwise or affirmatively harmful. Since World War II, secrecy and closed proceedings have marked adoption (Carp 1998). Social work practice, beginning in the 1950s, limited disclosure of non-identifying information to both adoptive parents and adoptees in the belief that communicating only selective, largely positive background information supported a healthier adoptive family (Freundlich & Peterson 1998). That practice has undergone significant change over the past decades, and non-identifying information is now more broadly available. Identifying information, however, continues to remain beyond the reach of many adoptees because of “sealed records” laws.

Beginning in the 1930s, the laws of most states sealed all adoption records (including adoptees’ original birth certificates), preventing all members of the adoption triad (including adult adoptees) from obtaining identifying information about one another (Carp 1998). The sealing of adoption records was grounded on the belief that keeping the names and whereabouts of birth parents and adoptive parents “confidential” ensured the integrity of the adoptive family, prevented birth parents from attempting to reclaim their children, and assisted birth parents to “recover” from their “indiscretions” (Carp 1998, pp. 105-106). The laws in most states — with the current exceptions of Kansas, Alaska, Oregon, and Alabama (which allow adult adoptees unconditional access to original birth certificates) and Tennessee (which allows adult adoptees access to original birth certificates and their adoption records) — continue to prohibit the release of identifying information about birth parents to adoptive parents or to adoptees even after they reach adulthood (see Carp 1998).

Over the past several years, opposition to sealed records has mounted across the U.S. At the heart of efforts to change state laws that prohibit adult adoptees from obtaining identifying information about their birth parents is the position that the interests of adult adoptees in obtaining personal information about themselves are paramount and that they have a “right to know” (Freundlich 1998). In opposition to this position are those who argue vociferously against allowing adult adoptees access to identifying information on their birthparents. Their arguments rest on the belief that such a practice places birthparents at risk of harm from adult adoptees whom they characterize as thoughtlessly intruding on the privacy of birthparents who simply wish to “left alone” (National Council for Adoption 1997).

The debate surrounding access to adoption records might suggest that birth parents, adoptees, and their adoptive parents have different and diametrically opposed perspectives on the issue of adult adoptee access to identifying information. Interestingly, however, data suggest that the respective positions of members of the triad are far more alike than different. Avery (1998) found in her survey of 1200 adoptive parents that 84% of all adoptive mothers and 73% of adoptive fathers supported adult adoptees' ability to obtain their original birth certificates. Studies by Sachdev (1991) and the Maine Task Force on Adoption (1989) likewise found that a great majority of birth parents support adult adoptees' access to information on their birth families.

In the U.S., the interests of adult adoptees — particularly in relation to access to information about their origins — have been recognized to some extent by the legal system, but more often, these interests have been found to be less compelling than the interests of birth and adoptive parents who tend to be viewed as the “real” adults with “real” interests. Arndt (1986, p. 119) comments that, “the real, present needs of the adopted person (for his or her background information) are ‘balanced’ against the theoretical needs of the natural parents” but, typically, the needs of adoptees have been found to hold less weight. Likewise, the interests of adoptive parents, principally framed in terms of the autonomy of adoptive parents and the integrity of the adoptive family, generally have been balanced against adoptee interests even after adoptees reach adulthood (see Hollinger 1999). In the process of such balancing, it commonly has been the case that the interests of adoptees have not been found to be as strong as what has been viewed as the superior rights of birth parents and adoptive parents to privacy. That analysis, however, is gradually being undermined as public education and advocacy efforts have made clear adoptees' needs and interests regarding their own personal histories and identity.

### Search and reunion

The ongoing debate about access to identifying information naturally has extended to different perspectives on adoptees' search for members of their birth families. There are no definitive data on the number of adoptees who undertake a search or wish to search for their biological relatives (Wegar 1997), although proponents of the closed record system maintain that “very few adoptees and birth parents seek to meet each other” (National Committee for Adoption 1989, p. 5) and search activists insist that “most adoptees, either as children or adults, would like to meet their birth parents” (Auth & Zaret 1986, p. 567). The debate about search and reunion, like the debate about access to identifying information, is frequently cast in terms of birthparents' right to privacy and protection from intrusiveness and adoptees' right to seek members of their birth families.

The literature suggests, contrary to the assertions of some that adoptees impulsively, if not recklessly,

undertake searches for their birthparents (see National Council for Adoption 1999), that the decision to search is one that adoptees make only after considerable thought. Triseliotis (1973, p. 92) found in his research with adoptees that:

The step of enquiring and searching was not taken lightly by most adoptees. The final step usually came at the end of a fair amount of deliberation and usually at a stage when it could not be put off any longer.

Modell (1994, p. 150) found in her interviews with adoptees that the decision to search was made “cautiously, aware of the risks in breaking the rules and violating conventions.” Many adoptees whom she interviewed reported that they felt pressure not to search:

Adoptees . . . heard they were crazy, neurotic, ungrateful for initiating their quest and, like the unknown birth parents, irresponsible and impulsive. For some adoptees, it was a no win game: ‘feeling like we’ve done something wrong and that we’re criminals for having just been born’ (1994, p. 150).

She observed that many adoptees continued their searches despite opposition (which for some may have come from their adoptive parents but for many others from the broader social environment) because they felt that “somebody else” had made all important decisions in their lives (1994, p. 151). “Being defined as less than adult and not in control of one’s own life course was not unique to searching adoptees, but it was certainly part of their experience” (Modell 1994, p. 151).

Very little work has been done with regard to search by international adoptees. One of the few surveys in this regard was conducted with adult Korean adoptees in June 2000. The respondents (167 adult Korean adoptees) were asked whether they had searched or were interested in searching for their birth families. Respondents were somewhat divided in this regard: slightly less than one-quarter had undertaken a search or were in the process of searching; a third stated that they were interested in searching but had not yet taken any step in that direction; 15% were uncertain about their interest in searching; and almost one-third stated that they had no interest in searching. Almost half of the adoptees who responded positively to the question regarding search (77 respondents) described the reasons behind their interest in searching for their birth families: to obtain medical histories (40%); curiosity (30%); to meet others whom they physically resembled (18%); to learn why they were placed for adoption (18%); to learn whether they had relatives, particularly siblings (16%); to fill a void or gain a sense of closure (16%); and to relay a message to their birth parents (10%). Four adoptees volunteered the reasons behind their lack of interest in searching: “There isn’t a need for me;” “I mostly live in the present and the future;” “I’m thankful that my birth parents gave life to me but I have no interest in meeting them;” and “I know that I was abandoned . . . always felt that my (birth) family cared enough for me to place me where someone could find me.”

