Curiosity and Opportunities:

The impact of accessing adoption information on adopted adults and the decision to search for birth relatives

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Abstract

Understanding the nature of adopted people's curiosity, and the reasons why some people seek out adoption information and birth relatives whilst others do not, has been the focus of research, debate and theorising for many years. This submission for the degree of PhD by Publication draws on three studies concerned with the experience of adoption, search and reunion undertaken between 1997 and 2013 on which the author was principal investigator. Nine publications have been selected to represent them. The studies explored the experiences of people adopted mostly in England and Wales, including a group of women who had been brought to the UK from Hong Kong and placed for adoption. Findings about their curiosity regarding their backgrounds, and the opportunities they may or may not have had to pursue them, were consistent themes in the studies.

This thesis takes the concepts of *curiosity* and *opportunities* and uses them as the thread to review the three studies, evaluate their significance at the time and consider their ongoing relevance. The opportunities for adopted people to trace relatives and find out about their origins have changed significantly over the years, in terms of professional understandings, social acceptability, legal provisions and technological possibilities.

The thesis is in three parts. The first part reviews the literature, showing what was known at the time of the studies about adopted people's experiences of adoption, curiosity, search and reunion, and then discussing how this knowledge has since been extended.

The second part summarises the author's role in the three studies before discussing the methodology and key findings, and the ethical considerations of researching such sensitive topics.

The third part explores in more depth how curiosity and opportunity can change and interact in dynamic and subtle ways, throughout the lifetime of an adopted person. It highlights the impact of social media and developments in DNA testing. The thesis illustrates how the knowledge and understanding from the three studies was used to

inform further research and changes in law, policy and practice, and how they have continuing relevance for the adoption community and in other related fields.

Acknowledgements

Contents

The Research Studies

Study 1: Adoption, Search and Reunion: The long-term experience of adopted adults (1997–2000)

This study used a mixed-method design to investigate the experience of adoption, thoughts about searching and search and reunion outcomes. Postal questionnaires were used to gather data from 394 adopted adults. Two separate questionnaires were designed for searching and non-searching adopted adults. The two questionnaires contained common questions allowing direct comparisons to be made. Qualitative interviews were carried out with a sub-sample of 74 adopted people who had completed one or other of the two questionnaires.

Study 2: The Adoption Triangle Revisited: A study of adoption search and reunion experiences (2002–2005)

This mixed-methods study used a postal questionnaire designed to elicit quantitative and qualitative data from birth mothers, adopted parents and adopted adults. The questionnaire was sent to 93 birth mothers, 93 adoptive parents and 126 adopted adults. The sample included both searching and non-searching adopted people and sought and seeker birth mothers.

Study 3: Adversity, Adoption and Afterwards: A mid-life follow-up study of women adopted from Hong Kong (2010–2013)

This most recent study set out to contact and follow up 100 women who were brought to the UK from Hong Kong during the 1960s and placed for adoption. Ninety-nine of these women were located through publicly available records and 72 agreed to participate. This mixed-methods study used questionnaires, including standardised measures and open-ended questions, and semi-structured interviews, which explored different experiences and reflections on being adopted internationally.

Publications for Submission with Reasons

Publication 1: Chapter 16: Identity and Relationships: interpretation of the findings. In: Howe, D. and Feast, J. (2000/2003) *Adoption Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults*. London: The Children's Society/BAAF.

This provides an overall summary of the findings regarding the differences between searchers and non-searchers, their experience of adoption and their motivation for accessing information and searching for birth relatives.

Publication 2: Chapter 9: Growing up adopted. In: Triseliotis, J., Feast, J. and Kyle, F. (2005) *The Adoption Triangle Revisited: A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences*. London: BAAF.

This chapter explores adopted people's experience of adoption and the relationship with their adoptive parents.

Publication 3: Chapter 9: Origins and access to information. In: Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A. and Simmonds, J. (2013) *Adversity, Adoption and Afterwards: A Mid-life Follow Up Study of Women Adopted from Hong Kong*. London: BAAF.

This chapter provides further information about the women's curiosity levels and how this was explored.

Publication 4: Kirton, D., Howe, D. and Feast, J. (2000) 'Searching, reunion and transracial adoption', *Adoption & Fostering*, 24(3): 8–15.

This article is the qualitative analysis of the transracially adopted people from Study 1 and builds on the quantitative data that was gathered.

Publication 5: Feast, J. and Howe, D. (2003) 'Open adoption records, the human rights of adopted people and discrimination: the case of Odievre v France', *European Journal of Social Work*, 7(1): 25–42.

This article illustrates how widely the research was disseminated and helped other countries to understand the benefits that accessing information about origins can have for adopted people and their sense of identity.

Publication 6: Feast, J. (2009) 'Identity and continuity: adults' access to and need for information about their history and identity', In: Schofield, G. and Simmonds, J., *The Child Placement Handbook*. London: BAAF, Chapter 23.

This article illustrates the similarities and differences about information gaps between adopted and care experienced adults, and the opportunities they have to access information.

Publication 7: Feast, J. (2003) 'Messages from the adoption experience for donor-assisted conception', *Human Fertility*, 6(1): 41–45.

This publication shows how the concepts of curiosity and opportunity can occupy the minds of other groups of people where they are not genetically related and about the importance of parents being open with their child about their genetic origins.

Publication 8: Feast, J. and Howe, D. (2003) 'Talking and telling', in Douglas, A. and Philpot, T. (eds.) *Changing Families, Changing Times*. London, Routledge.

This chapter expands on the findings from the research about this subject and the implications this has for practice.

Publication 9: Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A. and Simmonds, J. (2012) The British Chinese Adoption Study: planning a study of life course and outcomes', *European Journal of Social Work*, 16(3): 344–359.

This shows how we approached the study and developed a methodology.

Introduction

'For all these years I have felt that I have been living in a darkened room until someone switched the light on.' Jane, adopted person.

The above quotation comes from an adopted adult with whom I worked at The Children's Society after she had just received information from records relating to her adoption. Her words made a huge impact on me for they illustrated what it can be like for adopted people who have little or no knowledge of their origins and family background. Jane had a happy adoption but always felt very different. She was tall and fair, with blue eyes, and she was passionate about dogs. Her parents were completely the opposite: small, with dark hair and brown eyes, and they disliked dogs. When Jane accessed her records, she learned that her birth mother had the same colouring and height as her and loved dogs too. For the first time, she had an insight into why she was like she was.

Jane's reaction from reading her adoption records brought home to me the importance of addressing the curiosity of adopted people, as well as those who have been brought up in care, and the significance of choice and opportunities to access information about their personal heritage, something that can be taken for granted when you live with the family you were born into. Without a coherent narrative about their origins and genetic heritage, adopted people and others in this situation often express feelings of incompleteness and have difficulty making sense of who they are and where they come from.

The concepts of curiosity and opportunities, and the interplay between them, captivated me and during the course of the three studies I undertook, my knowledge and understanding deepened. I began to appreciate the nuances within these two concepts and how these can influence an adopted person's curiosity and their ability to activate their own personal journey of discovery.

Understanding the nature of adopted people's curiosity, and the reasons why some people seek out adoption information and birth relatives whilst others do not, is a subject that has been explored in the literature for several decades (McWhinnie, 1967;

Triseliotis, 1973; Timms, 1983; Brodzinsky, 1990; Howe and Feast, 2000; Wrobel, et al., 2005; Neil, et al., 2013; Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2020; Neil and Beek, 2020).

This submission for the degree of PhD by Publication draws on three studies concerned with the experience of adoption, search and reunion. Spanning a period of 16 years, between 1997 and 2013, the studies explored the experiences of people adopted mostly in England and Wales, including adopted people who were transracially placed, and also a group of women who had been brought to the UK from Hong Kong and placed for adoption. The studies contributed to building further knowledge about adopted people's curiosity and search for a cohesive identity from a life-span perspective.

The concepts of curiosity and opportunities were consistent themes in the studies and were fundamental to the findings from each one, providing original information to extend our knowledge in these areas. For example, Study 1 included searchers (adopted people who actively seek information and birth relatives) and non-searchers (adopted people who have not sought information or do not search for birth family), so comparisons were made about their curiosity levels and what motivated them or prevented them from beginning a search. Key findings revealed that both groups thought about their birth parents and origins during childhood and adolescence, but non-searchers did not take this forward for a range of reasons, including being concerned about upsetting their adoptive parents and being afraid of the information they would discover.

Study 2 built on Study 1 by including the adoptive and birth parents' experience of the adoption, search and reunion process from a dyadic and triadic perspective. One of the key findings showed that there was a strong relationship between how close the adopted person felt towards their adoptive parents and how openly the subject of adoption was discussed. Where this was discussed, this had a positive impact on the adopted person's sense of belonging and self-esteem.

The findings reported in Study 3 enabled comparisons to be made with the adopted people in Study 1 regarding their curiosity and decisions around searching for information and birth relatives. This revealed that the proportion who rarely thought

about their birth family in adulthood appeared larger in Study 3 than would have been predicted based on other reported studies. The reasons mainly related to the fact that for the majority, at the time of the study, accessing any information and beginning a search for birth relatives was an insurmountable task. For the majority of participants, being transnationally adopted from Hong Kong after having been 'abandoned' and left to be found as very young babies, meant there was no possibility of accessing information about their origins.

Throughout the thesis I use the words 'adopted people', 'adopted adults', and not 'adoptee', in the knowledge that for some adopted people this word can carry negative connotations. Some babies have been truly abandoned in circumstances where the clear intention was that they would not be found; however most babies are actually left in public places where they could be found. Hence the word 'foundling' or the phrase 'left to be found' is used in place of the commonly used term 'abandoned babies'. I have also chosen to use the word 'abandoned' as little as possible as this can have harsh connotations too.

The thesis is in three parts:

First, a literature review sets the context for the studies (Part 1). This starts with the circumstances of adoption over time, concentrating on the legislation and policy changes in England and Wales that have affected adopted people's rights to access information about their origins and adoption history. The commentary moves on to explore what was known about adopted people's experiences of adoption and their desire to access information about their origins and search for birth relatives at the time of the first study in 1997, before discussing how the knowledge has been extended since the studies were published.

Part 2 provides a summary of the author's role and responsibilities in the three studies before discussing the methodology and conduct used the studies. This includes the aims, methods, findings, strengths and limitations of each study, and key findings in relation to adopted people's curiosity and search for information about their origins.

Part 3 of the commentary examines the contribution that my research and published works have made to the existing knowledge of adopted people's curiosity to search and what they continue to offer in the much-changed context of adoption today. This discussion concentrates on adopted adults' quest for information about their origins, and whether or not to embark on a search for birth relatives. It explores the dynamic between curiosity and opportunities and how this may influence the decision to embark on this search, resulting in eight identified typologies. The discussion also looks at how the research has impacted on legislative, policy and practice change and how the findings can be used for other family situations where genetic origins and identity are of significance.

Appendix A contains letters from the following co-researchers on the projects, confirming my role and responsibilities:

Emeritus Professor David Howe, lead academic for Study 1; Dr Fiona Kyle, research assistant for Study 2; and Emeritus Professor Alan Rushton, lead academic with Dr John Simmonds and Dr Margaret Grant, research assistant for Study 3.

Appendix B contains the submitted publications.

Part 1: The Literature Review

Comprehensive reviews of the literature were previously conducted for all three studies about adopted people's experiences of adoption, search and reunion and these can be found in the publications for each study (Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis, et al., 2005; Feast, et al., 2013). To contextualise them within the adoption literature since the publication of Study 3 in 2013, a search was conducted to identify studies that examined the ways in which curiosity and opportunity affect adopted adults' decisions around seeking information about their origins and contacting birth family members. A range of social sciences and psychological databases were used, as well as direct searches of relevant journals, citation searching and other web searches using Google.

This literature review is divided into the following four sections:

1. Adopted people's rights to information - the legal, social and policy context to adoption in England and Wales;
2. Curiosity and the motivation to search for information and birth relatives;
3. The influence of family communicative openness on curiosity and the motivation to search;
4. The outcomes of search and reunion.

