An analysis of reunifications between adopted adults and their birth relatives

Shields, D. E., & Nicholl, P. (2024). An analysis of reunifications between adopted adults and their birth relatives. *Child Care in Practice*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2024.2359939

Published in:
Child Care in Practice

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

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Download date:14. Oct. 2026

Child Care in Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cccp20

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To cite this article: Donna E. Shields & Patricia Nicholl (26 Jun 2024): An Analysis of Reunifications Between Adopted Adults and Their Birth Relatives, Child Care in Practice, DOI: 10.1080/13575279.2024.2359939

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2024.2359939

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Published online: 26 Jun 2024.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2024.2359939

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ABSTRACT

The life-long nature of adoption and recognition of the often-fragile nature of post-reunion relationships, means adoption agencies have a duty of care and moral onus to facilitate comprehensive support services that can be readily accessed. The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust Post-Adoption Service was established in 1989, in response to the legislative changes brought about by The Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. This study employed retrospective file analysis and a purposive sample of 15 Case Files, drawn from a 10-year period (2009–2018), to explore reunifications between adopted adults and their birth relatives, from the time of initial involvement and over the longer term. The use of an Advisory Panel of professional experts, a Pilot Study and a specifically created Data Collection Form, enhanced overall rigour and robustness. Thematic analysis of the data identified common themes of curiosity; identity related; meeting the birth mother; and death of adoptive parents/loss; leading to meta-themes of identity and loss. Key findings include the diversity amongst service users accessing the service in terms of their gender, age and life stage; their motivations; the time-restricted nature of current involvement; protracted timescales from initial contact to search is not uncommon; that *post-reunion* social work involvement saw a marked drop from pre-contact levels, particularly for birth relatives. The study makes a compelling case for a well-resourced service that offers additional pre- and post-reunion support and argues for a more proactive professional approach, with further expansion of existing support provision.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 August 2022
Accepted 22 May 2024

KEYWORDS
Adoption; adopted adults; biological mother; birth relatives; post-adoption reunion; kinship

Introduction

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust Post-Adoption Service was established in Northern Ireland in 1989, in response to the legislative changes within The Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987. Changes that permit adopted adults to access their birth origin information, thereby learning about their pre-adoptive identity and early life history, including identifying details relating to their birth family. The team's functions include birth record counselling, and a tracing and intermediary service that facilitates reunions. This study was undertaken by a social worker from the team who has over

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30 years' experience in supporting post-adoption search and reunion. It employed retrospective file analysis to gain insights into its role in the reunion process, and the demographic profile and support needs of service users.

The complexities surrounding early life trauma, separation and loss, attachment and identity needs have been understood for decades (Brodzinsky et al., 1992), and life events can trigger the desire for information about one's origins (Greco et al., 2015; Wrobel et al., 2013). One cannot presume the drivers or motivators at play, instead, the importance of actively listening and tailoring an individualised response to service user needs is recognised (Clapton, 2018a). When adopted adults contemplate approaching their birth relatives, they are understandably curious as to the likely outcome. While one cannot predict the actual response, drawing upon available research can inform their decision-making and improve the social work service (Sánchez-Sandoval, López-Jiménez, et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2015). This study seeks to shed additional light upon this area of practice, with research findings that contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the needs and issues that may arise over the longer term for those engaging in the reunion process.

Literature review

Longer-term outcomes of adoption reunions

A systematic narrative review (Shields, 2020) focusing on the longer-term outcomes of adoption reunions, scrutinised 51 peer-reviewed papers, identifying 14 relevant international studies. Despite their methodological heterogeneity, and chronological and geographical range, commonalities were apparent regarding the post-reunion experience and the complexity of this area of practice.

Six themes relating to adoption reunion's longer-term outcomes were identified: unresolved emotions; differing expectations; differences of lifestyle, attitudes, and values; long-term and short-term effects of keeping secrets; unsupportive behaviour of others; and the lack of shared history. While a majority will retain contact over the longer-term, these relationships are often unsettled, with varying levels of satisfaction (Clapton, 2018b; Howe & Feast, 2001; O'Neill et al., 2018). This indicates the merits of timely professional follow-up support (Browning & Duncan, 2005; O'Neill et al., 2018). The themes identified can inform pre-reunion stage practice, enabling these areas to be meaningfully explored, ahead of introductions. This helps to demystify the process and normalise the range of conflicting emotions that may emerge as relationships develop (Clapton, 2018b). Reassurance that such issues may arise, can help minimise feelings of isolation or failure, enabling individuals to avail more readily of formal and informal support.