Relatively few (14) respondents stated that they had obtained information about their birth families,

and even fewer (11) respondents reported that they had had contact with their birth families. Two respondents had always had contact with members of their birth families; 3 adoptees were found as a result of search efforts by a birth family member; and 6 respondents had established contact with their birth families as a result of conducting their own searches. The outcomes of the reunions varied from sharing letters and phone calls to one or more personal contacts (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 1999).

### *Greater Openness and Birth Parents*

Less is understood about the impact of greater openness on birthparents largely because the perspectives of birth mothers and birth fathers have not customarily been sought. What is understood has been gained from work that has focused on the longer term impact of the adoption decision on birthparents (although far more research has been done with birthmothers than birthfathers). Do birth parents view the adoption decision with finality and go on with their lives or, alternatively, are they negatively effected by the absence of information and/or contact with their children?

Answers to this question vary depending upon the research one consults. Much of the research from Australia suggests that women who place their children for adoption are at significant risk of long term physical, emotional, and interpersonal difficulties (Condon 1986; McHutchinson 1986; Van Keppel & Winkler 1983). These studies suggest that many women who place their children for adoption suffer severe and debilitating grief that continues over time (Van Keppel & Winkler 1983); experience ongoing problems in their relationships with men and difficulties in parenting subsequent children (Condon 1986); adjust poorly or not at all to placing their children for adoption (Bouchier et al. 1991); and often experience symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (Wells 1993). In an Australian study of birth mothers' experiences conducted by Winkler and Van Keppel (1984), one-half of the birth mothers reported their sense of loss increased over time and extended, in the case of many women, over a 30-year time period. The researchers found that birth mothers' psychological distress was associated with few opportunities to talk with others about their feelings related to the adoption of their children, the absence of social supports, and a pervasive sense of loss regarding their children.

By contrast, research in the United States has tended to highlight the benefits of adoption for young unmarried women, particularly from an educational and economic standpoint, and has emphasized that the psychological consequences of decisions to place children for adoption are relatively minor (Kalmuss 1992). Typically, U.S. research shows that women who place their infants for adoption fare no worse psychologically than women who parent their children (McLaughlin 1988a, 1988b). Some U.S. research, however, offers a point of departure to these positive interpretations. Edwards (1995), for example, found a range of poor psychological outcomes in her study of 56 birth mothers who relinquished their children 16 to 51 years ago.

The participants in her study described an ongoing sense of loss, characterized the experience of placing their children for adoption as the most traumatic event of their lives, reported multiple symptoms of post-traumatic stress, and expressed a desire for search and reunion in order to fully heal.

The literature and research have given extremely little attention to the birthparents of children who are adopted internationally. The relative recency of international adoption (although Korea is the exception in this regard), the diverse cultures in which these parents live, and the circumstances surrounding many international adoptions have limited the understanding of the adoption experience on birth parents in other countries. To the extent that this issue has been examined, the focus has been on birth mothers and principally has addressed the circumstances surrounding their consent to the international adoption of their children as opposed to their desires regarding the release of information about themselves to their children or adoptive families or their wishes with regard to search and reunion.

It is clear that the circumstances surrounding the decisions of Korean birth parents regarding international adoption involve socioeconomic and cultural factors. During and immediately after the Korean War, Korean birth mothers who relinquished their children largely did so because the children were fathered by United Nations military personnel and, thus, were of mixed race and considered outcasts by Korean society. Mixed race births declined with the withdrawal of American and British forces, but the stigma associated with out-of-wedlock birth remained, and full-blooded Korean children born to unmarried mothers also faced social stigma (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute 1999). Since the 1960s, the international adoption of Korean children principally has been associated with birthparents' decisions to abandon or leave their children in care because of extreme poverty and social pressures related to "unwed" motherhood (Park 1998).

According to Molly Holt of Holt Korea, one of the oldest adoption agencies in Korea, the typical Korean birth mother is very poor, from a very large family in which she is the youngest, and lacking in family and social support. In some situations, international adoptions result from family pressures on unmarried parents so they can marry the partners whom their families have chosen for them (Holt 2000). Nonetheless, the decision to relinquish a child for adoption is likely to carry high social costs for Korean birth mothers. Because the contraception of choice in Korea is abortion, proceeding with a pregnancy as a single woman invites social censure and involves a "sacrifice (of) many things — job, school, friends, and sometimes family" (Han 1999, p. 133). Giving birth and relinquishing for adoption, though difficult, may be preferable, however, to choosing to parent a baby as a single woman, given the "overwhelming stigma of single motherhood and discrimination against children (who are) without legally recognized fathers" (Dorow 1999, p. 5). These social realities suggest cultural norms that promote secrecy and silence with regard to non-marital pregnancy, birth, and adoption and that the ready sharing of information may conflict with cultural

values regarding privacy.

The experiences of Ae Ran Won (2000), a program that offers counseling and support for single pregnant Korean women, provide some understanding of the feelings of Korea birth mothers regarding the adoption decision. Counselors at Ae Ran Won report that about 85% of the birth mothers whom they serve choose adoption, and many prefer international adoption to domestic adoption by a Korean family. Dorow (1999, p. 35) explains that international adoption has become more attractive to many Korean birth mothers because of the possibility of ongoing correspondence with their children and the opportunity to see them again, neither of which is possible when a child is adopted by a Korean family. Dorow (1999, p. 35) writes:

An adopted person often is not accepted into Korean society, and may never know he or she was adopted. Not only is adoption of a non-relative a new and strange concept for many Koreans, for whom blood ties are very important, but open adoption is nearly impossible. If a birth mother places her child domestically, in almost every case she will have no further contact with the child and adoptive family.

It appears that the later life experiences of Korean birthmothers vary and the extent to which they may wish connections with the child they place for adoption may vary as well. Han (2000), who directs Ae Ran Won, observes that birthmothers “often experience guilt, loss and despair” about the decision to place their children for adoption. Many women, however, do not express regret for their decisions as they believe they had no other choice (Han 2000). Similarly, Trolley (1995) found that Korean birth mothers reported significant grief following the placement of their children for adoption but that the longer term impact varied, ranging from guilt, isolation, shame, and anxiety in some situations to ambivalence in others and to relief in yet others. The experiences of staff at Ae Ran Won suggest that some birthmothers continue their education and marry after the adoption has been arranged; others seek employment after being terminated from their previous jobs because they were pregnant; and some are forced to drop out of school and are unable to return. Importantly, their work with birthmothers also indicates that only a few women choose to tell their husbands about their first babies (Han 2000). These realities suggest that the impact of search and reunion on birthmothers, whether these efforts are initiated by an adoptee or by adoptive parents, is likely to differ from one situation to another.