1. Adopted People's Rights to Information: The Legal, Social and Policy Context since 1926 in England and Wales

In England and Wales, adoption was largely an informal and private arrangement (Brammer, 2006); Keating, 2009; until the Adoption of Children Act 1926. This Act established a legal and permanent relationship between the child and the adoptive parents, terminating the birth parents' rights over the child and giving legal rights to the adoptive parents. Since then, adoption processes and law have undergone transitions in relation to 'openness' due to changes in societal attitudes, policies and practice. This section summarises the legislative, policy and practice developments over time, together with research findings about how these factors provide

'opportunities' and influence the 'curiosity' of an adopted person to seek information relating to their origins and family background.

Until the 1970s, the social stigma of being an unmarried mother was a powerful influence on a mother's decision, sometimes with a father involved, to place the child for adoption. Thus, a large number of white healthy babies were adopted, reaching a peak in 1968 when 27,000 adoption orders were made in England and Wales (Brammer, 2006). The Abortion Act 1967 and developments in contraception, social security payments and a more liberal attitude to unmarried mothers led to a decline in white babies being available for adoption. However, there were children, often older, who for varying reasons were not able to remain in the care of their parents or family and who were growing up in local authority care. Consequently, local authorities and adoption agencies began to recruit prospective adoptive parents for such children, opening the door to a wider range of adopters, including single people and gay and heterosexual couples (Gill and Jackson, 1983; Golombok, et al., 1983; Borland, et al., 1991; Baker, 2007).

The 1926 Act made no provision for an adopted adult to be given access to birth and adoption records. Unlike today, these were not made available to the adopted adult and often adoptive parents would be given very little information about the child's origins.

However, the Adoption of Children Act 1949 brought in a major change. It gave adopted children the same legal status as birth children, giving them the right to inherit from their adoptive parents. The Act also permitted non-disclosure of the identity of the adoptive parents from the birth parents by using serial numbers on court documents (and the Adoption of Children (County Court) Rules 1949; Adoption of Children (High Court) Rules 1950).

The Adoption Act 1950 consolidated previous legislation. It confirmed the court rules allowing a serial number to be allocated to an adoption application, by enabling a 'description' of the applicant 'in the manner set out in the court rules to be sufficient' (Cretney, 2005). This confirmed and emphasised the prevailing 'clean break–fresh start' view of adoption, reinforcing barriers to tracing origins.

The policies, information and guidance given by adoption agencies during the 1950s advised the adoptive parents that as long as their child felt loved then they would not be curious, as illustrated in the following excerpt from an information leaflet for adoptive parents:

> …..provided that the child has not grown up with the idea that his adoptive parents do not love him or that there is some mystery about his origins, he will not dwell unduly on these matters or want to get in touch with his natural parents. (Standing Conference of Societies Registered for Adoption, 1950)

The Hurst Committee Review of Adoption Law (1954) went on to recommend that adopted people aged 21 years and over should be able to apply to the court for a full copy of their adoption order, which would include details of birth parent(s)' names, (Hurst Report, para 201, p.53). It also recommended that the child should be told of their adoption status despite recognising that there were challenges in enforcing this. Nonetheless, the Adoption Act 1958 did not include either of the Hurst Committee's recommendations in their entirety. The Act gave power to the High Court and the Westminster County Court jurisdiction to make disclosure orders, but in reality this power was not used during the next two decades, thus maintaining the status quo regarding confidentiality (Cretney, 2005).

The Houghton Committee was appointed in July 1969 to look at the adoption of children including the issue of access to birth records. Their report (1972) acknowledged the importance of being 'open' and telling children about their adoption and provided the blueprint for sections of the Children Act 1975 and Adoption Act 1976 relating to tracing services for adopted adults. Their final submission was influenced by the findings of Triseliotis's (1973) Scottish study, which confirmed the importance of adopted people having access to information and knowledge about their origins and background.

The Children Act 1975, section 26, was a significant step forward for adopted persons in England and Wales as it recognised their curiosity and opportunity needs. It inserted section 20A into the Adoption Act 1958, recognising in law the information needs of

adopted adults by providing them with the right to access relevant information to apply for a copy of their birth certificate revealing their original name, their birth mother's name, and her address at the time of the birth (and birth father if known and named on the certificate). With this information, an adopted person could begin to search for their birth relatives, giving rise to concerns from adoption agencies and others. Its effect was seen as reneging on the reassurance given to birth mothers by adoption agencies and, in cases of privately arranged adoptions by those involved, that their child would not be able to trace or contact them (Haimes and Timms, 1985). Most unusually, the provisions were retrospective.

As a protective factor, the law stipulated that a person adopted before 12 November 1975 was required to receive 'birth record counselling' with an adoption 'counsellor', usually a qualified social worker with adoption practice experience, before they could apply for their birth certificate. Those adopted after this date were not required to do this although the option was open to them. The right was later incorporated into the Adoption Act 1976, section 51. The Government's advice notes to adoption counsellors had a discouraging tone advising adoption counsellors not to encourage the adopted person to search and contact birth relatives because of the hurt it was likely to cause (DHSS, 1976, p.6).

Whilst the law provided a formal opportunity for adopted people to satisfy their curiosity and locate birth relatives, this could be facilitated or diminished depending on practice implementation. The 1976 Act also had a major impact on professional practice. Social workers approached this practice cautiously, taking seriously the fears about how this legal right might impact negatively on birth mothers and their families. Nevertheless, meeting with adopted adults gave adoption practitioners and managers a unique opportunity to gain an insight into the information and search needs of adopted people. Social workers were able to increase their understanding about the lifelong experience of being adopted, and the impact that a lack of information and unanswered questions had on them, including their sense of identity (Howe and Feast, 2000). The subsequent contact via intermediary services (provided by registered adoption agencies to act as the mediator when adopted people and a birth relative wished to make contact with one another) also brought to the forefront the needs of

birth mothers regarding their feelings of loss and grief as a result of parting with their child through adoption (Bouchier, et al., 1991; Howe and Sawbridge, 1992; Coleman and Jenkins, 1998; Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis, et al., 2005; Kelly, 2005).

Slowly, practice in England and Wales began to consider the benefits to adopted adults and birth relatives of the opportunities for information about origins created in the Children Act 1975. A key influence during the 1980s was the work of Rockel and Ryburn (1988) who discussed openness in the context of the customary Maori practice [Whāngai] where a child is brought up by a person, usually another relative, other than their birth parents. Ryburn (1990) noted that, unlike in England where adoption without contact was the norm during the 1980s, white [*Pākehā*] adoption in New Zealand had developed some degree of continuing contact after the adoption order had been made, without adverse consequences for the adopted child, the birth parents, or the adoptive family. Likewise, research also showed how openness in adoption could and did work in the UK; there was an increasing acknowledgement that for some children retaining links with birth family members had an important role for their well-being and identity building (Fratter,1996).

The Children Act 1989 amended the Adoption Act 1976 by requiring the Registrar General to establish an Adoption Contact Register, allowing adopted people and their birth relatives to register a wish for contact, implemented in 1991. The rights of adopted people were potentially further extended through a High Court judgement in 2001, concerning an adopted woman who had been refused access to confidential information from agency records about her past, specifically in relation to her birth and adoptive parents who were deceased (*Gunn-Russo v Nugent Care Society and Secretary of State for Health [2001] EWHC Admin 566*). The court ruled that the agency had not exercised lawfully the wide discretion it had under the adoption regulations to disclose material about an adoption. This judgement enabled adoption agencies to exercise their discretion more confidently about sharing information.

In a further advance for people affected by adoption, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 recognised not only the access and information needs of adopted people but also those of birth relatives. It provided a legal right for birth relatives to request an

intermediary service to enable their adopted adult son or daughter (if adopted before 30 December 2005) to be told of their wish for contact. It also provided adopted adults with the right to place a qualified or absolute veto regarding their wish not to be contacted by an intermediary service. These apparently conflicting rights reflected the State's duty to protect the privacy right of an individual whilst also respecting the 'right to family life' in Article 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

For adoptions after that date, there is a different regulatory system for accessing birth records and pre-adoption order information, using a less secretive approach. It is, as yet, too early to know how this has shaped the experience of those children and young people adopted since 2005 as they find out about and contact their birth parents. However, the Neil, et al. (2013) and Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2020) studies provide insights into how the current legislation enables adopted people and their birth families to navigate the process of locating and making contact.

2. Curiosity and the Motivation to Search for Information and Birth Relatives

Understanding adopted people's curiosity and what motivates them to embark on a search has been of interest to academic researchers from a range of disciplines for many decades. Findings have suggested that the quality of adoption affects the adopted person's decision to search with an increase in 'seeking' behaviour observed in adopted people who perceive their relationship with their adoptive parents in a negative light. Hence, the urge to meet birth parents was linked to an unsatisfactory experience of adoption or a desire to hurt the birth mother for 'abandoning' them, or the adoptive parents for poor parenting (Raynor, 1980; Aumend and Barret, 1984; Campbell, et al., Schechter,1990; 1991; Sachdev, 1992; Pacheco and Eme, 1993; March, 1995).

Triseliotis's (1973) findings did not concur with this but concluded that 'a quest for their origins was not a vindictive venture, but an attempt to understand themselves and their situation better' (p.166). He also found that non-disclosure of background information was related to searching for birth parents. Researchers reported that it was 'normal' for adopted people to be curious about their origins and birth family and

that gaining factual information provided a fuller sense of identity and fulfilment (Sobel and Cardiff, 1983; Haimes and Timms, 1985).

Gender was found to be a key factor in distinguishing searchers from non-searchers with twice as many women tending to search (Goyno and Watson, 1988; Sachdev, 1993; Pacheco and Eme, 1993; Howe and Feast, 2000). This was thought to be due to the supposition that they were more interpersonally oriented than men and were more interested in their birth family (Sachdev, 1992; Pacheco and Eme, 1993). Age at adoption placement was reported to be another factor: the older the adopted person was at the time of adoption, the greater the probability that they would conduct a search (Sobel and Cardiff, 1983). Interestingly, a later study reported that there was no difference between females and males regarding curiosity or their motivation to search (Wrobel and Grotevant, 2019).

Haimes and Timms (1985) argued that searching behaviour occurs on a continuum and adopted people change their minds about searching over time. Exploring 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', 'Who do I look like' and 'Why was I placed for adoption?' are key themes emerging from the literature (Triseliotis, 1973; Haimes and Timms, 1983; Sobel and Cardiff, 1983; Kowal and Schilling, 1985. Brodzinsky, et al. (1992) suggest that every adopted person conducts an intra-psychic search, which includes thinking about why they were adopted. Being curious about origins and the need to find out more is a common process (Howe and Feast, 2000; Wrobel and Dillon, 2009).

Whilst the concept of curiosity is embedded in an adopted person's decision to embark on a search for information and birth relatives, researchers also have identified particular triggers. They have found that life experiences and events such as pregnancy, birth or adoption of a child, or death of an adoptive parent may prompt this (Kowal and Schilling, 1985). Equally, questions around their genealogy such as who they look like and their family medical history could empower them to initiate the search (McWhinnie, 1967; Triseliotis, 1973).

Prior to Müller and Perry's (2001) comprehensive systematic review of empirical research, two models for searching behaviour had been suggested: the normative and the pathological. The normative stresses the fluidity of identity and considers

searching to be an attempt to integrate one's roots and develop a fuller understanding of who one is, whereas the pathological model suggests that the desire to search arises out of dissatisfaction or difficulty with one's adoption. Müller and Perry's (2001) overview of the literature regarding the demographic and psychological characteristics of adopted people in key areas of interest shows: who searches for information and birth relatives; what motivates them to do so; the outcome of the search; contact; and reunion with birth relatives. They summarise the three theoretical models that emerged from the studies included in their review:

1. **Psychopathological** - desire to search due to some 'personal deficiency' (p.15);
2. Search as a normal process and as a developmental task that adopted persons must complete as part of their **psychological** development; and
3. Adoptive person's desire to search as framed within a context of **socio-cultural** norms and expectations about the importance of biological heritage.