Support needs

Sánchez-Sandoval, López-Jiménez, et al.'s (2020)'s systematic review of the support needs and resources for adopted adults recognises adoption as a life-long process, with the potential for issues across the lifespan (Scarvelis et al., 2017). They found applicants to post-adoption services were a heterogeneous group, with varied reasons for initiating their search enquiry. Searches often coincided with significant transition periods, for

instance, marriage, parenthood, or important losses. Despite cultural differences across the studies, Sánchez-Sandoval, López-Jiménez, et al. (2020) identified common needs, with social support and the role of significant others markedly impacting the search process. Sánchez-Sandoval, Melero, et al. (2020) found well-being and adjustment levels in adulthood were enhanced by access to both informal and formal support. Future training ought to take cognisance of these findings, with an additional focus on support for grief, trauma and identity-related issues for all adults impacted by adoption.

Additional influential guidance

Clapton (2018a) alerts practitioners to the normalcy of searching amongst adopted adults and delivers a key message regarding the persistence of loss and grief for birth mothers. Many were advised to make a fresh start after their child's adoption, in the mistaken belief they could readily move forward with their lives. Regrettably, this false premise has left many women unsupported for decades in the aftermath of their child's adoption (Howe et al., 1992; Winkler & van Keppel, 1984).

Historically, birth parents have been less well researched than other members of the adoption circle. Where research has been undertaken (Coleman & Garratt, 2016; Fessler, 2007) it highlights the stigmatising experiences of many, within a system that failed to grasp the enduring nature of grief and loss, particularly for birth mothers (Clapton, 2000). O'Brien (2013) highlighted that little was known about the motivation to search amongst birth relatives within Ireland, although Kelly (2005) goes some way to addressing the issue in respect of birth mothers. March (2014), in the USA, explores the emotions triggered by the reunion experience, with the mothers' disenfranchised grief, often suppressed over decades by secrecy and silence, finally finding expression. The implications for professional support are clear.

Nor can we omit the importance of assisting adoptive parents over the lifespan. Their ability to discuss adoption-related matters freely and openly, their "communicative openness", links directly with adoptees' emotional well-being (Grotevant et al., 2011, p. 530). Such openness assists the adoptee to develop a coherent narrative across time (Colaner, 2011). Parental acceptance of their child's adoptive status and a willingness to discuss it, aids identity formation, including adoptive identity (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Grotevant et al., 2017, 2011). Knowledge gaps are associated with adoptee curiosity (Carsten, 2000). The Adoption Curiosity Pathway Model developed by Wrobel et al. (2013) enhances our comprehension of adoptees' curiosity and their diverse forms of information-seeking behaviour. For many, searching is linked to increasing their sense of identity (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Wrobel et al., 2013). Practitioners need appropriate training to develop familiarity with these concepts.

Müller and Perry (2001) found information about the birth mother was a primary search goal for many adoptees, with several studies indicating she is often the first birth family member sought (March, 1995). While acknowledging reasons for searching are varied, Passmore et al. (2005) contend that practitioners must understand the links between search and identity. Meanwhile, O'Neill et al. (2018) indicate the importance of comprehending the connections between identity and overall adjustment.

Recent research highlights the necessity of involving service users in the planning of post-adoption services (Kalb & Tucker, 2019; Lyttle et al., 2021), with inherent

implications for future research and policy making. Several studies indicate that, irrespective of the outcome, the reunion process was viewed positively (Howe & Feast, 2001; Triseliotis et al., 2005). The review of the literature demonstrates post-adoption services have an important role in facilitating and supporting those engaging in the reunion process.

Aims and objectives

This study explores the Post-Adoption Team's role and professional contribution, at the time of initial involvement and over the longer term, in reunions between adopted adults and their birth relatives.