### *Greater Openness and Adoptive Parents*

From the perspective of adoptive parents, greater openness involves issues related to access to non-identifying information, access to identifying information, and “open adoption.” One clear aspect of practice related to information sharing in U.S. domestic adoptions is the right of prospective adoptive parents to receive certain non-identifying information about a child whom they are considering for adoption. As a result of statutes in most states in the U.S. and court decisions in “wrongful adoption” lawsuits, adoption

professionals who arrange domestic adoptions have a duty to disclose to prospective adoptive parents information about a child's health and social history, the birth parents' history, and other background information that would be material to the family's decision to adopt the child (Freundlich & Peterson 1998). This issue also arises in international adoption. As a result of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption and federal legislation that implements the Convention in the United States, greater attention has focused on the obligations of adoption professionals to provide prospective adoptive parents with non-identifying background information on children whom they are considering for adoption internationally. Numerous issues have been raised about the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the background information that is typically obtained and provided to families who pursue international adoptions. These concerns continue to be a point of focus in the ongoing design and delivery of international adoption services and are related to other aspects of openness in the international adoption arena.

In the U.S., the understanding of the impact of greater openness on adoptive parents has largely been limited to the effects of "open adoption" as it has been practiced since the 1980s. Far less attention has been given to issues related to adoptive parents' interest (or lack of interest) in obtaining identifying information about their children's birthparents, initiating a search, or experiencing a reunion. As discussed earlier, the far more common situations in the U.S. have been closed adoptions based on the wishes of the adoptive parents or open adoptions from the outset. As more and more adoptive parents are considering or engaging in efforts to "open" closed adoptions, there will be opportunities to better understand these aspects of greater openness and the experiences of adoptive parents in this arena. At present, however, the understanding is anecdotal at best.

Some understanding of the potential impact of these issues, however, can be gained from the work that has focused on the impact of "open adoption" on adoptive parents. Some view openness in adoption as having a highly negative impact on adoptive parents as it demands that adoptive parents accept the fact that their children will have "two sets of parents" and forces them to agree to co-parent with birth parents (Mann 1998, p. 44). Studies, however, have found that adoptive parents in open arrangements report positive benefits for themselves and their families, including a high level of satisfaction with openness and good relationships with birth parents (Belbas 1987; Etter 1993; Gross 1993); a greater sense of entitlement to their children (McRoy & Grotevant 1988; Belbas 1987); fewer concerns about attachment issues (Silverstein & Demick 1994); and less concern about efforts by birth parents to reclaim their children (Belbas 1987). Siegel (1993), for example, found in her study of 21 adoptive couples in open adoption arrangements that open adoption gave them a sense of control with regard to birth parents; prepared them to effectively fulfill their roles as parents; dissolved fantasies about their child's birth parents; and alleviated guilt and any moral apprehension about "having someone else's child" (1993, p. 18). Interestingly, the adoptive parents reported

that openness was “simply not that much of a concern” when weighed against the more difficult issues of infertility; finding a child to adopt; “dealing with unresponsive and obstructive social workers, lawyers, and medical personnel;” and coping with the lifelong issues involved in every adoption (1993, p. 20).

These research findings suggest that adoptive parents who consider opening closed adoptions may sense that a range of benefits can be gained for their children and their families as a whole by connecting with their children’s birth families. As stated earlier, however, much remains to be understood about adoptive parents’ experiences in this regard.

## **Part II**

### **Access to Identifying Information and Search and Reunion in Korean American Adoptions**

In the context of international adoption in general and Korean-American adoptions in particular, there are many questions related to information access and search and reunion. The “right” approach has not been easy to determine and has been complicated by the fact that the cultural environments of the U.S. and Korea are quite different. Because families in the United States have adopted children from Korea since the 1950s, however, consideration of these issues can be greatly enriched by the voices of adult Korean adoptees, their adoptive families, and Korean birth parents as well as professionals who have worked in the field for many years. In this section of the paper, a variety of perspectives are presented: first, some of the many perspectives on the issues that often arise when identifying information is sought by members of the triad in Korean-American adoptions; and second, a range of perspectives on how search and reunion should be conducted when there is interest in connecting with Korean birthparents. The discussion is based on interviews that were conducted with individuals who, because of their personal experience and/or their professional work, have given considerable thought to these issues.

#### **The Disclosure of Information**

Because of the nature of adoption and the sociocultural environment in which it takes place, the disclosure of information about one member of the triad to another member of the triad inevitably raises issues of individual rights and interests. In some cases, the identities and whereabouts of all members of the triad can be obtained and shared. In other cases, identifying information may be insufficient to permit birthparents to be found, such as when birthparents anonymously leave their children at sites where they know that the children will be found and then placed for adoption. In these circumstances, the issue of access to information may be moot as the birthparents’ decision-making regarding the relinquishment may make it extremely difficult to gather either identifying or non-identifying information (though not impossible, as cases to the contrary demonstrate). With the exception of circumstances in which identifying information

is completely unavailable, adoptees, birthparents and adoptive parents may be able to obtain information about one another through a variety of means. The question becomes: to what extent should information about one member of the triad be released to another member of the triad? This issue has ethical ramifications as it brings into question values related to privacy, personal identity, and individual and family well-being.

From an ethical perspective, two key values may come into play when access to information (particularly identifying information) and the possibility of an ensuing search and reunion are raised: autonomy and knowledge. These values, however, apply somewhat differently depending on the nature of the information and to whom it is disclosed, as set out in Table 1.

**Table 1. Values Regarding Disclosure of Identifying Information**

	Autonomy		Knowledge	
Disclosure of identifying information about birth parents	Birth Parent: Autonomy to decide yes or no		Adult Adoptee: Desire to know or not know	Adoptive Parent on Behalf of Adopted Child: Desire to know or not know
Disclosure of identifying information about adoptee and adoptive family	Adult Adoptee: Autonomy to decide yes or no	Adoptive Parent on Behalf of Adopted Child: Autonomy to decide yes or no	Birth Parent: Desire to know or not know	

*Disclosure of Information Regarding Birthparents*

When information pertains to a birth parent and is sought by an adult adoptee or adoptive parent on behalf of an adopted child, the key value for the birth parent is likely to be autonomy. Autonomy rests on the birthparent’s prerogative to decide whether personal information about herself or himself should be released to the adoptee or adoptive parents. For the seekers of such information (whether an adult adoptee or adoptive parents on behalf of their adoptive child), the value upon which their efforts rest is likely to be that of knowledge. Because seekers and those who are sought may have different perspectives, access to identifying information raises important questions about which values should be paramount in guiding decisions about the “right” course of action. The key question is whether, when information is sought by an adoptee or an adoptive parent, the wishes of the birthparent or the adoptee/adoptive parent should determine whether information should be released.