This model provided a framework to develop a broader understanding of what may be behind the adopted person's decision to search and this will be discussed further in Part 3.

Identity Exploration and Curiosity

Long before Müller and Perry (2001) developed their three theoretical models, Triseliotis (1983), building on the work of Kirk (1964), had explored the role of identity in adoption and described personal identity as a consequence of multiple psychological, social and cultural influences that combine towards the building of an integrated and unified self. This is different for every person and its importance for adopted people in developing a full sense of self to feel confident about who they are and where they come from has interested adoption researchers over many decades (Triseliotis, 1973; Haimes and Timms, 1986; Brodzinsky, et al.; 1992; Grotevant and Von Korff, 2011; Grotevant, et al., 2000; Neil and Beek, 2020).

Curiosity and identity exploration are intertwined. Many adopted people are curious because they have an information gap that they want to fill to help build a fuller sense of their own personal and unique identity. The concept of identity is fundamental to

how they construct a sense of self, which draws together and makes sense of their different experiences and histories in such a way as to create a coherent narrative (Grotevant 1997; Grotevant, et al., 2000; Von Korff and Grotevant, 2011).

This is particularly complex for adopted people as adoption adds an extra dimension to both birth and adoptive family identities. Grotevant (1997) identified three features of identity: self-definition; subjective sense of coherence of personality; and sense of continuity over time to assist with making connections with a person's past, present and future. Nonetheless, aspects of personal identity are not fixed but evolve over time, and identity development is a life-long and dynamic process (Grotevant,1987).

Identity exploration can be further complicated for people who have been transracially adopted, as illustrated in some of the many published personal accounts (e.g. Harris 2006; 2008; 2012).

The social policy and political implications of transracial adoption have received much attention (Raynor, 1970; Jackson 1975; Bagley, 1979; Gill and Jackson, 1983; Barn, 1993; Triseliotis, et al., 1997; Barn, 2000; Kirton, 2000; Rushton and Minnis, 2000; Selman, 2000; Thoburn, et al., 2000). Nonetheless, at the time of Müller and Perry's (2001) research, they acknowledged that there were few studies about 'internationally and transracially adopted persons' [whose] interest in searching deserves more attention' (p.12).

Transracially adopted adults often begin their search for birth parents at a younger age than their white counterparts in same-race placements (Howe and Feast, 2000). Their primary curiosity tends to be looking for the parent who held knowledge of their racial and ethnic identity. The research reported that 71% felt different from their adoptive families when growing up compared to 48% of those raised in same-race placements (Howe and Feast, 2000; Kirton, et al., 2000).

A prominent feature from reviewing the literature since 2010 is the significant number of studies concerning transnationally adopted people, predominately from the United States. Many are small in terms of numbers of participants, but the qualitative research methods employed provide insights into the lived experience of this group.

The literature covers the specific range of issues that transnationally and transracially adopted people encounter in their struggle to develop a fuller sense of identity; the obstacles they face when trying to access information; and the challenging situations that can arise if and when they meet up with birth parents and relatives. These obstacles are amplified in many cases by not speaking the same language and being culturally different (Godon, et al., 2014; Docan-Morgan, 2016; McKail, et al., 2017; Koskinen, et al., 2019). A number of research tools and measures have been introduced to understand more about these people's curiosity. Recent studies have concluded that thoughts about birth family and their ethnic and racial identity are part of a developmental common process (Godon, 2020; Kim, et al., 2020).

The Adoption Curiosity Pathway (Wrobel, et al., 2009) provides a framework for understanding the diversity of adopted people's curiosity and information-seeking behaviour. It recognises that when information is unavailable, adopted people can either be energised or deterred from going forward with their search. Information-seeking is much broader than searching for birth relatives and can be obtained through a range of sources, including asking their adoptive parents what information they have about their adoption and origins; accessing information from the adoption agency's records; searching the internet; and approaching the birth parents (Wrobel, et al., 2013).

The intensity of curiosity can vary from person to person and change across their lifespan. Furthermore, not everyone has the same desire and need to search for information and birth parents (Howe and Feast, 2000). Barroso, et al.'s (2019) study reported low levels of curiosity for their participants who were adopted into 'same race' families. This included curiosity about birth origins, and the reasons why they had been placed for adoption. Notably, the participants had all been received into care as a result of experiencing harmful family environments of neglect, abuse, or abandonment. Curiosity is not a static state but one that can alter when different situations and factors come into play. It is not an indication of dysfunction or pathological behaviour (Barroso, et al., 2019).

3. The Influence of Family Communicative Openness on Curiosity and the Motivation to Search

Kirk (1964) acknowledged the importance for adoptive parents to be able to embrace the 'acknowledgement of difference' rather than the 'rejection of difference'. He argued that acknowledging differences enhanced empathic and open communication with the adopted child about their origins and family background. This laid the foundation for subsequent adoption studies.

The concept of communicative openness in the adoptive family has generated debates and learning about how 'openness' in adoption impacts on an adopted person's life and outcome (Brodzinsky, 2005; 2006). One of the important qualities within an adoptive family is the ability to have an open approach to communication about adoption and not to be afraid of their child's curiosity about their origins. This approach may satisfy the child's curiosity before it is expressed and provide them with the opportunity to absorb new information at an appropriate pace. When adoptive parents provide an open, empathetic environment, this can have a positive impact on the adopted person's adjustment in several areas, including fewer identity problems; being more satisfied with their adoption experience; experiencing better adoptive family functioning; and having positive adjustment in adulthood (Brodzinsky, 2005).

Brodzinsky (2005) developed the Adoption Communication Openness Scale, a tool to assess and analyse the effect communicative openness has within the adoptive family. He describes the two models of openness as:

- Family structural openness and communication, where for example there may be direct or indirect contact with birth family members; and
- Communication openness, where adoption issues are talked about and explored easily.

Brodzinsky found that the adoptive parents' personality style is significant in determining the type of communication style adopted and identified that frequently children's curiosity about their origins can go unsupported and not acknowledged due to the parents feeling uncomfortable talking about adoption.

Triseliotis, et al. (2005) illustrated the importance of levels of closeness between adopted people and adoptive parents. He found there was a strong relationship between how close the adopted person felt towards their adoptive parents and how openly the subject of adoption was discussed, which had positive implications for an adopted person's sense of belonging and identity and feeling more complete as a person.

The more securely attached the adopted person is to their parents, the higher the likelihood that conversations about adoption occur openly along the lifespan continuum. These can also be positive factors and influence the development of contact and relationships with birth family members (Jones and Hackett, 2007; Wrobel, et al., 2013; Farr, et al., 2014).

The attitude of adoptive parents and positive family relationships within adoptive families tends to be a good indicator for contact being viewed more positively by the adopted young adult (Farr, et al., 2014). This supports the findings of earlier research (Wrobel, Grotevant and McRoy, 2004) which found that a negative family relationship with the adoptive family was not necessarily a precursor for the adopted person seeking contact with birth parents.

The literature illustrates how communicative openness enables the adopted person to address their curiosity but also provides them with opportunities to gather more information about their adoption and explore the meaning of their adoptive status (Jones and Hackett, 2007).

However, talking with the child during their childhood and adolescence about their adoption story can also present a range of challenges for adoptive parents, particularly when there are adopted children within the same family with different curiosity levels, perhaps due to contact arrangements and histories. A proactive approach to raising the subject of the adoption and birth family may not be appropriate for some children who show little interest and concern about their origins and adoption (Jones and Hackett, 2007). Additionally, unexpected contact and information-gathering via social media platforms have created other complexities, as well as opportunities, which will be further discussed in Part 3.

4. The Outcomes of Search and Reunion

Obstacles and challenges

The benefits of the search and reunion process for the adopted person have been well documented, even when the outcome was not the one hoped for (Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis, et al., 2005). Nonetheless in some countries, adopted people's ability to satisfy their curiosity about their origins through accessing information from official records can be problematic (Feast and Howe, 2004; Carp, 2007). For example, when there is no legal right to the birth and adoption information, learning that previous information received turned out to be false; or was not available (McKail, et al., 2017; Fronek and Briggs, 2018).

Outcomes of search and reunion can be a challenging experience if the adopted person is not ready or properly prepared. This was one of the findings from Wang, et al.'s (2015) small qualitative study (n=6) where adopted individuals from China aged between five and 19 years of age searched for and reunited with their birth parents. Although most respondents reported generally positive outcomes, the search was so preoccupying that participants were not always prepared for the emotional complexities and outcome. Further, the teenagers in the study had mixed feelings regarding who should make the decision to search. While they appreciated their adoptive parents had taken the initiative, they considered that the adopted person should be the prime decision-maker.

As referred to earlier, for transnationally adopted people, the loss of their language of origin, as well as the culture they were born into, can have a profound impact and become an obstacle for some adopted adults. It can influence how reunions and contact develop and the closeness they feel with their birth family. These cultural differences can negatively impact some adopted adults and affect their ability to develop familiarity and closeness with the birth family, resulting in them feeling more like 'strangers' following a reunion meeting (Haenga-Collins and Gibbs, 2015; Dorcan-Morgan, 2016; Koskinen and Book, 2015; Godon-Decoteau, 2016).

For transracially and transnationally adopted people their sense of difference from the adoptive family is often heightened. Haenga-Collins and Gibbs's small (n=6) qualitative study (2015) revealed that whilst they felt loved by their adoptive parents, they did not feel they belonged. The participants acknowledged that their adoptive parents had 'loved them and raised a well-adjusted child' (pp. 68). However, growing up as a cross-culturally (the term cross-cultural in their article is used to describe transracially or transculturally adopted people) adopted person, where access to and acknowledgment of their Maori identity and sense of self had been effectively cut off from them, was difficult and complex.

Adopted adults who are foundlings until recently had no hope of ever being able to satisfy their curiosity needs and have an opportunity to find out about their origins and family background (Mullender, et al., 2005). The potential of finding birth relatives because of developments in Direct-to-Consumer Genetic Testing (DTC-GT) offers a new possibility for this group of adopted people which will be discussed further in Part 3.

Opportunities and rewards

Most search and reunion outcomes have been reported as a positive experience by adopted people, including those transnationally adopted. By seeking information and meeting birth relatives, many transnationally adopted people described having a better understanding of who they were and where they came from; this enabled them to have answers to their questions and fill some of their information gaps. It also gave them a sense of connection to their birth family and of completeness. It enabled some to feel a sense of relief, principally because their desire to know more about their origins, including why they had been placed for adoption, had been addressed (Godon-Decoteau, et al., 2014; Koskinen and Book, 2019).

The process of participating in research was reported as beneficial for the Maori adopted people in Haenga-Collins and Gibbs's (2015) study. The participants recounted how attending group meetings gave them the opportunity to confront their 'lost identity' and the deep sense of rejection and loss that they had felt. By recounting their own experience of feeling a strong sense of disconnection, they gained a greater

understanding and knowledge about their Maori heritage and culture. They were able to reframe their adoption experience more positively and this enabled them to develop a new account of what it was like growing up in a community which was completely different to the one in which they were born.

For transnationally adopted people whose search and reunion feels like an impossible task, meeting with others who share this predicament can offer some solace and support. Myers, et al.'s (2020) study (n=20) of women who had been transnationally and transracially adopted from Hong Kong to other countries showed that this gave the participants a sense of belonging. The gathering was reported as a source of support as they could share their experiences with others who understood the issues that they had encountered across their lifespan. They found that high levels of interest in searching for birth families and a desire to obtain Hong Kong residence status were triggered by the gathering.

In the UK, O'Neill (2016) (n=33) and Clapton (2018) (n=75) each explored the relationships that developed post reunion with birth relatives. Both studies found that connecting with birth relatives can enrich adopted people's and birth relatives' lives. A strong sense of belonging can develop and enable long and close relationships to be cultivated across the birth family network.