It has been guided by the following objectives:

- To consider the demographic characteristics of those individuals seeking a post-adoption service
- To explore and record the nature and content of initial support to reunion service users.
- To establish whether any subsequent contact or follow-up work took place and the nature of it.
- To identify if the involvement of significant others contributed to the positive development of relationships engendered by reunion.
- To identify areas of practice that might be developed to better support reunion service users.

Methodology

Design

This qualitative exploratory study explores the Post-Adoption Team's role in reunifications between adopted adults and their birth relatives. A 5-person Advisory Panel, consisting of a retired adoption manager, senior social worker, administrator, a senior academic and voluntary organisation manager—all with significant post-adoption experience and including an adopted adult and birth parent, assisted the design and methodology. An Audit of all agency case file records involving an adoption reunion, over a ten-year period, identified a Pilot (5 cases) and Main Study (15 cases). The Pilot Study highlighted deficits in the original Data Collection Form, enabling changes that aided rigour and robustness (Taylor et al., 2015).

The social worker's positionality as researcher/evaluator

As a social worker conducting a study within their field of professional practice and as a worker employed by the adoption agency, positionality and its implications were explored within the context of insider research (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). Strategies and counterbalances were implemented to offset the risk of bias, including supervision, consultation with an Advisory Panel, maintaining a reflective journal, and a clear audit trail, underpinned by an appreciation of the important role of reflection in maintaining

researcher objectivity (Greene, 2014; Houston, 2015). Using an Advisory Panel supported the dependability and credibility of findings (Abdalla et al., 2018; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Data was discussed with the Advisory Panel—supporting the distribution of power and expertise within the study, reducing the potential for misinterpretation of the information, and minimising the possibility of researcher bias.

Method

This study draws a purposive sample (Taylor et al., 2015) from case file records. A scoping exercise was undertaken to determine the overall number of case files within a 10-year framework. A total of 153 files were identified, covering 1 January 2009 to 31 December 2018. Given Study time constraints, a systematic sampling strategy was adopted (Creswell, 2007). The sample of 15 files is information-rich in respect of the topic under evaluation. Bowen (2009) is clear that file analysis has merit as a standalone, cost-effective method of gathering empirical data, with the benefit of being "unobtrusive and nonreactive" (38). It had additional merit given the practical considerations and constraints created by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The sample

The sample consisted of a pilot (5 files) and a main study (15 files). The pilot highlighted the need for amendments to the data collection form. For instance, the draft form did not explicitly ask if the Social Worker was present at the initial face to face meeting between the adopted adult and their birth relative, and if not, why not? The main study consisted of 15 files (all from the Adoption Agency concerned): 11 where adopted adults initiated the contact, and 4 where the birth relative initiated the contact.

Data collection and analysis

A Data Collection Form promoted consistency during the data extraction process (Taylor et al., 2015). Collated data was subjected to thematic analysis, with manual coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Since the risk of bias remains, irrespective of which approach to data analysis is adopted (Smith & Noble, 2014), regular academic supervisory support was accessed and proved beneficial, as did the Advisory Panel's input and the use of a reflective journal (Baizerman et al., 2012). Regular academic supervisory support aided reflection, while discussion with the Advisory Panel enhanced rigour and findings validity (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the HSC Trust, premised on the understanding that data would be anonymised in accordance with the Information Commissioner Office (ICO)'s anonymisation code (ICO, 2012) and adhere to all current legislative and governance requirements.

The role of a researcher/ practitioner conducting research within their own organisation can be problematic and warrants acknowledgement in terms of the potential for bias,

however unintended. This was addressed during supervision, and through discussions with the Professional Advisory Panel.

Findings

Findings are considered under five sub-headings:

1. Demographic and background information
2. Motivation to search
3. Contact with the post-adoption Team
4. Presence/absence of significant others
5. Subsequent contact with the post-adoption team

Demographic and background information

Gender and marital status are detailed in the tables below (Figures 1 and 2). The youngest birth mother was 16, and the oldest 36, with an average age of 23. Only three birth fathers (20%) were named, but non-identifying information, including ages, was provided in eight cases. They ranged from 17 to 33, with an average age of 24. In one case, that of a birth relative, the infant's age at placement was not recorded within the post-adoption file. Of the remaining 14 cases, the youngest was placed at 6 days old, the oldest was 2 years and 9 months. The mean average age at placement was nine and a half months. Interestingly, the three oldest-placed individuals described their adoption in positive or very positive terms. The two participants who viewed their adoption in negative or very negative terms had been placed with their adopters at three months and eight months respectively.