It is important to note that a quest for identifying information about birth parents may play out in many different ways. In some cases, identifying information is available and the birthparent has made clear

her desire to have the information released. In such cases, the interests of both the birthparent and the adoptee/adoptive parent coincide. In other situations, the birth parent expressly has made clear that she does not wish her identity revealed for personal reasons related to privacy and/or the possible repercussions (psychological or social) related to a disclosure. In such cases, the birthparent's privacy and right to make a decision about a personal matter may conflict with an adoptee's interest in obtaining information that is integral to her own personal history and personal identity or an adoptive parent's desire to act on behalf of her child and obtain information which she judges to be important to him. Finally, there may be situations in which the birthparent's wishes with regard to the disclosure of identifying information about herself are not known. The questions then become whether, based on considerations related to birthparent privacy and integrity, it should be assumed that she would or would not wish to have information about herself disclosed and how (or whether) to determine her desires in this regard.

Prior to the early 1990s, most international adoptions of Korean children took place with relatively little information available with regard to their birthparents. Birthmothers (and to some extent birthfathers) who, for economic, social and/or cultural reasons, determined that they could not parent their children, knew that by anonymously leaving them for adoption, their children would be placed with families abroad who could care for them. Although a birthmother in some cases might have provided information about herself, the Korean government did not require the involvement of birthparents in planning the international adoptions of their children, and many birthparents left behind no information that could identify them. In these cases, adoption agencies may have little or no information about birthparents. Information in these cases, however, may be available through other sources, such as hospitals and other government offices (which may have been the initial point of contact for the child or the child's birthfamily), although such information may not have been retained for more than a few years nor safeguarded in the same way as an adoption record would be.

Since 1989, the Korean government has restricted the placement of abandoned children with families from abroad, and it now requires written consent by birthparents for international adoption (Baik, Sarl & Bombyk 1996). This change has made identifying information more readily available for adoptions completed since that time. At the same time, there has been efforts to promote the domestic adoption of Korean children and disclosures to children about their adoptive status. These efforts have met with some success, but secrecy continues to surround Korean families' adoptions of unrelated children and the origins of the children whom they adopt. Some of the individuals who were interviewed noted that although the social environment in Korea with regard to domestic adoption is changing gradually, birthmothers often select international over domestic adoption because international adoption presents a greater opportunity for ongoing information about their children.

Under current practice, birthmothers who wish to pursue international adoption work primarily work with three Korean agencies. They typically give permission for the release of non-identifying information (including the mother's age, first name, medical history, education and employment history, interests and talents, and the circumstances that led to her decision to place her child for adoption). Many individuals who were interviewed emphasized the importance of this non-identifying information to adoptees. One individual noted that adoptees fare far better when they have information about their heritage and their medical and genetic history and when they understand the reasons that they were placed for adoption. Those interviewed uniformly highlighted the importance of collecting and sharing such information with adoptive families. In addition to providing non-identifying information, a birthmother may request a "semi-open" arrangement in which identifying information is not shared but some level of communication is established, such as correspondence with the adoptive family through the agency. One individual estimated that, given the opportunity, about 1 in 8 birthmothers currently request or agree to some level of contact with the adoptive family.

It is not always possible to determine the extent to which identifying information may be available, nor is it always clear what the desires of a birthmother may be regarding release of identifying information about herself. Many adoptees and adoptive families begin their exploration regarding the availability of identifying information by contacting the Korean agency that arranged their international adoptions. At that point, the agency determines the appropriate course of action regarding the request. Some of the individuals interviewed felt strongly that it is essential that adoptees and families work with agencies regarding their interest in accessing identifying information. They emphasized that Korean agencies are committed to the protection of birthmothers' privacy as the paramount consideration. These individuals stressed that the stigma associated with non-marital pregnancy and birth in Korea remains high. Culturally and socially, there continue to be strong pressures to maintain secrecy about any out-of-wedlock birth as public knowledge can result in ostracism of the birthmother and social criticism of her family. One individual emphasized that when birthmothers have gone on to marry and have other children, any revelation of their histories can undermine the security of their marriages and their ability to maintain custody of their children. It was pointed out that agencies may differ in their policies regarding whether and under what circumstances they will contact a birthmother about her wishes concerning the release of identifying information about herself. Some agencies may have policies under which they will contact birthmothers only after a significant period of time has elapsed since the adoptive placement. Other agencies may be more willing to contact a birthmother to learn of her wishes when it is determined that a child is in great psychological distress regarding her adoption or the child has a serious medical condition.

Others who were interviewed were more reluctant to recommend reliance on agencies in Korea for

purposes of determining the extent to which information is available and the wishes of birthparents regarding release of identifying information. They expressed concerns that in many of the cases in which they had been personally involved, they discovered that agencies misled adoptive families by providing inaccurate information about their children's birth families. They also reported that in the course of many reunions, birth families expressed through translators that they were distressed that throughout the intervening years, they never received cards or photos of their children, as they were apparently led to believe would occur when they placed their children for adoption. These individuals indicated that agency staff may have beliefs about birthparents' desires for privacy and secrecy that do not correspond with birthparents' desires and, out of desire to protect birthparents, may have some reticence to move forward in a proactive way. Some individuals interviewed questioned agency policies that limit the circumstances under which they would contact a birthmother about her wishes regarding the release of information about herself. They expressed the opinion that all birth mothers should be contacted and allowed to express their wishes rather than the agency exercising discretion as to whether to notify them of the request.

Several of the individuals who were interviewed emphasized their belief that primary emphasis must be placed on the protection of the birthmother's privacy and integrity, with due consideration for her current life circumstances. They highlighted the cultural realities and the difficulties that Americans often have in understanding the power of these cultural values because they are quite different than their own. Others emphasized the absence of any services for birthmothers in Korea that could support them through the process of revealing their identities and opening themselves to contact with their children. Given these realities, one individual commented that it is neither appropriate nor fair to expect that Korean birthmothers are emotionally prepared to disclose information about themselves. This individual emphasized that for many birthmothers, time is the major avenue for healing. Based on a range of cultural and service considerations, many individuals stated that should a birthmother refuse to agree to the release of information about herself, her decision should prevail.