Clapton found that the relationships formed were more 'horizontal' than 'hierarchal', particularly with those reunions where relationships deepen and develop over time and become long-term. He suggests that it is rare for the adoptive family to be replaced by the birth family following reunion and contact. What his research found was that the adoptive and birth family were often side by side and the roles of siblings, grandparents and spouses within the birth family network may have an important part to play in assisting the relationship to develop and continue.

O'Neill's (2016) research studied the development of post-reunion relationships with birth siblings. This added a positive dimension to the lives of all involved and again highlighted the importance of identity and belonging. The longevity of the sibling relationship was attributed to the personality traits of their sibling(s) and the adopted adult feeling a sense of welcome, warmth and openness in the relationship. However,

when their expectations for their relationship were not met, it could lead to a sense of disappointment and affect the development of the sibling relationship.

In current studies there is an emphasis on the exploration of adopted adolescents and emerging adults, particularly in relation to thoughts about birth family and their motivation to search for information and birth relatives. It is notable that the literature search found just two UK studies from the past two decades which explore the search and reunion experiences of adopted adults (O'Neill, et al., 2016; Clapton, 2018). However, Neil, et al.'s longitudinal study (2013) and Fargas-Malet and McSherry's (2020) longitudinal study are currently producing important information for the adoption community. Both these studies are beginning to report the experience of contact over time for the adopted person as well as their birth relatives and adoptive parents. Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2020) found that young people, regardless of their placement type, conveyed a range of emotions towards their birth family which could alter over time.

Summary

The literature has illustrated how the concepts of identity, curiosity and communicative openness are intrinsically intertwined and all play an important role. A key message is that the level of curiosity is not static but dynamic and can change over time depending on events and the influence of socio-cultural norms and expectations.

Since adopted people were given a legal right to obtain information about their origins, research has illustrated how this opportunity can have a positive impact. Knowing their origins helps adopted people to build their sense of identity and so feel more complete. At the same time, the opportunity for seeking information and finding birth relatives can also bring with it a number of challenges where hopes and expectations can be left unmet, causing emotional turmoil.

There are ambiguities within the relationship of curiosity and opportunities. An important consideration when exploring what motivates adopted people to search is the potential obstacles they may encounter, and the consequential effects this may have on their decision to embark on a search for information and birth relatives. For

example, understanding the context of the legal and administrative systems, and how they provide opportunities or obstacles for the adopted person.

In the following section, Part 2, a summary of the findings and complexities in relation to curiosity and opportunities will be explored. This will provide a broader view of how the intrinsic relationship between curiosity and opportunity influences the decision to search for information and birth relatives.

Part 2: Methodology and Conduct of the Studies

The Studies

Part 2 provides an overview of the three funded studies that form the core of this submission. Firstly, my role in the studies is summarised, followed by a review of how they were conducted, including the research methods and analysis, key findings, ethical issues and reflexivity. The summary for this submission focuses on curiosity and opportunities, while the published studies (Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis, et al., 2005; Feast, et al., 2013) provide a full overview of the findings and Chapter 3 of each study provides comprehensive information about the methodology and conduct of the research.

My Role in the Studies

I was principal investigator for all three studies and participated in a significant number of research tasks. These included:

1. Developing and submitting applications for the research funding;
2. Consideration of ethical issues and writing ethics submissions;
3. Managing the research team;
4. Developing material for each study/providing information about the studies to participants;
5. Designing and piloting questionnaires to gather quantitative and qualitative data;
6. Recruiting participants;
7. Designing data collection tools for file searchers and conducting paper searches;
8. Designing and piloting interview schedules;
9. Taking responsibility for safe keeping and confidentiality of anonymised case records and research material;
10. Conducting interviews with participants (1st and 3rd study);
11. Data analysis;
12. Developing a dissemination strategy;
13. Writing research reports and publications;

14. Presenting findings to a range of audiences;

15. Writing regular progress reports to the funder and advisory group;

16. Providing research evidence for the Select Committee – Adoption and Children's Bill.

Study 1: Adoption Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults (1997-2000)

Related publications: 1,4,5,6,7,8

Aims

The study sought to examine curiosity and the reasons adopted people gave for accessing records and searching for birth relatives, including their experience and evaluation of the search process and its outcome. We wanted to gain further insight and understanding of the differences between searchers and non-searchers' curiosity, including their characteristics and adoption experiences.

Methods

Four hundred and fifty-one adopted people who had contacted the post-adoption service at The Children's Society between 1988 and 1997 were invited to participate. Three hundred and ninety-four searchers and 78 non-searchers completed the questionnaire, a high response rate of 87%. Two separate questionnaires were designed to take account of searchers and non-searchers. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a sub-sample of 74 who had completed one of the two questionnaires and were selected strategically.

Key findings

The main reasons why adopted adults contacted the adoption agency was to satisfy a longstanding curiosity about their origins, and needing more information about themselves, including background and medical history. Life events such as the death of an adopted parent or having a baby were not showing as strong drivers.

Eighty percent of adopted people said they were curious about their birth relatives when growing up, wondering whether they might look like them; however, searchers were more likely than non-searchers to wonder why their birth mother placed them for adoption. Non-searchers were more likely to say that they felt they belonged in their adoptive families when growing up and evaluated their adoption experience as positive. Both groups reported feeling uncomfortable asking their adoptive parents for information about their birth families and their origins.

Adopted women were twice as likely as men to initiate a search. The mean age at which women first began their search was lower (29.8 years v 32.3 years). Non-searchers who had been contacted by a birth relative via the organisation's intermediary service were also around 30 years old.

Eighty percent of both groups described the contact as having answered important questions about their origins and background and reported their reunion as positive. Half of all searchers and a third of non-searchers said that contact had improved their sense of identity and wellbeing. People talked about feeling 'more complete as a person'.

Transracially adopted people reported similar experiences and outcomes to those who had been placed in same-race placements. They were as likely to be still in contact or to have ceased contact with their birth relatives, and to feel positive about the outcome of the reunion. However, 71% of people who had been placed transracially felt different to their adoptive families when growing up compared to 48% of those raised in white matched placements and they were more likely to begin their search at a younger age.

Study 2: The Adoption Triangle Revisited: A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences (2002–2005)

Related publications: 2 and 8

Aims

The principal aim of the research was to provide a comprehensive overview of experiences and impact of the adoption, search and reunion process and outcome on all three members of the same adoption triad using sizeable samples, namely birth mothers, adoptive parents and adopted people. Only birth mothers and adoptive parents whose adopted child took part in Study 1 were included. By using related groups of birth mothers and adoptive parents, the study ensured that the groups were reporting on the same experience of the search, reunion and outcome, hence different perspectives could be obtained of the same event.

The study sought to update their contact situation in Study 1 and report on the adopted person's self-esteem, emotional health and possible sense of rejection and loss arising from separation from their birth family.

Methods

The data from 312 individuals were included in the study, with 93 birth mothers, 93 adoptive parents and 126 (searchers and non-searchers) adopted people. A small sample of birth fathers (n=15) also participated.

One hundred and four adopted people had initiated the search process and the remaining 22 had been contacted by a member of their birth family. Out of 93 birth mothers who took part, 32 had initiated the search for the adopted person and 61 birth mothers had been contacted by the adopted person. Seventy-seven participants were adoptive parents whose son or daughter had searched for the**ir** birth parent and 16 were parents of adopted people who had been contacted.

A large-scale postal questionnaire was designed for the individual groups to elicit quantitative and qualitative data. Most questions, including open-ended ones, allowed for respondents to expand upon answers and describe experiences qualitatively.

Key findings

Eighty percent of adopted people said that they felt happy about being adopted, felt loved by their parents, and had developed a sense of belonging. A broadly similar proportion reported having developed close or very close relationships with their adoptive parents during childhood. The closer adopted people felt to their adoptive parents, the happier they felt about being adopted, the more they felt they belonged, the higher their self-esteem and the better their emotional health.

Almost half of the adopted people had felt a sense of loss or rejection at some point in their lives because of being adopted. Searchers were more likely than non-searchers to report these feelings, which appeared to act as a strong motivating force for the search, irrespective of how they felt about the adoption. One of the main questions adopted people wanted answered was 'Why was I adopted?'. Having a close relationship with, and feeling loved by, their adoptive parents helped to diminish feelings of rejection and loss.

There was a strong relationship between how close the adopted person felt towards their adoptive parents and how openly the subject of adoption was discussed, as was reported in the literature review. The adopted person's curiosity, when accepted and endorsed by family communicative openness, provided enhanced opportunities for understanding and exploration.

Eighty-five percent of adopted people reported that the contact and reunion experience was positive. The 15% who had mixed or negative reactions were those who had experienced rejection, or were disappointed with the quality of the relationship or unhappy about the demands made on them. The majority also said that the contact and reunion experience had enhanced their sense of identity, as they were better able to answer questions such as: 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', and 'Why was I adopted?'. They reported many personal benefits including 'mental wellbeing', 'closeness', 'a sense of identity', and 'an endless list of positive things.' Fifty percent of those who had felt rejected for being placed for adoption reported that these feelings disappeared after contact; 68% said the same about feelings of loss. Ninety-seven percent of adopted people said that meeting their birth parents had not

changed the way they felt about their adoptive parents. The closer that adopted people felt to their adoptive parents before contact the more likely they were to say that they became even closer afterwards.

Study 3: Adversity Adoption and Afterwards: A mid-life follow-up study of women adopted from Hong Kong (2010–2013)

Related publications: 3 and 9

Aims

The women adopted via the International Social Services (ISS) Hong Kong Project provided a distinctive cohort that offered an opportunity to investigate links between the early experience of orphanage care, later development and adult outcomes. We were able to make comparisons with other adopted and non-adopted women born in the UK and to explore the experience of international transracial adoption, formation of ethnic identity and community connectedness. We were also able to explore their curiosity about their origins.

Methods

The research was designed to gather information through a comprehensive questionnaire pack and where participants agreed, subsequent face-to-face in-depth interviews. Ninety-four women were invited to participate in the study and 77% agreed. All 72 completed the self-administered questionnaire pack sent prior to the face-to-face interview, which consisted of approximately 200 items and took from 50 minutes to 3.5 hours to complete.

Sixty-eight participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The Adult Life Phase Interview (ALPhI) (Bifulco, et al., 2000; Feast, et al., 2013) was adapted to explore more specific adoption-related experiences and to find out more about the positive events and experiences in the women's lives over time.

Study 3 had a high response rate of 92%.

Key Findings

Eighty-six percent were placed with adoptive families with two white British (or European) parents when most girls were just under two years old. The majority appeared to have been received into loving homes and most said they felt loved by their adoptive mother and father. However, some recounted that they were not close to their adoptive parents, and a few had no continuing contact with one or other parent in adulthood. Among those who had experienced a degree of difficulty in their relationships, particularly during adolescence, some described their parents as being important and a valued source of support.

Half of the participants identified themselves as Chinese, 19% British and 15% British Chinese, with the remainder using more personal definitions. Generally speaking, they saw themselves as both British (by nationality and cultural socialisation) and Chinese (by genetic inheritance). Visible differences from family and peers played an important part in childhood experience to varying degrees. The interview data also gave illustrations of feelings of alienation and struggles with dual/multiple identities and experiences of race-based mistreatment.

We found no evidence from our statistical tests for associations between higher connectedness to Chinese communities and/or affiliation with Chinese cultural practices and mental well-being in adulthood. The women were much less likely in adulthood to report feeling uncomfortable at times with their Chinese appearance than in their childhood.

In reviewing the data collected, we concluded that the conflicts, uncertainties and stresses of identity development had not disappeared over the lifespan but for most women they had not come to dominate their lives in terms of psychological well-being. Findings from this study also revealed how the women managed their curiosity and lack of opportunities to access information about their origins.

Eighty-nine percent of those who took part in the study had been left to be found. As such there was an almost complete absence of knowledge about birth families and the

circumstances of their adoption; many regarded their very early history as 'a closed door' but this did not necessarily leave them feeling incomplete.

The largest group (37%) reported that they rarely or never thought about their birth parents during childhood and adolescence. Others had wondered what it would be like to meet family members, about physical resemblances and shared characteristics.

