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Adoption in the Era of Secrecy: Practical and Ethical Challenges Facing Adult Adoptees in the Search for Birth Families

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Abstract: This article explores findings from research into the impact of adoption throughout the life course of adults who were adopted in the era of secrecy, the 1940s–1970s. A narrative approach was used to explore their reflections, and semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 11 adults. The findings were then analysed through the lens of the Life Course Perspective. Previous studies on adoption have largely explored the outcomes of searching for birth family members, but few have focused on how adoptees went about this, the challenges they encountered, the decisions made and what happened as they began to dismantle layers of secrecy surrounding their adoption. For most of the participants, resources such as genealogical websites and particular guidance were not available at the time they were searching for birth information or attempting to make contact with birth families. Their accounts highlighted how social workers with potential birth information did not appear to be able to consider the broader emotional impact this might entail for adoptees. Initial meetings were described by some adoptees as hurdles to be overcome, and little birth information was given. Some continued to search for birth relatives without support, using random methods to gain contact. The ways in which adults went about their search sometimes appeared to suggest a lack of consideration or awareness on their part of the possible impact on others involved. In reality, they were faced with obstacles and barriers as they attempted to learn about their origins. Their stories provide a valuable insight into how adult adoptees sought to dismantle layers of secrecy, highlighting the complex, challenging and isolated situation they found themselves in as they searched for birth information and birth families, as well as the ethical challenges and dilemmas they had to negotiate in order to do so.

Keywords: adoption; secrecy; searching; challenges; dilemmas

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1. Introduction

This paper presents some findings from a PhD study which explored the impact of adoption throughout the life course of adopted adults Searching for birth information and making contact with birth parents highlighted decisions that the adoptees had to undertake concerning, firstly, how they went about trying to gain access to birth information and, secondly, whether and how they then made contact with their birth parents. Exploring these aspects highlighted not only the practical challenges encountered by the adoptees in the search for their birth information but also some ethical questions that arose in the process.

Key questions were derived from my interest in adult adoptees' lives:

- How did adoption impact adopted adults throughout their life courses?
- How did changes in adoption legislation, policy and practice impact adoptees' life decisions?
- How did secrecy impact the lives of adult adoptees over their life courses?
- How did adult adoptees construct their identities and view the stigma surrounding adoption?

Over the course of the study, one issue that arose for all of the adults was the decisions that they made about starting to search for birth information. This particular aspect

highlighted how to access their birth information and further decisions on how to make contact with birth families. The decisions they undertook involved dismantling layers of secrecy over the years and encountering obstacles and barriers to gaining birth information and contacting their birth families.

Historical Context

Many adults who were adopted in the era of secrecy want to find their birth details to know why they were adopted and who their birth parents were. This paper focuses on adults adopted before 1975 in the UK. It charts a brief legislative history, including how secrecy came about, the subsequent impact of not knowing birth details until much later in their lives and the shift towards a more open adoption process after 1975.

Adoption was made legal in the UK in 1926 (Adoption of Children Act 1926), which gave adopting parents legal rights to keep their adopted child, putting an end to the 'rights, duties, obligations of the parents of the child', and with that, the child was to be thought of 'as though born to the adopter in lawful wedlock' (Adoption of Children Act 1926, sct. 5), which still presides today (Pepper 2018). Given that the mother of the child to be adopted was usually unmarried, adoption was considered a new start for the adoptive family, the illegitimate child and the unmarried mother (Keating 2009).

The new legislation, however, did not include any reference to significant issues strongly debated by committees prior to the 1926 act, which questioned the notion of severing all links between birth families and adopters, believing that secrecy and severance with birth families was not necessary. The Hopkinson Report (1921) had highlighted a more open level of adoption in which the parties involved had access to information that could identify them and adoptees could still have rights of inheritance with their birth families. A few years later, the Tomlin Report (1926) clarified its position, stating: '. . . apart from the question whether it is desirable or even admissible deliberately to eliminate or obscures traces of a child's origin so that it shall be difficult or impossible thereafter for such an origin to be ascertained, we think that this system of secrecy would be wholly unnecessary and objectionable in connection with a legalised system of adoption and we should deprecate any attempt to introduce it' (Tomlin Report 1926, p. 9, para. 28).

Adoption agencies at that time, however, favoured the severance of all links; advocating for secrecy, they were firmly in favour of adoptive families not having any contact with birth families. Their aim was twofold: to assist couples who could not have children and to provide a new family for those children who were not wanted or whose mothers could not keep them (Ryburn 1995; Keating 2001). As adoption legislation developed, the Horsburgh Report (1937) promoted a shift in emphasis to the child and away from the adopters. A more rigorous vetting procedure was also introduced, which had to be adhered to by adoption societies but did little to deter them from maintaining the practice of secrecy within the adoption process. Adoption societies were well aware of the request for secrecy from some of the potential adopters who were clear that they would not go ahead with adopting a child if the process was not secret. The committee noted that the practice of adoption societies still guaranteed secrecy, requesting that the birth parent sign a consent form before the adopters did to ensure that the two parties did not meet (Keating 2009). The Horsburgh Committee was also aware that adoption agencies did not want to keep in contact with the birth mother of the child who was to be adopted even though it made clear that birth parents had the right to be included when adoptive parents were being selected (Ryburn 1995).