One individual who was interviewed observed that as time passes, it is likely that more birthparents in Korea will find themselves in an environment that allows them to realize their desires to reconnect with their children. Noting that the parent-child connection is not cultural but "simply human," she highlighted the gradual changes in Korean culture regarding illegitimacy that are likely to lead to a more accepting climate in which birthmothers may step forward. She noted, however, that it is important to recognize the differences between the cultural norms in the U.S. and the positioning of such issues as unwed pregnancy and privacy in the cultures of Korea and other countries.

In contrast to the view that the desires of the birthparent regarding release of identifying information should be paramount, others who were interviewed stated that the adoptee has the paramount right in these

situations. Drawing on the adoptee movement in the US, these individuals highlighted that the adoptee has the right to obtain such personal information about herself, irrespective of agency policy or birthparent preference. While recognizing that the cultural environment of Korea is quite different than in the U.S. and that privacy may have a different cultural value and meaning, they noted the inaccuracy of the prevailing stereotype that all birthmothers are fearful of being found, and they emphasized the responsibilities that birthparents have to their children that are inherent in giving birth and making an adoption plan. Although believing in the adoptee's absolute right to obtain identifying information, these individuals also emphasized that mutual interest must be present for a meaningful relationship between the adoptee and the birthparent to develop. They pointed out, however, that the extent to which the parties may be interested in a relationship may vary over time and greater openness in the relationship may evolve.

#### *Release of Identifying Information Regarding the Adoptee and Adoptive Family to Birthparents*

Just as an adoptee or adoptive parents may seek information about the adopted person's birthparents, there are situations in which a birthmother may seek information about her child and/or the family who adopted her child. She may be motivated by grief and psychological distress about her decision to place her child for adoption; she may have been led to believe that she would have some level of ongoing information about her child and the adoptive family and when such information is not made available to her, she may seek information through other efforts; or she may wish information that she had not specifically requested at the time she placed her child for adoption. One avenue for birthmothers (as for adoptees and adoptive parents) is to return to the agency in Korea and request information about and, in some cases, contact with her child or the adoptive family. In such cases, the Korean agency typically contacts its U.S. agency partner which then determines, through a contact with the adoptive family if the child is under 18 or with the adult adoptee, whether information may be shared. Alternatively, the birthmother may find other avenues to obtain information about the adoptee and/or adoptive family and initiate a search for information and/or contact on her own. When information is sought by a birthparent about the adoptee and/or the adoptive parents, should that information be released?

When the adoptee is an adult, the same considerations that apply to birthparent decision-making about release of identifying information about herself may come into play. As an adult, the adoptee is in a position to decide for himself or herself whether identifying information should be released. Those interviewed believed that such decisions are within the prerogative of the adoptee -- that the adoptee must decide whether he or she wishes "to be found." It is possible, however, that a birthparent may directly contact the adoptee, as opposed to using the agency as an intermediary, in which case the adoptee may find that identifying information already has been obtained. In these cases, the question becomes whether the

adoptee is interested in any level of contact.

Complicated questions may arise when adoptive parents become aware – either through an agency contact or a contact from the birthparent herself -- that their child's birthmother is seeking more information about the child and family. An adoptive parent may respond in a variety of ways: she may immediately rule out the possibility and refuse to discuss the question with their child (possibly on the grounds that her child is not sufficiently mature or stable and with the plan to tell the child about her birthmother's interest "some day"); she may agree but the adopted child (perhaps a teenager) may say "no;" the adopted parents may believe that the information should not be shared but their child, whom they consult on the question, may wish the information to be shared; or the adoptive parents and their child may agree that the information should or should not be shared at the time.

In these situations, several individuals interviewed emphasized the importance of adoptive parents talking with their children about birthparents' requests for information. They viewed open communication between adoptive parents and the child as essential, just as openness in general (as opposed to keeping secrets) promotes the well being of the family members and the family as a whole. Some individuals stated that the adopted child should always have a strong voice in the decision regarding sharing information with birthparents; some stated that when the child is a pre-adolescent or adolescent, the child should be the decision-maker; and others believed that the decision should be made on a case by case basis with, at minimum, the adoptive parent sharing with the child that he or she is in contact with the birthparent. One individual emphasized that adoptive parents should make a distinction between having a conversation with child about the issue (which she strongly recommended) and assuming that the adopted child is ready to make a decision about information being shared with her birthparent (which she believed needed to be carefully assessed). Another individual commented that it is likely that the parent-child relationship would be negatively affected if adoptive parents were to withhold from their child that her birthparent had requested information or were to make a decision that differed from the child's desires.

Some of the individuals interviewed believed that information about birthparents should always be considered the adoptee's information, irrespective of the age of the adoptee, and that the relationship with birthparents should be seen as primarily between the adoptee and the birthparent and secondarily between the adoptive parents and the birthparent. That said, these individuals emphasized that these guiding principles do not mean that adoptive parents are incapable of acting sensitively and in their child's best interests, including assessing their child's needs for wholeness and sense of well-being. Several individuals emphasized that parents always should retain the autonomy to make decisions for their children and determine what type and level of information is developmentally appropriate for the child, and that adoptive parents should not be marginalized in the process.

One individual emphasized the need for “counseling, counseling, counseling” to assist adoptive parents and children in coming to decisions about these issues. She highlighted the importance of a neutral environment where the child can examine his or her own feelings and consider all aspects of the decision, including the choice that his or her adoptive parents may expressly or implicitly communicate as the option they hope the child will make. Likewise, she emphasized the importance of the adoptive parent having the opportunity to assess all aspects of the birthparent’s request for information, including any “red flags” that need attention. To the extent that the adoptive parent is considering withholding from the child the birthparent’s request for information, this individual emphasized that counseling should be provided to clarify that the information belongs to the child, to explore the parent’s reasons for not sharing the information at the current time, and to develop an approach that makes it possible for the child to be involved in the decision-making at a level that is right for the child.

Others who were interviewed focused on the importance of children’s sense of security in their adoptive families and the need for adoptive parents to be fully involved in and oversee the situation and decision-making. They emphasized that adoptive parents best know their children and can best assess whether the birthparent’s interest should be shared with the child. In instances when an agency indicates that a birthmother is seeking identifying information about her child or the birthmother makes direct or indirect contact herself, one individual highly recommended that adoptive parents first utilize an intermediary with fluency in the Korean language to explore the birthparents’ situation more fully and clarify the reasons for the birthparent’s current interest in information or contact. Emphasizing that parents should create a “holding environment” for the child, this individual highlighted that only after further exploration and a determination that the situation is an appropriate one should the parents inform the child of the birthparent’s interest in information. She noted that the child should not be given the authority to make a decision but the opportunity to give “semi-permission” (that is, not veto) next steps.