Motivation to search

Eleven cases (the "adopted person who traced" subgroup) were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Basic themes relating to their motivation to search

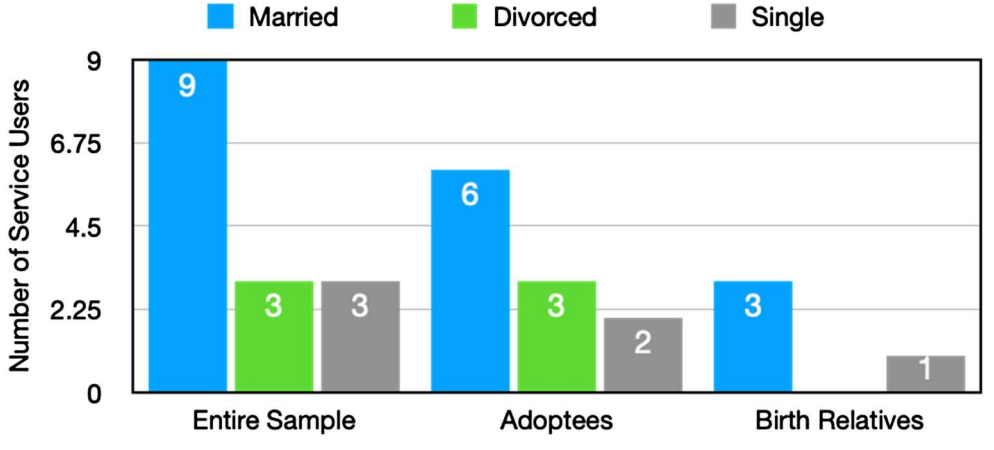

Figure 1. Gender.

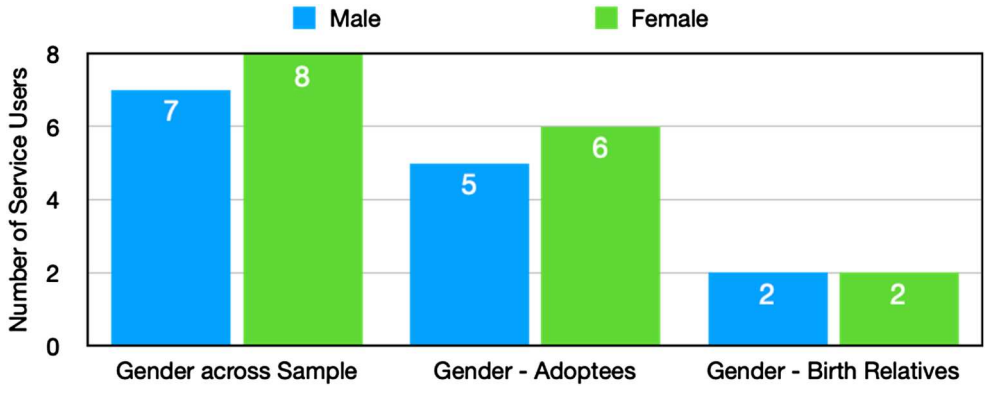

Figure 2. Marital status.

were: curiosity, identity-related, meeting birth mother, and death of parents, leading to meta themes of Identity and loss, themes that resonate across adoption literature.

References to "curiosity" or "being curious" constitute the numerically dominant theme within this study (6). When the term "to learn more" is added, a total of nine adopted adults fall within this motivational category, further increasing its dominance. Within this study, motivational interest is designated as "identity related" in two instances where the reasons moved from a general curiosity, to a more deep-seated interest in filling perceived gaps regarding one's sense of self, or to address feelings of incompleteness. The identity-related motivations identified in the study are consistent with findings from leading academics and theorists (Grotevant et al., 2017; Palacios et al., 2019).