Thoughts about origins were not limited to birth families as sometimes women focused more on wondering about their life in the orphanage or other aspects of their early experiences. Such thoughts often lay dormant until triggered by an event, such as having children. Visits to Hong Kong were common and reactions ranged from experiencing it as a 'homecoming'to feeling no more allegiance to Hong Kong than to any other country.

Overall Methodology

Theoretical framework and philosophical assumptions

A mixed-method approach was used in all studies to collect both quantitative and qualitative data and draw conclusions (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007). Employing a quantitative method enabled us to produce empirical data for large samples and test the research hypotheses (Creswell, 2014). Using a qualitative method, we were able to add meaning to the quantitative data by understanding the participants' lived experiences. We wanted to capitalise on the potential for gaining new information that would bring further understanding of the life experiences of adopted adults (Punch, 2014). By intermingling a quantitative and qualitative approach our theory of knowledge was positioned within both positivist and interpretive paradigms.

Using a mixed method meant that the quantitative data highlighted the statistical relationship between various data collected (Creswell, 2014), while the qualitative data provided the narrative of the research subjects' lived experience (Bryman, 2016). In Study 3 we included a range of standardised measures and questions that had been used in the 1958 National Child Development Study (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, N.D). This allowed us to make comparisons with an age-matched sample of adopted

and non-adopted women born in the UK. By combining the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, we were able to capture a more nuanced picture of women's lives up to midlife, and to use the qualitative analysis to better understand the context of the quantitative findings.

Research Methods

We conducted pilot studies for all three studies to ensure that the research design, tools and methods were fit for purpose and assisted in preventing or minimising any misunderstanding and confusion.

Data collection

Identifying our samples

For Study 1 our sample was recruited from a specific nine-year period (1988–1997) of searching and non-searching adopted people who had contact with The Children's Society. Study 2 recruited a subset of adoptive and birth parents who were connected to the adopted people who went on to have contact with one or more birth relatives. This enabled us to produce data using matched pairs of birth mothers with the adopted person, matched pairs of adoptive parents with the adopted person, and triads of these three groups. For Study 3, we identified 100 women who had been brought to the UK from Hong Kong orphanages for adoption during the 1960s via the ISS Hong Kong Project. All had been legally adopted by families in the UK by two adoption agencies through the ISS.

Questionnaires

Self-administered postal questionnaires were a cost-effective and efficient way of collecting quantitative data for the large sample in the three studies combined with the geographical spread of the participants (Bryman, 2016). The questionnaires covered a range of areas for enquiry including their characteristics, their adoption experience, and their thoughts about their origins and birth family across their lifespan. They allowed for participants to add further comments and experiences. This

produced a valuable and detailed set of data that built a narrative of the participants'
experiences.

Semi-structured interviews

For Studies 1 and 3 we conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with
participants.

An advantage of employing such interviews to collect data is that they allow for open-
ended and more in-depth responses within a pre-prepared set of questions (Pickard,
2013; Bryman, 2016). A disadvantage is that they can be time-consuming and costly
and there needs to be sufficient numbers to make comparisons and draw conclusions.
Regular meetings were held with the research interviewers to discuss any issues
relating to the semi-structured interviews as well as to share initial thoughts about the
resulting data.

Coding and analysis

Quantitative

The data gathered from the questionnaires provided baseline factual information, such
as date of adoption, age at placement and adoptive family composition.

For Study 1, the questionnaires were coded and input into a database using Statistical
Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Comparisons were made between both
the two major comparison groups (searchers and non-searchers) and within each
group.

The data in Study 2 were essentially categorical, with some continuous variables. Much
of the categorical data could also be treated as ordinal data due to the categories
being ordered on a 5-point Likert scale, representing the respondents' level of
agreement (e.g., strongly agree, agree, mixed, disagree or strongly disagree).
Therefore, a variety of tests was employed depending upon which variables were
being examined or compared. These included Chi-squared tests, Fisher's exact tests,
Mann-Whitney tests, and correlations. In the instances where there was a choice of
tests, more than one was used to substantiate the results.

In Study 3, the data were collected from a questionnaire pack consisting of approximately 200 items. Suitable questions and scales from sweep 6 of the National Child Development Study 1958 cohort were mapped into this pack and included basic demographic details, partnerships and children, and physical and mental health to enable comparisons. Additional data collection focused on adoptive family relationships, views of their adoption experiences, education and employment history.

Qualitative

The interviews in Studies 1 and 3 were recorded and transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed, as were the qualitative data from the questionnaires in Study 2 (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The research team met regularly to look at the data under each heading/category, and to discuss the themes that were being identified. This enabled a more rounded sense of the data by having more than one perspective.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are integral to both social work practice and to social work research (Mclaughlin, 2012). Diener and Crandall's (1978) work on ethical issues identified four key areas: whether there is *harm to participants;* whether *there is a lack of consent*; whether there is an *invasion of privacy*; and *whether deception is involved*. These considerations were purposefully at the forefront of all three studies. There was no deception involved and the other three areas addressed are described below.

Specific ethical issues

In Study 1, we employed the advisory group to discuss pertinent and challenging issues relating to adopted people who had not initiated contact with the adoption agency which were inevitably more complex (Punch, 2014). The comparative nature of the study required a survey of adopted people who had not wanted information about contact with birth relatives. There was a small number in the sample of non-searchers who had asked never to be in touch again following the initial contact about a birth relative's enquiry. Although a minority, we felt the views of this group were important if we were to gain full and representative views of all non-searchers. It was decided to

make an approach to this group with a carefully written explanation of why we had contacted them again (Creswell, 2014).

There was also a small number of non-searching adopted people with whom we had not had direct contact, but who had been approached via their adoptive parents and informed of the birth relative's enquiry for information. In most cases, the adoptive parents had expressed distress caused by the approach of the agency and had requested no further contact. Eleven of the adoptive parents fell into this category. A decision was made to write to them explaining why we felt it was important for their son/daughter to have the opportunity to participate in the research. Seven replies were received with five indicating that the adopted person was willing to receive the questionnaire.

Ethical approval

Studies 1 and 2 were carried out before formal, independent research committees were established, (Tinker and Coomber, 2005). However, we met all the ethical requirements of our funding body which were addressed in the research proposal applications. They were also debated within research teams throughout the research cycle and received external scrutiny through the Advisory Group for individual studies.

To undertake a file analysis of adoption records for Study 3, we received approval from the Secretary of State in the Department for Schools, Children and Families (now Department for Education) which allowed access to records held by ISS UK for the purposes of research. Once we had obtained funding to carry out a full-scale research study we received approval from the Research Ethics Committee at King's College, London.

Informed consent to participate

The principle of ethical practice when obtaining informed consent is critical when undertaking research studies and the issue of harm needs to be considered (Erikson, 1967) as well as the invasion of privacy (Bryman, 2016). It was important, therefore, for potential participants in all studies to fully understand what the research was

about, what was involved and how sensitive issues would be managed. An information leaflet was provided to enable participants to complete the informed consent form to record and retain their consent and explaining that they could withdraw at any time.

In Study 1, participants were encouraged to contact the principal investigator if they wanted further information or consultation following receipt of the invitation to participate and the questionnaire. The distribution of the questionnaires was staggered so that the research team could manage and respond to any requests for support.

In Study 3, where contact was 'completely out of the blue' it was essential that access to comprehensive information about the study and what would be involved was provided and to be reassured that we were sensitive to the range of reactions that they might have about being approached unexpectedly. We were particularly aware that some women may not have known of the existence of records relating to their adoptions. We not only prepared an information leaflet about the study that accompanied the letter sent, but also directed people to the British Chinese Adoption Study webpage, which gave more information about the research team. As with Studies 1 and 2, potential participants were encouraged to contact a member of the research team if they wanted an informal discussion about what the study would involve before they decided. Participants were also informed that they could contact the Ethics Committee directly if they wished to report any issues in confidence.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Due diligence had been undertaken regarding maintaining the participants' privacy, confidentiality and anonymity and adhering to rules and regulations of the Data Protection Act 1998. The only exception was if a participant disclosed issues of harm to themselves or another person.

Protecting participants from harm

Observing the principles of ethical practice as identified by the work of Diener and Crandall (1978), one area of discussion within the research team was the potential of

inadvertently causing harm to a participant (Punch, 2014). Attention was given to the information that was sent to adopted people about the study and its objectives to ensure potential participants had comprehensive information about the scope of the study and their involvement (Mclaughlin, 2012; Pickard, 2013). We were aware that talking about their experiences of being adopted could be unsettling. The information provided addressed this, making it clear that support would be given if it occurred. One participant reported feeling emotionally unsettled and needed to re-evaluate their life after participating in Study 3, and appropriate support was provided.

Throughout the three studies, the research team were acutely aware that receiving a request to take part in a study about their personal perspective and experiences of adoption might provoke strong feelings and raise issues for some adopted people, birth relatives and adoptive parents.

The Research Teams

McLaughlin (2014) suggests that integrating research into practice can be challenging and that social work practitioners can cite barriers, such as not enough time allowed in the day job, difficulties understanding what research reports say and mean and/or that the research does not address the day-to-day problems they face (McLaughlin, 2014).

The social workers in the research team were experienced child and family social workers with additional experience, knowledge and skills of working with adopted people, birth relatives and adoptive parents. They were confident with their abilities to explore the lifelong experiences of adoption, search and reunion and provide innovative intermediary services. They had a real depth of understanding of the importance of how post adoption services can profoundly impact the adopted person's and birth relatives' lives. They were also able to provide an empathetic approach for the participants in the qualitative interviews. Additionally, having social workers involved directly throughout the research cycle, from designing the data collection tools to gathering data and writing up the analysis, the research team were mindful of both practice and academic communities, and so the findings were better able to inform a wider range of audiences.

The social work researchers were involved with gathering the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews that were undertaken in Study 1 and 3. For Study 3, the research assistant also undertook a number of semi-structured interviews, and we also employed the skills of one other experienced researcher. It was important to distinguish between the role and responsibilities of the social worker and the researcher, and training in relation to the semi-structured interviews was provided. They were also trained to undertake Adult Life Phase Interview (ALPhI).

The Advisory Group

A multi-disciplinary Advisory Group was established for all three studies which included a mixture of researchers, academics, a medical doctor (Study 3) and adoption practitioners who were involved in the search and reunion process. We also had representatives of adopted people (Study 1), birth and adoptive parents and adopted people (Study 2) and the internationally adopted community (Study 3).

The advisory groups provided a forum through which to discuss relevant ethical, design and analysis queries. Their advice, comments and guidance offered at all stages of the research was invaluable and helped to enhance the quality of the research (Moore, 2006).

Information and Progress

The participants of all three studies were kept informed about the progress of the research. Update letters were written to the participants on a regular basis and again finally when the study was completed with a summary of the findings, acknowledging that without their involvement the important findings would not have been realised and utilised.

In Study 3, as a result of the analyses of the adoption records, we were able to identify the orphanages in which these women had been placed prior to their journey to the UK for adoption. We produced an information booklet about these orphanages with a historical timeline of the era when they were 'abandoned' as babies so that they would have some understanding and knowledge of the potential reasons for this. As Study 3

took longer than anticipated, a special event was organised to give participants an opportunity to hear some of the preliminary findings. Fifty women from the study attended and the impact of being in one room with other women who looked like them and had been brought to the UK from Hong Kong for adoption was profound. The Hong Kong Adoptees Network was subsequently formed and is now a well-established resource with its own website and regular events. Many close relationships have been formed and maintained over the years.

Dissemination

A dissemination strategy for all three studies was discussed at the outset to ensure that the findings were made accessible to a wide-ranging audience, including for example: academics, social work practitioners and policy makers. We wanted to maximise the potential of enabling evidence-based practice and build on existing knowledge (Denscombe, 2010). McLaughlin (2014) has suggested that it is not always easy for busy social workers to find the time to keep abreast with research studies that are pertinent to their area of work, and they do not always find the reports about studies and outcomes accessible. However, as Munro (2011) has suggested, whilst social workers gain experience, understanding and expertise through their practice, this can be enhanced by referring to evidence gained from research.