### **Search and Reunion**

Assuming that identifying information is available to one or more parties to an adoption, search and reunion become potential next steps. Although not all adult adoptees, adoptive parents, or birthparents initiate searches upon obtaining identifying information, the availability of identifying information raises the possibility of a search and reunion and, with that possibility come questions regarding who should initiate, conduct, and/or participate in a search. A number of questions are raised in relation to search and reunion:

Should search be conducted on behalf of adopted children by their adoptive parents, or is search the prerogative of adult adoptees and should be initiated only by them?

Should adoptive parents participate in searches initiated by adult adoptees?

Under what circumstances should search be conducted, including to what extent should facilitators should be utilized?

*The Right to Search*

Who has the right to search for birthparents – the adoptee or the adoptive parent acting on behalf of the adopted child? Two perspectives have emerged regarding the initiation of a search for birth parents in Korea. The first is that adult adoptees hold the right to initiate a search because of their right to direct the course of their own lives (the value of autonomy) and the personal nature of such knowledge which involves the individual’s identity, sense of self, and integration of his or her own life experiences. The second is that adoptive parents have the prerogative to initiate a search on behalf of their adoptive child based on their need for knowledge about their child, their responsibility to ensure their child’s well-being to the maximum extent possible, and their autonomy as parents that entitles them to make decisions on behalf of their child. These values are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2. Values Related to Search**

<b>Initiator</b>	<b>Values</b>
Adult Adoptee	Personal Autonomy Personal Knowledge
Adoptive Parent on Behalf of Adopted Child	Parental Knowledge Parental Responsibility Parental Autonomy

Some of the individuals interviewed emphasized that it is critical that the adoptee initiate a search for his or her birthparents. They stated that, as a general rule, the adoptee should “take the lead.” In the words of one individual, “the search for biological family is a complex and deeply personal decision that unless there are unusual circumstances, belongs to the adoptee.” The individuals who strongly supported adoptee-initiated searches stated that adoptive parents should remain neutral in terms of activating a search or influencing the decision of the adoptee. They believed that a search must be based on the adoptee’s strong interest and motivation and that the adoptee must be of sufficient age and maturity to undertake a search. While encouraging adoptive parents to explore the interests of their child in moving forward with a search for her birthparents, these individuals expressed concern that a child’s “interest” (such as thinking about and talking about her birthparent) may be misinterpreted as a desire to search when it does not, in actuality, mean that the child is ready to take this step. Some adoptees, for example, may eagerly wish to pursue a search but others, although interested, may not wish to search because of concerns about their birthparents’ privacy and

possible disruption in their lives. These individuals also stated that adoptive parents can support their children's personal decisions regarding search by clearly communicating that the adoptee's interest in knowing more about her birthparents is normal; that they understand and accept her choice to search or not search; and that they see the choice as a personal and individual decision that may change from one point in their child's life to another.

Some of the individuals who endorsed adoptee-initiated searches expressed a strong preference for searches to be undertaken only after adoptees reach adulthood. They noted that although search can be incredibly gratifying, it can also be tumultuous and can feel "out of control," and, as a result, is best undertaken when the adoptee is an adult. One individual emphasized the importance of the adoptee seriously contemplating the ramifications of search, carefully evaluating her motivations, clarifying what she expects to learn about herself, determining if she is ready for the life-long implications of a successful search, and considering how a successful search may affect her current relationships and current life situation. One individual, however, stated that she believed that some teenagers may be ready to undertake a search. She made note of a Korean law that permits an adoptee at age 14 or older (with parental consent) to request non-identifying information in her adoption file in Korea and to place a letter to her birthparents in the file that could be shared with the birthparent if she seeks such information – steps that may lead to a "match" and a reunion. In this individual's view, a teenager may be ready in some cases to initiate a search, assuming that she is mature and has received a great deal of support and preparation.

Some individuals who believed strongly in adoptee-initiated searches and who held a strong preference for adult adoptee-initiated search raised questions about using a standard of a "child-focused reason" to justify an adoptive parent-initiated search. They asked whether any motivation might ultimately be framed as "child focused" and, as a consequence, they expressed concern that the reason for search may have relatively little to do with the adoptee's actual desires or readiness. They also questioned the view of search as a normative process in the context of the adoptive family's life. They asked whether "normative" could alternatively be viewed in terms of the work undertaken by a mature adult adoptee to integrate all aspects of herself. Finally, some individuals who endorsed adoptee-initiated searches stated that there would always be exceptions to such a strong preference (such as when a child is in great psychological distress with regard to adoption issues) just as there are exceptions to a strong preference for adoptive parent-initiated searches.

Other individuals who were interviewed believed strongly that adoptive parents can best determine the needs of their children for information regarding their birthparents and should be supported in initiating searches at any time that they believe that their child would benefit from a search. Perspectives vary as to why adoptive families initiate searches. Some individuals pointed to the many situations with which they had been involved in which adopted children, as they became more fully aware of their adoptions and the fact

that they had biological parents elsewhere, were deeply distressed and in “mourning” about the many “missing pieces” in their lives. The issues for these children often center on body image and questions about whom they physically resemble. Children as young as 6 or 7 years understand loss, and some social workers who work with adopted children and adoptive families estimate that approximately 10% of adopted children, because of heightened sensitivity, go “into mourning” for their birthparents. Children may withdraw through daydreaming or more directly express desires to have a connection with the “mommy who carried me in her belly.” Adoptive parents, observing their children’s intense pain, may determine that they need to obtain information and conduct a search for their children’s birthmother (most children are focused on their birthmothers and not birthfathers) in order to address their children’s psychological pain.

Others stated that searches are best conducted by adoptive families before there are such crises in their children’s lives. These individuals emphasized that searches should be viewed as normative as opposed to a response to children’s psychological distress, and they expressed concerns that if a search is undertaken as an avenue for addressing problems, too much may be expected from the search. They focused, however, on the key role of preparation in any adoptive family’s search for their child’s birthparent so that the family can provide the child with support and understanding as the search proceeds. Depending on the individual family and child, preparation may involve talking with other families who have searched, therapeutic work around issues that may impact the search, work with the adopted child who may have misconceptions or anxieties about a search (such as fear of being abandoned in Korea), connecting the child with other children who have searched with their adoptive families for their birthparents, and discussions with non-adopted children in the family who will participate in the search.