A desire to meet the birth mother was indicated within three of the files; findings that align with the synthesised review of the literature (Shields, 2020). At a practical level, generally tracing commences with the individual identified on file, namely the mother (outside of abandonment cases). The findings indicate that two birth mothers found the face-to-face meeting highly emotional, triggering a raft of earlier memories and accompanying trauma. During the reunion, both were tearful and talked afterwards about the strength of feelings and memories evoked.

Birth mothers may anticipate a mother–child relationship (Affleck & Steed, 2001), as with one birth mother within this study. In that case, an element of the social worker's follow-up support entailed addressing the mother's unresolved emotions and managing expectations of future contact.

In four cases, the death of adoptive parents enabled the adult adoptee to explore their origins more actively and to initiate a search for birth relatives. Findings suggest adoptees are often protective of their adoptive families; fearing the emotional impact of tracing birth parents, they may delay action on their motivation to trace. Within this study, the birth sibling seeking their younger half-sister brought more emotional investment to the process because they were drawing upon childhood memory and a loss that had registered as emotionally significant. By contrast, their sibling appeared motivated by a more generalised curiosity. In the final case, where the adopted adult was seeking an adopted sibling, there was a more equitable balance of feelings and emotions; perhaps unsurprising, given their shared experience of growing up as adopted children.

Contact with the post-adoption team

Prior to the initial meeting between the adopted adult and their birth relative, the social worker met face to face on one or two occasions with fourteen adopted adults and twelve birth relatives, alongside providing telephone support. There was contact with significant others in eight cases (53.3%), during the pre-reunion phase. Interviews explored motivation to search and/ or expectations of contact, alongside the practical arrangements for the initial meeting. Service users were encouraged to select a neutral reunion venue. Social Workers were enabling the identification and exploration of issues, in preparation for the initial reunion meeting. There was a general tendency to meet face to face on one or two occasions only. Social workers participated in nine of the thirteen initial face-to-face meetings in Northern Ireland (two were in England).

Following the initial meeting between the adopted adult and their birth relative, there was a notable decline in professional involvement, with face-to-face meetings occurring with four adopted adults and four birth relatives across the sample of fifteen cases. Contact with significant others saw a similar marked decline in the post-meeting phase. Involvement with the team ended within 6 weeks of the initial face-to-face meeting between the adopted adult and their birth relative in nine of the cases (60%), a further four (27%) ended from seven weeks to six months after the first meeting. The social worker ended contact in 10 (67%) cases, while in a further 2 cases (13%) the contact appears to have ended by mutual agreement. In the remaining three cases (20%), contact was terminated by the service user.

Amongst adopted adults, the youngest person was eighteen at the time of their initial approach to the Post-Adoption Team, and the oldest was 48. The sub-group's mean average age was 36. Amongst birth relatives, the youngest person was 32 at the initial approach, the oldest 47. Across the entire sample, the average age was 37 at the initial approach to the Team. At their first "reunion" meeting, the mean average age, across the entire sample, was 40 years.

In eight cases (53.3%), the reunion was between an adult adoptee and their birth mother. In one case, the reunion was between an adoptee and their birth father. In the remaining six cases (40%), the reunions took place between siblings. Two sibling reunions occurred when the adoptee learned their birth mother had died and requested their sibling be approached. In eight of the fifteen cases (53.3%), the service user had prior involvement with the Post-Adoption Team. The longest interval between contacts was fourteen and a half years. Prior involvement with the Team had usually involved accessing initial birth records, with individuals then requiring time to assimilate and process the information.

The swiftest time frame, from an initial approach to the Post-Adoption Team, through to a face-to-face "reunion", was 3 months. The longest timeframe was 19 years, with an overall average of 5 years and 4 months.

Presence/absence of significant others

Twelve adopted adults (80%) experienced their adoption as positive or very positive, with only two people indicating a negative or very negative experience. In nine cases (60%), during the pre-reunion phase, there was a positive and supportive stance from partners,

friends, and family members, evidenced through their accompaniment of the adopted adults to appointments and/ or the reunion meeting. Two cases (13.3%) involved supportive significant others, though they expressed concern about the potentially negative impact of an unsuccessful reunion meeting on the adoptee's sense of rejection. In two cases, there was a lack of clarity around available support networks, while in one case the birth mother felt estranged from her family, who failed to share her apprehension about the reunion process. During the post-reunion phase, eight service users (53.3%) had significant others who were both positive and supportive.