Studies 1 and 2 helped the development of intermediary services for birth relatives throughout England and Wales and enabled practitioners to provide these services with confidence. The findings provided evidence for policy and legislative change in relation to adopted people and birth relatives. This will be discussed further in Part 3.

Reflexivity

At the time I began working on the first study in 1997, I had been a social worker and team manager for 24 years, working mostly with children and families. A significant number of years had also been with adopted and care-experienced adults who wanted to access the agency's records relating to their adoption or time in care. I therefore brought a significant amount of experience and knowledge and a way of looking at aspects of the adoption, search, and reunion experience. I managed a team of

adoption and post-care workers, and it was an inherent part of practice within team meetings and supervision to conduct reflective discussions about our own beliefs and practice and how this might influence the work we undertook with adopted adults and their birth and adoptive families.

I was aware of the two distinct roles of being a researcher and social worker. As Bryman (2016) argues, there is a multiplicity of meanings of reflexivity and what it means for the research worker. The research team had regular discussions about our role as researchers, and how our practice experience, values and beliefs could potentially affect the conduct of the study. As Creswell (2013) suggests, it is an essential task to ensure that reflection is not a one-off process but needs to be revisited along a study's journey.

For all three studies I had several roles and responsibilities: as principal investigator and manager with responsibility for the study; and as research interviewer involved with data analysis, communicating with the participants and writing interim progress reports for funders, and planning dissemination. Exploring these classifications, Holmes (2020) discussed the debate around the position of researchers in terms of being an insider or outsider. An 'insider' research position has been associated with the researcher being a member of a particular group, 'whose personal biography (gender, race, skin-colour, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives them a "lived familiarity" with a priori knowledge of the group being researched' (Holmes, 2020, p.6). An 'outsider' is a person/researcher who does not share these characteristics or the 'lived familiarity'. Each position brings advantages as well as disadvantages to the research process in mixed-method studies (Holmes, 2020).

Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009), in their discussion of researchers' membership roles in qualitative research, explore the debate about the researcher's epistemological position in terms of 'insider versus outsider' and suggest that 'to present these concepts in a dualistic manner is overly simplistic' (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p.60). They have suggested a third position of being neither one or the other and refer to this as 'the space between' (p.60).

Reflecting my positions in the studies, I was not an insider as I was not adopted, neither had my nuclear or extended family been affected by adoption. However, as a practitioner, when working with adopted people, I was often perceived by them as another adopted person. I would explain that the experience of working with many adopted people over the years had given me a good understanding of their sense of curiosity and need to have access to information that could help fill the gaps in their personal histories.

Neither do I consider that I was an outsider, as I was an active member of the group in a range of areas. Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) refer to the work of Fay (1996) when discussing the concept of the 'the space between', citing 'There is no self-understanding without other-understanding' (p. 241). They suggest that 'Accepting this notion requires that noting the ways in which we are different from others requires that we also note the ways in which we are similar. This is the origin of the space between. It is this foundation that allows the position of both insider and outsider.'

The experience of working as a researcher and practitioner enabled me to use the research findings from Study 1 and 2 to illustrate the value of the pioneering practice that was being undertaken, such as intermediary services for birth relatives.

Summary

These three seminal studies have produced original, comprehensive and insightful information about the lifelong impact of adoption, search, and reunion for both the domestic and international adoption community. They have offered a detailed portrayal of the outcome of adoption, search and reunion across the lifespan for domestic and intercountry adoption.

In this critical commentary, I have illustrated how all these studies were conducted within an ethical framework that kept the impact of participants' involvement in the studies at the forefront of the minds of the research team. The collaboration between the practitioner and academic researchers leveraged individual skills and knowledge and produced a certain synergy that had a productive and successful outcome. An

interdisciplinary research team brought together the practitioner's enquiring mind and knowledge, and the academic researcher's ability to formulate a viable research hypothesis. The mixed-method approach to all three studies and the collaboration between the two disciplines produced data that could be disseminated to meet the needs of both the practitioner and academic communities.

The studies have provided knowledge to assist practitioners working with adopted people and their birth and adoptive families and the academic community. They have illustrated how empirical research can be disseminated widely and used to influence legislation, policies and practice change in England and Wales, which acknowledge the particular needs of adopted people and their birth and adoptive families. Further discussion about these issues will be pursued in Part 3.

Part 3: Discussion

Part 3 of this submission discusses the contribution that my research and published works have made to the existing knowledge of adopted people's curiosity to search and what they continue to offer in the much-changed context of adoption today. This discussion concentrates on adopted adults' quest for information about their origins, and whether or not to embark on a search for birth relatives. It explores the dynamic between curiosity and opportunities and how this may influence the decision to embark on this search.

Part 3 is divided into two main sections.

The first section focuses on the concepts of curiosity and opportunities and will explore:

- Development of the research knowledge in relation to curiosity about origins and birth family;
- The interaction between curiosity and opportunities and their impact on the searching decision;
- Key messages and the influence the studies have had on research, policy and practice.

Since the studies outlined in this thesis were completed, the adoption landscape in England and Wales has altered significantly. This has involved a substantial change in the population of children considered and placed for adoption, which has included more children who have experienced adversity or were placed at an older age with knowledge of their family background, including sibling groups and children with disabilities (Borland, et al.,1991; Baker 2007).

In addition, significant medical and technological advances have created new avenues for accessing information, underlining the need for openness. The growing acceptance of more openness around adoption and the importance of the provision of information for children and their new adoptive families, through later life letters, life story books and contact arrangements, have meant that links could be retained with birth family members. Whilst these are positive developments, the lived experience of

communicative and structural openness can present challenges for the adopted child and the adoptive and birth families (MacDonald and McSherry, 2013; Jones, 2016). These advances have created new avenues for accessing information, again underlining the need for openness.

The second section considers the current state of knowledge about adopted people's curiosity and the opportunities they have for accessing information and locating birth relatives. It will explore:

- The changing context of adoption;
- The impact of the internet and social media, and developments in DNA testing and the opportunities these provide for adopted people;
- The continued contribution of the research in modern-day adoption and related areas, such as care-experienced and/or donor-conceived people.

Section 1: Key messages about curiosity and opportunities, and the influence of the studies

Development of the research knowledge in relation to curiosity about origins and birth family

Recruiting non-searching adopted people for Study 1 meant that we were able to report for the first time, using a large sample, the similarities and differences between searchers and non-searchers. It illustrated that the decision to search is a complex interaction between numerous factors, as reflected from the findings from Studies 1 and 3. Study 1 was able to offer more understanding of the different factors at play, providing more understanding and nuance about the decision-making process that leads adopted people to begin searching for information and birth relatives. This first study explored the experience of transracially adopted people; Publication 4 produced original data about their particular thoughts about this and the information they hoped to gain towards building their sense of identity.

As revealed in the research literature, a central area of exploration has been to identify what provokes adopted people to search, and whether adoption satisfaction is an

indication of adoption-seeking behaviour. Study 1's investigation into this subject suggested that there was not a simplistic distinction between feeling happy with their adoption or not. It was connected to the adopted person's sense of belonging, difference and feeling loved. Whilst the majority evaluated their adoption positively, significant differences emerged between searchers and non-searchers (53% searchers *v* 74% non-searchers). Publication 1 in the submitted publications gives a summary of the findings regarding the differences between searchers and non-searchers, and their motivation for searching.

Those with mixed feelings (39% searchers v 22% non-searchers) broadly felt positive, but also recounted *'I am not unhappy but adoption does leave scars'; 'felt happy but never felt whole'*, indicating that their happiness about being adopted was more complex when other factors came into play, such as an incomplete narrative or simply the fact of their adoption status. A small number evaluated their adoption as negative (searchers 9%, non-searchers 4%) and described their adoptions as unhappy because of sentiments such as '*I always felt like an unpaid servant'; 'I never felt loved'; 'I had a lonely childhood'; 'no affection, no cuddles, no praise, no friends made welcome'*.

Study 1 showed that more people from the searching group said they were not happy being adopted (15% searchers, 4% non-searchers). On reflection more exploration would have been helpful to understand the reasons behind this; for example, was it the fact of their adoptive status rather than the experience they had within their adoptive families? Being adopted for some people can have negative connotations associated with being 'rejected' and 'feeling different' from their adoptive family.

The women in Study 3 reported similar evaluations of their adoption, with 60% describing the experience as positive. Publication 3 gives full information about the women's curiosity levels and more exploration of the reasons for this. Those who reported mixed feelings appreciated the benefits of being adopted, visualising that this would not have been the same if they had been brought up in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, this did not diminish the losses associated with their adoption, particularly leaving their country of origin and not having information about their birth families. Although the proportion of women who described their adoption as negative

or very negative (10%) was small, they raised the same issues as participants in Study 1; for example, not feeling loved, lack of warmth, feeling an outsider and not being accepted by the family. It may be that the strong sense of gratitude expressed by women in Study 3 influenced their responses regarding their attitude to their adoption.

Study 2 illustrated that the levels of closeness between adopted people and adoptive parents were important, as described in Publication 2. A strong relationship between how close the adopted person felt towards their adoptive parents and how openly the subject of adoption was discussed had positive implications for an adopted person's sense of belonging and identity and feeling of being more complete as a person.

Nonetheless, there was a disparity between adopted people and adoptive parents regarding their perceptions about how much discussion about their adoption and origins occurred and how comfortable they felt raising these questions. In Publication 8, both searching and non-searching adopted people recounted that whilst they were curious, they felt uncomfortable asking their parents questions about their origins, with just 29% of searchers and 26% of non-searchers stating that they did feel comfortable.

Conversely, 96% of adoptive parents reported that they felt comfortable, although this did not necessarily mean they raised the subject and talked about it (Triseliotis, et al., 2005, p. 203). This was a significant finding as it showed that communicating with an adopted person about their origins is a highly complex and sensitive process which can be challenging for both the adoptive parent and the adopted person. The research indicated that adoptive parents cannot make assumptions about the adopted person's level of comfort with talking about their origins and they need to be prepared to return to the subject over time (Publication 8). Practising family structural openness and communicative openness can be challenging and an area where support and training may be necessary to help the adoptive family with this important task (Morrison, 2012; MacDonald and McSherry, 2013; Neil, et al., 2013; Jones, 2016).

The adopted people in Study 3 enabled us to make comparisons with the adopted people in Study 1 regarding their curiosity and decisions around searching for

information and birth relatives. This revealed that the proportion who rarely thought about their birth family in adulthood appeared greater than would have been predicted based on Studies 1 and 2 (Publication 3). The reasons mainly related to the fact that for the majority, at the time of the study, the opportunity to access any information and begin a search for birth relatives felt like an insurmountable task. Being transnationally adopted from Hong Kong and left to be found as very young babies, the majority had no way of accessing information about their origins which, for a significant number, appeared to dampen their curiosity.

As noted earlier, searching behaviour occurs on a continuum and adopted people change their minds about searching over time (Haimes and Timms, 1985; Howe and Feast, 2000).

The lack of opportunities available to help the women in Study 3 to access identifying information about their origins and birth parents suggested this had affected their curiosity levels and decision-making process. Nonetheless, as illustrated in Study 1, when opportunities and possibilities arose it could activate their curiosity and information-seeking behaviour (Howe and Feast, 2000), as happened for the women in Study 3 (to be discussed in Section 2).

Curiosity and opportunities – a typology

In Study 1 we reported that the decision to search appears to involve a complex interaction between various factors (Publication 1). Whilst there were distinct differences between searchers and non-searchers, their curiosity and searching behaviour is dynamic across their lifespan, influenced by different events and situations. Over the course of the three studies, the distinctions between these two main groups developed and became more complex. On reflection, looking at all three studies, I would now suggest there are eight identified subgroups of adopted people who have varying levels of curiosity and opportunities that stimulate the decision to search. These are listed below.