Others who were interviewed expressed general agreement with this viewpoint but stated two caveats. First, some stated that it is important that search not be viewed as a “should” for all adoptive families. They noted that search and reunion can themselves raise issues for an adoptive family, and it is very important that search be assessed in terms of whether these steps are the best choice for the child. Second, some of the individuals who were interviewed who work with adoptive parents in these situations expressed the importance of decision-making in this regard being clearly child-focused as opposed to adoptive-parent focused. They viewed the following needs of children as “child-focused:” to fill in the missing pieces of the child’s life so that she can move forward in healthy ways; to connect with the intergenerational taproot of the child’s biological heritage that relates to how she looks, her talents (such as agility in sports or math ability), and medical history; and to correct painful misconceptions that a child may have about her birthparents (such as the belief that her birthmother was indifferent to her well being or abandoned her without a thought). One individual stated that a search is also justified on child-focused grounds when the adoptive parent believes that information will be lost and a search must be conducted relatively quickly. In this regard, several

individuals viewed as strong bases for search: the needs of adoptive parents to gain as much as information as possible so that they can provide the best care for their children, the responsibilities of parents to find ways to assist their children, and the rights of parents to make the decisions that they believe are best for their children.

Those who strongly supported adoptive parent-initiated searches expressed disagreement with the position that search “belongs” to the adult adoptee. They stated that when an adoptive parent understands the issues involved in search and is well prepared for search, adopted children are provided with vital information and opportunities that can only enrich their lives and their understanding of themselves and their histories. They stated that as adults, adoptees can then take on “another kind of search” that adds further to their connection to Korea and to their birth families – searches that can be built on information that has already been provided through the search initiated by their adoptive families (which, in many cases, may have dispelled certain myths and provided a base for the adoptee to fully integrate all aspects of herself). These individuals rejected the notion of adoptive parents’ “taking over” when parents are well prepared and initiate search for child-focused reasons. They believed that through “sensitive listening and timing,” parents can determine whether search is right for the adoptee.

Some of the individuals who were interviewed, however, expressed concerns that some adoptive parents are interested in search for reasons that are not child-focused: curiosity, a desire to provide their child with an interesting opportunity or the family with a “project” that they can together undertake, or a desire to control the future by initiating efforts to obtain identifying information and acting upon that information while such efforts can be directed by themselves. The individuals who expressed these concerns focused on the child’s involvement and any search conducted by a parent “following the feelings of the child,” whether directly expressed by the child or communicated in some other way.

Some of the individuals who were interviewed highlighted the role that adoptive parents can play in meeting their children’s needs outside of seeking identifying information about their children’s birthparents or undertaking search efforts. They stated that non-identifying information can often provide children with the knowledge and reassurance that children need as they are growing up. Some pointed out, for example, that a photograph of the child’s birthmother may play a powerful role in assuring the child, permitting the child to obtain the information that she needs, and laying a foundation for further efforts in the future when the adoptee is ready to initiate a search on her own. Others emphasized the importance of focusing on the child’s cultural connections to Korea and integrating “Koreaness” into the child’s life whether or not the child seeks such information about Korea directly. These individuals stated that connection with ethnic heritage is a critical foundation that must be built before connections with birthfamily are sought.

Some individuals highlighted the importance of adoptive parents’ obtaining and holding as much

information as possible in “safe-keeping” for their children. These individuals emphasized the ever-changing availability of information over time (for example, information held by government agencies may be lost as these agencies move and dispose of older records and information that can be obtained only through personal contacts and recall may diminish over time). They urged that adoptive parents obtain and retain as much information as soon as possible to avoid the risk of information loss, keeping in mind the interests of others and the child’s psychological readiness at any point in time. On this point, one individual emphasized the importance of counseling with adopted children as more information – both non-identifying and identifying – becomes available. Noting that such information can be difficult for a child to hold and process (the most difficult information of all being the fact of having been “given away” in the first place), she emphasized that counseling can play a critical role in giving an adopted child or teen as much control as possible over the information in their adoption stories.

A final issue raised in connection with “the right to search” was the extent to which adoptive parents should participate in their adult adoptee children’s searches. Several of the individuals who were interviewed stated that the decision should be made by the adult adoptee, and adoptive parents should accompany adoptees only when invited and when they can play a very supportive role. They noted that some adult adoptees need the support of their adoptive parents, as well as other significant persons in their lives, to undertake and continue their searches. Some individuals took a “minimalist” approach to adoptive parent involvement in adoptees’ searches. They emphasized that a search is undertaken by an adult to find herself, not to enrich her relationship with her adoptive parents. They viewed search as an aspect of the adult process of individualization and noted that unless adoptive parents are “110% supportive,” their involvement may pose additional challenges to an already emotionally demanding and confusing process. One individual commented that adoptive parents often feel the need to take control of the process in the spirit of protecting their children from any further hurt or pain, and for that reason, the best approach for an adoptee may be to seek the support of others while keeping her adoptive parents informed about the process (assuming the general support of her adoptive parents).

On the other hand, others believed in the full involvement of adoptive parents in an adult adoptee’s search and viewed their participation as a way for the adult adoptee to fully integrate all parts of herself and her history. These individuals noted that many adoptees wish to involve their parents as they do not want to continue compartmentalizing their lives (as adoption essentially requires all members of the triad to do). To the extent that adoptees wish to maintain separateness between their birth and adoptive families, they may not be comfortable involving their adoptive parents. One of the individuals interviewed expressed concern when adoptees have strong feelings related to keeping their birth families and their adoptive families separate as she believed that this approach suggested difficulties in their fully integrating all parts of themselves.

Another individual pointed out, however, that adoptees may not include their adoptive parents because their parents express opposition to the search, have refused to assist in any way, or have communicated their discomfort and the adoptees are concerned that knowledge of the search would hurt their adoptive parents' feelings. While recognizing the importance of an extensive support system for an adoptee who undertakes a search, this individual noted that the failure to involve adoptive parents often is the result of the adoptive parent's position on the issue.

### *Conducting the Search*

A number of viewpoints emerged on the "best" approach to use in conducting a search. Some of the individuals who were interviewed urged that adoptive families and adoptees not embark on searches without the guidance and assistance of agencies in the United States and Korea. They viewed self-initiated searches as neither necessary nor prudent given the well-established agencies in Korea that are committed to post-adoption services. These individuals emphasized that these agencies not only have the technical skills required to conduct a search but have an appreciation of the psychological, social and cultural impact of search on birthmothers, and, as a result, they are able to work discreetly to ensure that birthmothers are protected from the potentially destructive impact that a search conducted without such an appreciation may have.

These individuals also emphasized that the Korean agencies can be of great assistance to adult adoptees who search, assisting with notices in newspapers and television broadcasts designed to communicate the adoptee's desire to find her birthparent if her birthparent is open to contact. They did not endorse reliance on facilitators based in Korea (adult adoptees who have returned to Korea to live and who offer their services to other adoptees who are seeking their birthparents or other individuals who offer assistance with search). These individuals expressed concerns that facilitators, while perhaps having skills in the mechanics of search, may not have the objectivity or cultural sensitivity that search in Korea demands.