Subsequent contact with the post-adoption team

Following case closure (after reunion), seven individuals had subsequent contact with the Post-Adoption Team. Time frames ranged from 3 months after case closure, through to 7 years. In three cases, the re-approach was motivated by a desire for contact with their birth father. Seven years after meeting the birth mother, one adopted adult was seeking two siblings placed for adoption.

Discussion

The heterogeneous nature of the demographic information identified within this study is consistent with earlier studies (Sánchez-Sandoval, Jiménez-Luque et al., 2020; Clapton, 2018a). Studies indicate more females search (Sánchez-Sandoval, Jiménez-Luque et al., 2020; O'Neill et al., 2018). Howe and Feast (2001) found women were twice as likely as men to search. Conversely, this study found no marked gender gap among adoptees, with six females and five males forming the sample. Further quantitative research might establish if this is of significance, in terms of reunion service users in Northern Ireland.

Study findings on birth parent age are consistent with other recent studies. Foli et al. (2012) found birth mothers more likely to be in their twenties, with Coleman and Garratt (2016) finding just 25% of their sample were teenage mothers, challenging the dominant view of birth mothers as teenagers. These findings are likely to be helpful in dispelling this belief during initial, pre-reunion work with adult adoptees.

Although not the case within this study, it has been indicated that older-placed children are more likely to have experienced an insecure attachment relationship with their adoptive mother (Howe et al., 2008). This is not necessarily attributable to their age *per se* but may be linked to their pre-placement histories. Such findings may have greater relevance for adoptees who come to adoption from the care system, with a history of adverse childhood experiences (Palacios et al., 2019). Although Verrier (2003) argues separation at birth itself has a particularly negative impact on the infant, leading to trauma, and relationship difficulties. Further study is needed to attain a more informed position. Nonetheless, the established risk factors associated with adverse childhood experiences and later adoptions (Neil et al., 2020), alongside a greater understanding of attachment and loss, make an additional case for the appropriate funding of post-adoption services across the lifespan (Harris, 2004; Neil et al., 2020). These services should address a range of needs, including counselling, reunion preparation, and readily accessible on-going support.

Gaining a better understanding of the motivational factors behind an approach to the Post-Adoption Team aids in developing service responses that align with the needs and expectations of service users. Thematic analysis of this study's findings identified several motivational factors: Curiosity, identity related, meeting birth mother, and Death of adoptive parents/loss.

Curiosity

Curiosity was one of six themes identified within the synthesised narrative review (Shields, 2020). It can take numerous forms, necessitating additional exploration to establish its meaning for the service user; this more nuanced approach is important, as it will guide the focus of future direct work and discussion, in preparation for initial face-to-face introductions (Wrobel et al., 2013). The adoption curiosity pathway (ACP) model (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) recognises the diversity of curiosity and information-seeking behaviour amongst adoptees, suggesting most will consider seeking information (Wrobel et al., 2013). They may seek health-related medical histories or to understand the birth mother's reasons for adoption. The normalcy of this position now informs post-adoption best practice with adults (Clapton, 2018a). Curiosity about one's origins is no longer perceived as maladaptive thinking or behaviour (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Practitioners can address elements of the "information gap" (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009) by providing information from the agency and/ or court files compiled at the time of the adoption. Additional research may be necessary to establish the sought person's current whereabouts and circumstances. This may indicate potential differences in lifestyle, attitudes or values that can be meaningfully explored ahead of any direct approach to the birth relative.

Identity related

Grotevant et al. (2017) advocate for more person-centred, adoption-related interventions. Given this study's findings regarding prior involvement, practitioners must appreciate that identity development is a fluid process (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Consequently, when service users reconnect with the Team their needs and aspirations may have changed. An appreciation of adoption's complexity, viewing it as a lifelong process, will help to ensure that practitioners are responsive to actual, as opposed to perceived, needs. Some seek a biological connection; others hope to secure additional background information. In instances where their birth father's identity was undisclosed, they may seek his details. This can be problematic, with Sachdev (1992) finding 80.4% of birth mothers were unwilling to discuss the birth father. Hence, this can form one aspect of the practitioner's role in terms of managing expectations.