The element of secrecy continued and was embedded further into the Adoption of Children Act (1949) when serial numbers replaced the names of the adopting parents on application forms. This act highlighted what Howe and Feast (2000) called a 'clean break' or 'fresh start' (p. 5). It is important to highlight that secrecy in the process of adoption had been a constant within adoption practices for more than 20 years, although the emphasis in legislation had shifted from the interests of the adopting parents to the interests of the

child. In reality, this meant that secrecy now included an assumed benefit for the adopted child, which would later have significant ramifications.

In 1954, the Hurst Committee was set up to review adoption policy and law. There was a growing awareness of the need for adopted people to access their background information (Triseliotis 1973; Triseliotis et al. 2005), and witnesses stated that 'it is not in the interest of adopted children to be permanently precluded from satisfying their natural curiosity' (Hurst Report 1954, para. 201, p. 53). This was the first time that adoptees' curiosity about their birth family origins was acknowledged as a natural part of being adopted (Haimes and Timms 1985). The Hurst Committee attempted to remove the element of secrecy which had become commonplace within adoption practice and recommended that adoptees over 21 years of age should be able to apply to the courts for their adoption order, thereby accessing the names of their birth parents. Although the need for adopted people to know about their birth details was acknowledged by the committee, there was no parliamentary debate on the Hurst Report, and the recommendation did not go forward to be included in the Adoption Act (1958). Again, the aspect of secrecy did not seem to shift even with government committees discussing the need for adopted children to know their background. Secrecy continued to be an inherent aspect of adoption.

Explicit procedures were advised at this point by the committee for any adopted people who wanted to trace their birth parents, and any information relating to an adopted person could only be obtained through a court application (Haimes and Timms 1985; Teague 1989). Adoption societies and social service departments still advocated for secrecy and believed that an adoptee's wish to find out about their birth information was somewhat immature (Keating 2009). As with previous legislation, the Adoption Act (1958) upheld the status quo regarding access to birth information for adopted people. Adoption societies were clearly a force both within adoption practice and opinions, and they remained unchallenged. They continued to serve ostensibly as protection for adopting families if couples were infertile, for unmarried birth mothers who were viewed negatively and for adopted children, who were usually illegitimate. The practice and culture of secrecy within adoption continued.

In 1968, the Houghton Committee was set up to look at children's matters, including adoption, and in 1972, it reported that '. . . at some stage the child will need to know about his origins . . . this kind of information helps proper development of a sense of identity' (Houghton Report 1978, para. 28, p. 8). The committee was influenced by findings from a study carried out by Triseliotis (1973) which highlighted the significance of adopted people accessing information about their background and birth relatives. Similar to McWhinnie's research in 1967, the study referred to the importance of identity and self-worth, demonstrating that secrecy surrounding adoption could have a negative impact the development of adoptees' identities (McWhinnie 1967). Indeed, Triseliotis (1973) reinforced this conception of the impact of the lack of information about birth details and the possibility of finding out about adoption from someone other than parents, which could be traumatic. With this information, the committee put forward the following recommendation: 'The weight of the evidence as a whole was in freer access to background information, and this accords with our wish to encourage greater openness about adoption . . . all adopted people in England and Wales, whenever adopted, should be in the future permitted to obtain a copy of their original birth entry' (Houghton Report 1978, para. 303, p. 85).

This gave rise to section 26 of the 1975 Children Act in England and Wales, and it later became section 51 of the Adoption Act (1976). Debates about secrecy in adoption had been held for many years without success. Significantly, research with adoptees brought this to the fore, prompting legislation to shift to include the necessity of birth information. Before the Children Act (1975) came into effect, debates were held about adoptees being able to access their birth details and how this might impact their birth mothers (who would now be able to be traced). The ethical aspect being debated concerned the pertinent questions of what was the right thing to do for the adoptees, who up to now could not legally access their birth information, and the previous historical promise of confidentiality to birth mothers.

Ethical issues for both adoptees and birth mothers were addressed at this time, but no one had any idea how this would impact their future lives.

The legislation was retrospective for all adopted adults over the age of 18, bringing about a significant change by overturning previously held notions that adoption was a clean break from the birth family. The new tracing rights for adoptees marked a huge shift from the previously held secrecy surrounding adoption. To address the impact of a more open adoptive process, included in the act was section 26, which made counselling compulsory for the adoptees before they were given the information on their birth certificate (Haimes and Timms 1985). Adoptees who had sufficient information could contact their birth families, and it was recognised that they would need support to consider the impact that searching and pursuing contact could have on them, their birth families and their adoptive families (Howe and Feast 2000). This important legislation was viewed as a positive shift for adoptees, on the one hand, but as potentially negative for birth mothers, who could now be traced, and adoptive families, whose adopted children could now access information about their birth families.