Others, however, expressed concerns about reliance on agencies in Korea for assistance in conducting searches, pointing out that the primary function of these agencies is the adoptive placements of children. Given the inevitable limitations on agency resources (and possible concerns that search may negatively impact their placement activities), agencies may not be able or willing to provide extensive assistance with search. Some individuals who expressed concerns about agencies recommended instead the use of "friends" to conduct searches. These individuals believed that adult adoptees who have returned to Korea and others (people who are bilingual, bicultural, and often have social work or psychology backgrounds) who offer adoptees and adoptive families assistance with search are equally well-prepared to conduct searches, both in the technical sense and in terms of their caution, sympathy, and care in

approaching birth families and determining their interest in being contacted. These individuals, in fact, believed that “friends” are more likely to make successful contacts with birthfamilies because agencies often do not have information on which to base a search and are not always extremely well-regarded by birthfamilies who were led to believe, for example, that they would have some level of ongoing contact with their children that never materialized.

Others who were interviewed, however, urged caution in selecting individuals who serve as facilitators. They noted that a growing number of individuals and groups are offering search assistance for a fee and that care should be taken in utilizing such services. Some urged caution, particularly with regard to adult adoptees who return to Korea and assist with search, highlighting the fact that some of these individuals have not resolved many of their own issues related to adoption. Others, however, pointed out that the fact that fees are charged should not be viewed in a negative light. They noted that individuals and agencies that assist with search are providing a valuable service to which they bring knowledge and experience and that they often incur expenses in conducting searches for others (including travel and research costs). These individuals observed that some adoptees and families who search have unreasonable expectations about the extent to which others should provide support and services on their behalf.

One individual recommended that search-related resources be used in progressive fashion, with the first contact being with the Korean agency. She noted that the agencies are likely to have the most information and that, at least theoretically, agency staff are trained in search issues. She stated that when the agency has no information or proves unhelpful, the next step should involve contacts with others who have searched without the assistance of an agency to learn from their experiences. She recommended the use of a trustworthy facilitator but also strongly recommended that an adult adoptee be personally and actively engaged in the search (as opposed to simply paying someone to conduct the search for her). As a final resort, she recommended use of the media.

Other individuals pointed out that there is, in essence, no “best practice” with regard to conducting searches in Korea. They noted that individuals search in a variety of ways, using numerous options that have varying strengths and drawbacks. One individual highlighted the haphazard nature of the process, and another commented on the climate of confusion and distress that often permeates the search process, leading individuals to circumvent existing systems. She expressed concerns about the inequities related to resources and responses to individual adoptees who attempt to search. In light of these realities, several individuals emphasized the importance of considering all alternatives and preparing oneself for the inevitable stresses associated with search.

## Conclusion

Access to identifying information and search and reunion present a range of challenging questions – in domestic adoption in the U.S. and in international adoption. Although much has been learned in the U.S. about the negative impact of secrecy on members of the triad and the benefits of greater openness, much remains to be understood about access to identifying information and search and reunion in international adoptions in general and Korean-American adoptions in particular. In addition to the many challenging questions related to the respective interests of birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive parents, there are cultural and social issues that make these issues in international adoption more complex.

There are many perspectives on some of the perplexing issues that arise in Korean American adoptions: how to weigh the privacy interests of Korean birthparents against adoptees' "right to know;" how to balance the interests of Korean birthparents in obtaining identifying information on their children or their children's adoptive families against the privacy interests of adoptees and adoptive parents; the extent to which search "belongs" to adoptees or is a decision that adoptive parents can best make; whether adoptive parents should participate in their adult children's searches for birthparents; and how best to conduct a search in Korea. These issues require a balancing of the autonomy, knowledge and responsibility interests of each member of the triad at different stages of the lifelong journey of adoption.

The interviews conducted for this paper revealed a remarkable lack of consensus on many of the issues that were explored. Even when there was general agreement on certain points, individual perspectives were shaped by unique considerations and insights. How should such varied opinion be viewed? The many perspectives seem to suggest that these complex issues do not lend themselves to ready answers or to approaches that can be expected to work for everyone. At the same time, they also seem to reflect the importance of continuing to carefully assess these issues while building a stronger understanding and knowledge base.

Importantly, the individuals interviewed for this paper did agree upon the critical role of preparation, education, support and counseling – for birthparents, adoptive parents and adoptees. A number of individuals emphasized that greater efforts are needed to educate and support birthparents in Korea regarding the interests of adoptees in obtaining information about themselves and, in many cases, making connections with their birthparents. There was a general acknowledgment of the privacy interests of birthparents, but many believed that adoption professionals can do much more to assist Korean birthparents in understanding their ongoing importance in their children's lives. Preparation and education also were highlighted for adoptive parents who are interested in obtaining identifying information about their children's birthparents and who are considering a search. The individuals who were interviewed highlighted the many issues

associated with taking these steps and the importance of providing quality support for adoptive parents who may be struggling with these issues. Finally, support for adoptees was a consistent theme. Those interviewed identified many issues that adoptees must confront when they decide to conduct a search and emphasized the importance of ongoing support through the process.

There also was an emphasis on the role that agencies in the U.S. can play in working together to consolidate resources, policies and practices to eliminate much of the inequity that has characterized access to information and search and reunion both in the U.S. and abroad. Such collaboration was seen as providing a model for Korean agencies, as professionals in both countries develop a firm understanding of the lifelong issues in adoption and how they can best support adoptees and their adoptive and birth families, irrespective of which agency was initially involved in a particular adoptive placement.

Finally, it is important to note the sensitivity that all of those interviewed brought to their consideration of the interests of all members of the triad in connection with these complex issues. As a group, they focused on the interests and needs of adoptees while at the same time acknowledging the important interests of adoptive parents and the limitations posed by social and cultural considerations when considering the interests of birth parents. This integrated focus was summed up by one of the individuals interviewed, Marilyn Schoettle, in the following way:

There are a few places that most of us as adoptive parents can never go with our children. We can't really walk in their shoes as Korean Americans, Thai Americans, or Chinese Americans. We also can't be adopted persons. However, we can load their backpacks with supplies to help them on their journey, and we can let them know that we will always be there for them when they need us.

The sensitive and thoughtful attention brought to these issues by all of the individuals interviewed for this paper provides a strong basis for further discussion and exploration. It is hoped that this foundation will spur additional dialogue on these important questions.

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