1. Searchers who have high curiosity and opportunities and actively seek information and birth relatives;

2. Searchers who have curiosity and opportunities to search but just seek background information and make a decision not to search;

3. Obstructed searchers who would like to locate records and birth relatives but do not have the opportunities to do so, as in internationally adopted people and foundlings;

4. Obstructed searchers who may go on to search when presented with new opportunities;

5. Non-searchers who have high opportunity and low curiosity about origins and birth family and have no desire to receive information or have contact with a birth relative;

6. Non-searchers who may have had thoughts about birth family but are inhibited by concern for adoptive parents' feelings, and fear of what they may find;

7. Non-searchers with high opportunities and thoughts about origins and birth family but who do not initiate a search, although when contacted via an intermediary service would take up the opportunity to have some form of contact with the birth relative;

8. Non-searchers with low opportunity and low curiosity who are 'comfortable' with their situation and adoption status and have no desire to obtain information or search for birth relatives.

For each of the subgroups of searchers and non-searchers there are different factors at work which can affect the adopted person's curiosity and influence their decision whether to embark on a search or not, as evident in Studies 1 and 3 (Publication: 1 and 3). More exploration is needed to gain a deeper understanding of what factors enable or inhibit searching behaviours. Müller and Perry's (2001) model, as explained in Part 2, is helpful but inevitably, there is an overlapping of reasons and life is more complicated than the three options offered.

The eight-part typology that I suggest attempts to capture some of that complexity and brings it closer to the reality of the different forces and factors that can influence and drive an adopted person to search – or not.

The majority of adopted people in Study 1 said they had thought about their birth family during adolescence compared to 22% of non-searchers. This finding did not alter significantly in adulthood. The assumption that every adopted person conducts a search at some point in their life (Brodzinsky, 2005) could be challenged by this finding, although the numbers are small. It is very clear that there are some adopted people who have no interest in their birth family and origins, and some are disturbed by the 'intrusion' of learning that a birth relative would like to make contact (Trinder, 2000). However, there are non-searchers who have had birth family thoughts but feel inhibited to conduct a search due to fear, anxiety and concern (Publication 1). At the same time, they will take the opportunity for contact if it is initiated by the birth relative.

The participants in Study 3 expressed lower levels of curiosity when compared to the participants in Study 1 (Publication 1 and Publication 3). For some, the knowledge that finding information about their origins was impossible meant that it was best to shut down any birth family thoughts as it caused too much emotional turmoil. I am aware that for at least some of the women, their curiosity levels have increased since the study, and for some this is linked with the availability of Direct-to-Consumer Genetic Testing (DTC-GT).

At a recent meeting of the Hong Kong Adoptees Network (October 2021), which included 16 women who had participated in the British Chinese Adoption Study (Feast, et al., 2013), there was a discussion about how their situation had changed in relation to their curiosity levels and their decision to search for birth relatives. All reported that their curiosity levels had changed and heightened since the study. Five women had accessed their adoption records prior to the study, and since then eleven more have done so. Some reported that their decision to try and find birth relatives had been influenced by the new opportunity to take a DTC-GT test. This testing has given them a new opening and the ability to allow themselves to have some hope that they now might be able find birth relatives and understand more about their genetic history. Eleven women had actually taken a DTC-GT, of whom two had found a half-sibling. Taking part in the study had provided an opportunity for the women to come together and support and learn from one another about how they could resolve some of their

information gaps. This demonstrates how technology, life stages, networks and sharing with others can provide an impetus to make use of new opportunities.

Key messages from the studies and the impact on research, policy and practice

Until the studies' publications there was a dearth of information from an adopted adult's perspective in relation to adoption experience and the search and reunion process. Our research received great interest not only from the adoption community in the UK but also internationally. Its findings provided a bedrock of knowledge that helped to develop good practice for intermediary services and changed policy and legislation in England and Wales (Smith and Wallace, 2000). The following selection of findings illustrates how the results from our research have proved to be both informative and influential.

Studies 1 and 2 influenced the debates in Parliament during the passage of the Adoption and Children Act, 2002. For example, in 2001 when the right of adopted people to access information to obtain a copy of their original birth records was well established, the Government proposed a significant limitation on this right. Empirical evidence from Study 2, presented to the House of Commons Special Standing Committee in Autumn 2002, helped to prevent this being passed as law (Triseliotis, et al., 2005).

The evidence of the findings from Study 1 also influenced the change in the law that enabled birth relatives of adopted adults to have the right to request an intermediary service. The study was unique as it included a cohort of non-searching adopted adults who had not initiated contact with a birth relative. Instead, the birth relative (mainly birth mothers) had made the first approach via an adoption agency's intermediary service. The research was able to demonstrate that only 10% who had been contacted responded negatively and just 6% thought that it was wrong for the adoption agency to have got in touch with them (Howe and Feast, 2000).

Apart from the adoption community, one of our aims was to ensure that the findings from the studies would be widely disseminated to a range of audiences, where a child's identity and the opportunities to gain knowledge about their genetic identity

were of concern; for example, care-experienced, and donor-conceived people. Publication 6 reflects the similarities between adopted and care-experienced people in terms of curiosity. However, care-experienced people can encounter greater challenges in trying to obtain the information that helps them to make sense of their lives before and after care. Publication 7 illustrates the similarities between adoption and donor conception but brings into focus how fear and secrecy hamper the donor-conceived person's opportunity to obtain important information that may profoundly affect the decisions they make in their lifetime.

We were able to share the knowledge gained from the studies in the interests of all children, whether adopted or not, to have the opportunity to find out 'who they are' and 'where they come from'. Publication 5 illustrates how widely the research was disseminated and provides the opportunity for other countries, where adoption records are not open, to understand the benefits for adopted people of having access to information that can help build their sense of identity.

The practice of providing intermediary services for birth relatives was introduced during the early 1990s by a number of adoption agencies and local authorities based on practice experience. However, our research findings provided solid evidence demonstrating how this practice offers more opportunities than disadvantages for the vast majority of adopted people (Triseliotis, et al., 2005, p.14). They gave encouragement and confidence to those agencies who were reluctant to provide these services. Significantly, it established that while adopted people may not have taken the initiative to search for birth parents and other relatives, this did not indicate that they did not want to have contact with their birth family. It is also notable that non-searchers who did not want to have contact with birth relatives considered that it was right that they should be informed of a birth relative's interest. They also considered that birth relatives should have the right to request an intermediary service (Publication 1). As mentioned above, these findings were presented in Parliament during the passage of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and this, along with the campaign by birth mothers and adoption organisations, was given as evidence that legislative change was required. Section 98 of the Adoption and Children Act

recognised the needs of birth relatives and intermediary services became embedded in a legislative framework.

The findings from Study 1 were used to develop a training manual and video for adoption professionals to assist with working with adopted people and preparing prospective adoptive parents about the issues relating to the adoption search and reunion process (Feast and Philpott, 2003). A handbook about searching and subsequent reunions with birth relatives was also published (Trinder, et al. 2003).

Section 2: The current state of knowledge about adopted people's curiosity and opportunities

The changing context of adoption

The participants in the three studies were all adopted prior to 1975 when adoption predominantly involved the placement of infants under 12 months, and when adoptive parents were not given formal preparation. As we have seen, the context of adoption has changed considerably since then and nowadays children are mostly adopted from the care system (Howe and Feast, 2000). As part of their adoption assessment, prospective adopters must attend formal preparation sessions which address some of the challenges and issues they might encounter in parenting a child who is not biologically related (Adoption UK, 2021).

Until the 1970s, the adoption order was seen as the end of the journey: a clean break not only for the child and adoptive parents but also for the birth mother (Triseliotis, et al., 2005). This position has gradually been challenged and it is now recognised that adoption is a life-long process (Kirton, 2013). There is an acceptance and understanding that while the adoption order may cut the legal ties to the birth family, it does not mean complete severance emotionally, nor in terms of adopted people's curiosity about their origins and their sense of identity. Thoughts about an adopted person's birth family are likely to continue during their childhood and ensuing years (Wrobel and Dillon, 2009; Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2020; Kim, et al., 2020).

Hence, in current adoption practice, life story books, later life letters and some form of contact is usually considered and expected (Lord and Borthwick, 2008; Neil, 2018). Equally, the provision of post-adoption support services has grown enormously. These services are seen as part of the adoption journey; they are necessary to support adoptive families (Meakings, et al., 2017).

Only a minority of contact plans include direct face-to-face contact with birth family members after adoption (Neil, et al., 2015). Both direct and indirect contact with birth family relatives, when properly assessed and managed, can help the adopted child and young person to build a personal and unique sense of their identity (Moffat, 2012). However, maintaining contact can be a challenging feature in adoption placements, as any arrangements agreed at the time of a child's adoption may not always materialise, may diminish or increase over time, turn out to be unhelpful or may cease altogether (Jones and Henderson, 2017; Meakings, et al., 2017).

With some form of contact with at least one birth family member being an expectation in modern adoptions, the concepts of curiosity and opportunity may look very different from the cohort in the studies presented. Adopted people's curiosity needs may be satisfied and the desire to search may not be so strong, as there are many more opportunities to access the information they may need. Alternatively, information may stimulate curiosity and further questions and exploration.

In the three studies in question, the children placed had experienced the trauma of separation and loss (Verrier, 2009). Today many of the children placed for adoption may come from backgrounds of extreme adversity which they have lived with for some months or years, causing ongoing trauma that may have a continuing impact during their lifetime. They may have longstanding issues and disabilities. In this respect, contact may not always provide benefits for it can reawaken trauma on different levels, or it may provide reassurance. Curiosity and opportunities may continue to be present but acting on them could need very careful preparation and support.

The impact and opportunities of the internet and social media and developments in DNA testing

During the past few decades, with the advent of social media and easily available access to online resources such as Facebook, adopted people and birth relatives have greater potential for contacting one another. This, coupled with rapid and extremely easy access to information and other people, has engendered the notion of 'instant gratification' for a whole generation. It can lead to adopted adolescents and emerging adults embarking on a search more easily and much earlier to satisfy their curiosity needs and fill their information gaps. Such situations can occur without the protection of proper preparation for the potential outcomes and without their adoptive parents knowing; conversely, birth relatives can search for and approach their adopted child directly. At the same time, in making it easier for adoptive and birth family members to make contact with one another, advances in technology have provided an opportunity for them to obtain more information about each other and the adopted child (Black, et al., 2016). Whilst there have been some reservations about social media and how there can be a negative fallout from unexpected and unplanned contact, there are also significant potential benefits.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, social media platforms have provided a way forward for adopted children and adults to maintain some form of contact with their birth relatives and have shown that they can offer other opportunities for keeping in touch with birth relatives. However, while social media can be used very successfully everyone needs to be aware of the potential dangers and professional support should be available to facilitate how best this can be organised (Iyer, et al., 2020). Social media platforms can create opportunities for the child to bring together their adoptive and birth family lives, as well as address issues of loss and separation (Neil, et al., 2020, p.5). Neil also recommends that contact using social media platforms needs to be well supported and designed to meet the child's needs.

The continued contribution of the research in modern-day adoption and related areas, such as care-experienced people and donor-conceived people.

Adopted people have often reported how they are regularly reminded of their adoption status when they are asked about their family health history, particularly when they have no details (Feast, 1992). These occurrences underline that key information about their origins is often missing, and consequently their curiosity about this may be heightened. They may want to find out more about their familial medical history, especially if they have a particular health issue that could be potentially hereditary, or they have a child who has been born with a genetically inherited condition. Scientific advances and our understanding of genetics and the part they can play on our health history have developed considerably in recent years (Hill, 2001; Cai, et al., 2019; Lee, et al., 2021) and DNA examination has provided many more opportunities to try and fill these knowledge gaps.

Developments using DNA and the use of DTC-GT have led to a rapid growth in people searching for more information about their heritage (Crawshaw, 2017; Cai, et al., 2020). This significant opportunity for the general population has also altered the lives of adopted people who were left to be found, and others who do not have information about their parentage, among them those who were donor-conceived or spent time in the care system. Nonetheless, whilst it can provide opportunities and change and enrich a person's life in a positive way, it may also cause distress, particularly in situations where people have discovered that they and their parent(s) are not genetically related, for instance through donor conception (Crawshaw, 2017).