Meeting birth mother

The adoptee may see the reunion encounter as an information-gathering exercise, while the birth mother may anticipate a mother–child relationship (Affleck & Steed, 2001) as was the case for a birth mother within this Study. This accords with March's (2014) study and other research findings that suggest birth mothers are often more emotionally

invested in the reunion process, than the adopted adult (Browning & Duncan, 2005; Müller et al., 2003). Addressing differing expectations with tact and sensitivity is a pivotal role for social workers in such situations.

Death of adoptive parents/loss

Links between adoption and loss are well established (Brodzinsky, 2011; Robinson, 2007).

Sensitivity to adoptive parents' feelings sometimes leads adoptees to delay searching for birth family until after the adoptive parents have died. There is now a greater appreciation that the loss of the adoptive parents may trigger feelings of grief relating to their earlier loss experience through adoption. This calls for an additional set of practitioner skills, around the losses experienced by all of those impacted by adoption, including the ambiguous loss and disenfranchised grief of birth parents (Robinson, 2007).

Level of involvement

This study's Findings evidence a high level of social work involvement prior to the initial face-to-face meeting between the adoptee and their birth relative, in contrast to the contact levels following the initial meeting/ reunion. There was a notable imbalance, also, between the follow-up contact afforded to birth relatives, when compared with the adoptees. The study's literature review evidences the wide range of challenges faced by *all* parties in the post-reunion phase (Shields, 2020). Differing expectations, lack of a shared history, lifestyle, attitudes and values, accompanied by secrecy and a lack of support from others in establishing post-reunion relationships with family members: these challenges may continue over the longer term. This study's findings resonate with the literature review, underscoring the importance of adequately exploring expectations and available support. Some studies suggest that people who are inadequately prepared for the reunion experience have encountered professionals who lack knowledge of the processes involved (Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Simply put, without proper preparation, relationships suffer. This has implications for future training and practice, for instance, post-reunion follow-up, service development or further studies in the field.

Social support

There is widespread acceptance of the important support role played by significant others within the sphere of adoption reunion (O'Neill et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2013) Access to social support during childhood and adolescence helps adoptees develop healthy levels of adjustment and well-being in adulthood (Sánchez-Sandoval, Melero, et al., 2020), although definitions of both social support and well-being vary somewhat across studies. Feeney and Collins (2015) define social support as having two main functions: as a source of strength, and "a relational catalyst" (119). Some studies differentiate between the formal support provided by professionals, and the informal network of support drawn from close family and friends (Atkinson et al., 2013). This study evidenced adopted adults availing of professional supports, both face to face and via telephone, alongside a range of supports from significant others throughout the process. While the value of informal networks is readily acknowledged by professionals, greater

engagement with, and support of them is likely to be beneficial (Sánchez-Sandoval, Melero, et al., 2020). Work on family dynamics (Wall, 2011) may aid adoptive parents' understanding of, and preparation for, the reunification process. In turn, this may lead to greater "adoption communication openness" (Brodzinsky, 2006:3). The more open nature of current adoption may reduce adoptive parents' concerns regarding contact with birth parents which, for some, has acted as an inhibitor within the search process (Schooler, 1995).

Within this study, prior to reunion, significant others were considered supportive in a majority of cases (9). Interestingly, during the pre-reunion phase, it was adoptive parents who tended to harbour anxieties about the potentially negative impact of the reunion process. While in the post-reunion phase, of the three cases where significant others were classified as "concerned", all were adoptive parents. Although this may simply reflect the wider role of parents generally, it highlights a potential area for targeted support. Sánchez-Sandoval, Melero, et al. (2020) highlight that support interventions tend to be for adult adoptees and see merit in extending provision to others, including partners and the adult children of adoptees. Significant others would be better prepared, gaining helpful insights likely to enhance everyone's overall experience. Notably, within this study, during the post-reunion period, a majority of significant others (8) were still considered supportive. That said, further research on the roles of significant others in reunifications and its implications for Post-Adoption Services is necessary.