The learning from the three studies has direct relevance to other areas outside of adoption where issues of identity, understanding of birth and family origins, and contact with birth relatives are critical. Care-experienced and donor-conceived people share similar curiosity issues but not the same opportunities (Publication 6 and Publication 7). This illustrates the importance of being able to access information that enables all children in these situations to have truthful representation about their genetic origins in order that they are well informed and can make significant decisions that may profoundly affect their lives.

With scientific and technological developments, we have entered a new era that has transformed the interaction between curiosity and opportunities and created significant changes when planning for adopted children and their adoptive families, particularly in relation to contact arrangements with birth family members. Current and new studies (Neil, et al., 2015; Fargas-Malet and McSherry, 2020) will continue to build on existing knowledge and provide further insights about how adoptive parents can help nurture and foster adopted people's sense of understanding of their adoptive identity and of their origins.

Conclusion

One of the main messages of my research is that adoption is a lifelong process and that the levels of curiosity and the nature of opportunities are likely to interact and change over the course of a lifetime. The three studies under discussion provide substance and reality to these concepts (Publication 1 and Publication 3) and show how certain factors can influence and alter adopted people's positions, from individual maturation, changes in their circumstances through life events to developments in technology, legislation and social attitudes.

The concepts of curiosity and opportunities continue to be important components of the adopted person's life, and this is reflected in current practice and policy. Lack of information about origins and not having the opportunity to create a cohesive narrative about their birth and adoptive identities are likely to have an impact on the adopted person's sense of self, belonging and difference. Policy and practice have developed to address some of these issues by providing accessible information for the adopted child and their families, but the task of talking with the adopted child about their origins can still present challenges (Publication 8).

The studies have provided an enduring contribution to our understanding of the concepts of curiosity and opportunities in relation to adopted people and will continue to be developed in relation to contemporary adoption.

Additionally, future research that focuses on these two central concepts within the relatively new context of social media and DNA/genetic testing could usefully broaden our understanding in this area. Studies using comparisons between people who were not adopted, such as care-experienced and donor-conceived adults, would also enable greater exploration of how the concepts of curiosity and opportunities may help these groups to build a fuller sense of self and continuity. This will have a fundamental and positive impact on their lives.

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Appendix A: Statements

Appendix 1

Emeritus Professor David Howe

Principal collaborator statement: Adoption Search and Reunion Study (1997-2000) and published works below – confirmation of the contribution of Julia Feast

As the principal collaborator in this research and its published works I confirm that Julia Feast was

the driving force behind all aspects of the research and its success. She took the lead role in defining the key research questions as well as identifying and securing the sample populations that were necessary in order to generate the data and answer the questions posed. Julia Feast took the initiative in submitting the successful research bids for the monies to support the projects. She jointly shared with me in the research design, its instrumentation, data collection, data analysis (quantitative and qualitative), writing of the research reports, executive summaries, peer reviewed articles and books, conference presentations, and keynote lectures. The conceptual themes that emerged from the research and its findings were jointly identified. She took sole initiative in generating and presenting evidence-based reports, advice and guidance for policy and practice for use by governments and professionals. Julia Feast has been a pioneer in the investigation of adoption as experienced by all parties. Her research and its findings have played a key role in helping to map the adoption landscape in greater detail and with greater subtlety, sensitivity and understanding.

David Howe, BSc, MA, PhD, PGCE, CQSW
Emeritus Professor of Social Work

University of East Anglia, Norwich

4 December 2021

Howe, D., Feast, J. (2000) Adoption Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults, The Children's Society, London.

Kirton, D., Howe, D., Feast, J. (2000) 'Searching, reunion and transracial adoption', *Adoption & Fostering*, 24(3), pp. 8-15.

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Appendix 2

Dr Fiona Kyle

Co-worker statement of Julia Feast's role in the Adoption Triangle Revisited: A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences (2002-2005)

I am writing to confirm the role of Julia Feast in the Adoption Triangle Revisited study from 2002-2005. Julia was the principal investigator for this project and was she was involved in all aspects of the study. The late professor John Triseliotis was the academic collaborator and at the time I was the research assistant.

Julia led on the successful funding application to the Nuffield Foundation. She designed the study which built upon her previously funded project looking at the adoption and reunion experiences of adopted adults. Julia brought to the study a depth of practitioner knowledge that shaped the research questions. She utilised her extensive links with participants to facilitate recruitment and she project managed the team involved with calling and tracing potential participants. It was her expertise as a practitioner that drove the content of the questionnaires and the specific topics that were covered. She contributed to the data analysis and interpretation of findings.

The team worked together to write a book containing the study findings, and in particular, Julia led on the sections about the history of adoption, the policy and practice implications. She was an equal partner in the publication of study findings in a journal article, conference presentations and an executive summary. It was Julia's idea to hold a practitioner and stakeholder dissemination conference in which the academic findings were presented alongside talks from the participants about their lived experiences. This brought the research to life in a way I hadn't seen before or since. In my opinion, the project would not have had such a significant academic or practical impact without Julia's research direction and determination.

Dr Fiona Kyle

31st January 2022

Appendix 3

Dr Margaret Grant

Co-worker research statement: British Chinese Adoption Study (2010-2013) and published works below – confirmation of the contribution of Julia Feast

Julia Feast took an active role as principal investigator in all aspects of the research project on which the publications are based - from the research bid; research design; recruiting participants; data collection; data analysis; managing the advisory group; writing reports, a book and peer-reviewed journal articles; dissemination for practice and to people with lived experience of adoption. In addition to the articles noted below, Julia contributed key knowledge and expertise to other co-authored articles with other members of the research team.

She took a leading and autonomous role particularly in relation to:

- developing the ethical approach and leading the response to ethical issues as they arose in the course of the research.
- designing and piloting the semi-structured interview schedules.
- Managing a multi-disciplinary team of academic researchers, research interviewers and administrators.
- identifying, approaching and recruiting participants, leading a small team of staff and volunteers that located contact details for 99 of the original group of 100 children, more than 40 years after they had been adopted.
- qualitative analysis of interview data e.g. developing the conceptual framework around 'talking and telling' across the lifespan; and key contributions to interpreting statistical results.
- writing a range of publications and presentations, including co-presenting with study participants; and organising dissemination events, including an event for research participants and a conference chaired by Sir Professor Michael Rutter.

Dr Maggie Grant

6 December 2021

Study 3: Adversity Adoption and Afterwards: A mid-life follow-up study of women adopted from Hong Kong (2010-13)

Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A., Simmonds, J. (2012) The British Chinese Adoption Study: planning a study of life course and outcomes', *European Journal of Social Work*, DOI:10.1080/13691457.2012.660906.

Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A. and Simmonds J. (2013) Adversity, Adoption and Afterwards: A Mid-life Follow Up Study of Women Adopted from Hong Kong. London: BAAF

Appendix 4

Statement by Dr Alan Rushton OBE, on the roles and responsibilities of Julia Feast British Chinese Adoption Study (2010-2013)

Julia had the foresight to see the potential of a long-term follow-up study to assess the adult outcomes of children with adverse early childhoods who were subsequently internationally adopted. It was her initiative to bring together and manage the research team, including myself, to seek funding and ethical approval, to recruit interviewers, to conduct interviews and to act as Principal Investigator. We worked as a collaborative research team, but Julia made her independent contribution to critical reviewing of the relevant research literature and to the research design, including conceptualising adult outcomes and selecting appropriate measures and interview questions likely to relate to negative early experience. She contributed to interrogation of the quantitative and qualitative findings as they emerged and the formulation of conclusions and implications. She took a leading role in writing reports, peer reviewed articles, the book of the study and in dissemination of findings.

Dr Alan Rushton OBE
15th December 2021

Appendix 5

Dr John Simmonds OBE
Statement – Julia Feast's role in three Research Studies

Julia was a member of my team at the British Association of Adoption and Fostering and then CoramBAAF. Julia occupied the role of adoption consultant, where she had a wide range of responsibilities, including research. The studies named in her PhD were an important part of her role.

Julia was responsible for identifying the focus of the studies, resulting from her professional experiences in working in adoption. Julia developed a plan for each study with its specific objectives, methodology, timescales, ethical considerations, staffing and resource issues. These were discussed and agreed by myself and others and then submitted as applications for funding including compliance with the processes required to secure that funding.

Each of the studies was established and delivered within a partnership arrangement with a University or Research Institute. Julia was the Principal Investigator for each of the three studies. This included managing the team within BAAF/CoramBAAF and the research partners for each study. Each of the studies required detailed plans for engaging the subjects of the studies. Julia applied her expertise in understanding the challenges of making contact with those individuals, explaining the research and its purpose and the issues to be addressed. Julia's sensitivity to these matters was significant and they were an essential part of her work with the research teams as the research gathered momentum. In each study, those who agreed to participate exceeded the planned /expected numbers who would agree to participate. This was recognised as an important part of Julia applying what she knew about the challenges of being adopted and its lifelong impact.

The methodology agreed and applied in the design of questionnaires and interview schedules was complex but again was carefully constructed under Julia's guidance. These were appropriately tested and modified and used by the research teams. Julia arranged regular meetings to ensure compliance with the agreed methodology and explore and resolve specific issues as they arose. The data collected was appropriately and securely stored and subject to rigorous analysis. Where issues were raised about the significance and meaning of the analysis, these were explored by the teams under Julia's guidance to identify and appropriately address them in the study reports and

conclusions. This included providing feedback to the funders as required in the funding agreement.

Each study resulted in a detailed report that was agreed by the funders. These were then further developed with Julia's significant planning and contribution to drafting submissions to journals or published books and making presentations professional audiences at relevant conferences. These were in turn used to influence public policy and professional service development.

Julia's expertise in each study significantly influenced the development and delivery of each project. At the same time, Julia managed a team of co-researchers in significantly influencing their contribution and being influenced by their expertise and experience. The value and impact of the studies cannot be under-estimated.

Dr John Simmonds OBE, Director of Policy, Research and Development, CoramBAAF
10th December 2021

Appendix B: The Submitted Publications

Publication 1: Chapter 16: Identity and Relationships: interpretation of the findings. In: Howe, D. and Feast, J. (2000/2003) *Adoption Search and Reunion: The Long-Term Experience of Adopted Adults*. London: The Children's Society/BAAF.

Publication 2: Chapter 9: Growing up adopted. In: Triseliotis, J., Feast, J. and Kyle, F. (2005) *The Adoption Triangle Revisited: A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences*. London: BAAF.

Publication 3: Chapter 9: Origins and access to information. In: Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A. and Simmonds, J. (2013) *Adversity, Adoption and Afterwards: A Mid-life Follow Up Study of Women Adopted from Hong Kong*. London: BAAF.

Publication 4: Kirton, D., Howe, D. and Feast, J. (2000) 'Searching, reunion and transracial adoption', *Adoption & Fostering*, 24(3): 8–15.

Publication 5: Feast, J. and Howe, D. (2003) 'Open adoption records, the human rights of adopted people and discrimination: the case of Odievre v France', *European Journal of Social Work*, 7(1): 25–42.

Publication 6: Feast, J. (2009) 'Identity and continuity: adults' access to and need for information about their history and identity', In: Schofield, G. and Simmonds, J., *The Child Placement Handbook*. London: BAAF, Chapter 23.

Publication 7: Feast, J. (2003) 'Messages from the adoption experience for donor-assisted conception', *Human Fertility*, 6(1): 41–45.

Publication 8: Feast, J. and Howe, D. (2003) 'Talking and telling', in Douglas, A. and Philpot, T. (eds.) *Changing Families, Changing Times*. London, Routledge.

Publication 9: Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A. and Simmonds, J. (2012) The British Chinese Adoption Study: planning a study of life course and outcomes', *European Journal of Social Work*, 16(3): 344–359.