Overview of practice implications

The Post-Adoption Team plays an important role, across a range of adoption-related areas. Practitioners need a comprehensive understanding of core adoption-related issues including, early life trauma and its neurological and emotional impact; grief and loss; identity; rejection; guilt and shame; intimacy; secrecy; mastery/ control (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982; Van der Kolk, 2017). A comprehensive understanding of the search process including the location of relevant records, tracing, and mediation skills is also required. Effective supervision (DoH, 2020) and relevant on-going training (NISCC, 2019) are imperative. Findings indicate the merits of expanding current service provision to ensure that the wide-ranging and diverse needs of its service users are met in a manner consistent with best practice.

A revised framework that incorporates focussed curriculum development for post-adoption practitioners engaged in reunifications between adopted adults and their birth relatives would be beneficial. One that permits a fuller exploration of recognised issues and themes in the pre-reunion phase, together with a practice model that permits additional post-reunion involvement and post-closure follow-up contact from the Team, would help to address practice concerns. This has significant implications for policy and practice, in the context of competing demands in other areas of adoption practice and across children's services.

Limitations

The small sample size of 15 case files means no claims can be made as to representativeness nor the generalisability of the findings. That said, the purposive sample is

information rich and permits intensive study within an under-researched area. The sample relates to domestic, third-party, so-called stranger adoptions only and as such is not well placed to inform our understanding of adoption reunions with an intercountry element. Finally, the often-limited nature of case records' references to significant others, limits the insights that can be drawn regarding their role and illuminates a pathway for further research in this area.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the Post-Adoption Team's role and professional contribution, at the time of initial involvement and over the longer term, in reunions between adopted adults and their birth relatives. The demographic characteristics and heterogeneous nature of service users are consistent with findings from other studies. While no significant gender differentiation was noted, additional research would establish if these findings were significant.

Prior contact with the Post-Adoption Team is not uncommon, with people opting for "time out" from actively progressing their search, in some instances for substantial periods. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the complexity of the task and the recognition of adoption as a life-long process, not an event. Exploring the nature of initial social work support has established that face-to-face and telephone support, for all reunion service users, is normal practice. There is also evidence of motivational factors and expectations being explored ahead of the initial reunion meeting. Unfortunately, the time-limited nature of the current Post-Adoption Team involvement precludes more than a cursory exploration of the issues. Additional involvement pre-reunion would enhance consideration of issues and needs. Post-reunion social work contact saw a marked drop from pre-contact levels, particularly with birth relatives. Given the findings, an additional period of post-reunion involvement is recommended, for both adopted adults and birth relatives.

Consistent with existing literature (O'Neill et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2013), significant others' involvement and positive impact on relationships post-reunion have been identified. Consequently, there would be merit in developing guidance and support specifically for significant others. Further research focussing on this aspect of the work would, also, be highly beneficial.

The tenuous and fragile nature of post-reunion relationships, particularly over the longer term, suggests many people are dealing with recognised challenges and stresses, without recourse to professional guidance and support. Currently, re-engagement with the service is user initiated; the study's findings suggest there may be merit in professionals re-evaluating this established position.

Although post-adoption service provision has increased dramatically for adopted children and their families in recent years, regrettably, the same cannot be said for adult provision. As Harris (2004) clearly states "*Adult issues, whether of adopted adults or birth relatives, have received less attention and then only reluctantly.*" (50). This situation has developed despite legislative recognition that an adoption service must offer support irrespective of age (Article 3, Adoption (Northern Ireland) Order 1987). New provisions under the Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, will further strengthen post-adoption support. The Research Report on Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene

Laundries in Northern Ireland, 1922–1990 (DoH, 2021) offers additional impetus for the expansion of provision within this sector. Highlighting, as it does, the enduring trauma for many of these women whose infants were adopted. Consideration might be given, also, to the establishment of a dedicated and centralised post-adoption service for adults impacted by adoption, covering the whole of Northern Ireland. This new service would ensure that other areas of adoption practice did not impede service delivery to adults impacted by adoption, an area that for too long has been akin to a Cinderella service.

This study is the first exploration of post-adoption practice with adults in Northern Ireland, and its limitations have been outlined. It highlights the merit of further research in various areas, including service users' views and experiences of professional involvement, both pre- and post- reunion, and the role and contribution of significant others within the reunion process. Further research is likely to offer additional insights and support the ongoing training requirements of practitioners in this field.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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