The Children Act (1975) did not make provisions for birth mothers to access their children's adoption records. Birth mothers consequently took issue with the law over what they perceived as failing to recognise their rights (Carp 2008). As a result, the Children Act (England and Wales, Children Act 1989) made a provision which amended the Adoption Act (1976) and added a section (51A) referring to the Adoption Contact Register whereby adoptees and birth relatives who wished to make contact could be registered, and contact information could be shared if both parties were willing. The Children Act (1975) purported to move away from the previous secrecy surrounding adoption to a more open approach whereby need-to-know birth information was now understood. If adoptees wanted information about their birth backgrounds, there was now a formal process within which this could occur. Birth mothers who decided to have their children adopted after 1 August 1975 would not be guaranteed anonymity, as identifying information would no longer be kept secret.

Contemporary Context

As adoption legislation has developed in the UK, there has been a distinct shift in emphasis from the importance of meeting the needs of adopting families to putting the welfare and interests of children first. Increased awareness and understanding of children's emotional needs throughout the twentieth century have allowed a change in focus to more child-centred perspectives within adoption practices (O'Halloran 2015). The notion and practice of secrecy within adoption has given way to a much more open model of adoption in which the sharing of information and contact between adopted children and birth families is promoted (Adoption and Children Act 2002). Given this stark contrast between secrecy and openness in adoption legislation, it is important that studies on adults who were adopted before 1975 explore and highlight the impact of secrecy on their life courses and the lives of others connected to them. Positioning their stories within the historical context helps our understanding of why secrecy was deemed to be no longer necessary. How this was legislated for and managed remains important to highlight now, as it is crucial to understand the challenges and dilemmas that adopted people were faced with, having grown up in an atmosphere of secrecy and then suddenly finding themselves able to access their birth information. Although contemporary adoption practices are much more open, the impact of the secrecy that surrounded adoption for adult adoptees remains a significant issue.

2. Methods

A narrative methodology was chosen for this study, as it foregrounded the storied aspect of the participating adults' narratives (Lawler 2002; Woodiwiss 2017). Given my research questions and approach, I knew it was important to be able to highlight sequences of events over a period of time which would demonstrate the social, historical and cultural

dimensions of adoption. The narrative methodology certainly captured these aspects and allowed the adults to look back over their life courses at how adoption had impacted them and to tell their stories. It provided an opportunity to understand how the participating adults reflected on their adoption from a mid-to-later-life position, looking back to their very early years, how they interpreted particular events, why they made certain decisions and how their personal narratives were located within a broader social and historical narrative (Lawler 2002; Elliot 2005; Frank 2010; Miller 2017).

The conceptual framework of the Life Course Perspective (Elder 1994) was used to foreground 'how historical time, social location and culture affect the individual experience of each life stage' (Hutchison 2011, p. 11). This element was particularly helpful in exploring adoption over a life course, and it enabled a focus on the ways in which a larger public narrative located and situated the participants' individual experiences. Viewing adoption through this lens provided clarity as to how adoption can be perceived, how it impacts the lives of adoptees at different times and how it connects early life events to events in later life. In particular, the life course concept of a 'trajectory', which uses the aspect of looking back through a 'rear view mirror' as an approach (Hutchison 2019, p. 354), was invaluable in exploring the lives of the participating adults through their stories.

Data Collection and Analysis

Recruiting adopted adults into the study presented challenges. Adoption organisations were contacted, conversations took place with social workers and the research was advertised. This avenue, however, did not yield adoptees who were interested. Reflecting on the literature on the stigma and secrecy surrounding adoption suggested that it was possible that adults who were part of a group within an adoption organisation or individuals who may have been given the study information may not have wanted to come forward, owing to the what they perceived society's view of adoption to be (Maill 1987; March 1995; Wegar 2000; Weistra and Luke 2017). I then employed a local snowballing sample (Bryman 2016) by contacting colleagues and friends who knew adults who had been adopted and met the inclusion criteria: adults who were over the age of 40 and had been adopted in the UK before 1975. This brought forward 11 adults, six women and five men, who were keen to be part of the study. Ten of the eleven adults wanted to find out more about their birth parents and why they had been adopted, and their ages ranged from 44 to 78 years.

Aspects that needed careful attention were confidentiality, privacy and anonymity (Dickson-Swift 2005). From the outset, it was important that the adults understood that their identities and the identities of anyone else or places they mentioned would be concealed and measures put in place to ensure anonymity (Liamputtong and Ezzy 1999; Braun and Clarke 2013). I was mindful that the adoptees might name members of their adoptive families, birth families and other significant people involved in their adoption, and indeed, this did occur. As well as pseudonyms for all the adult adoptees, pseudonyms for anyone else they mentioned, such as partners and friends, were also employed. Once the adults decided to take part in the study, they knew they would be interviewed, that the interviews would be recorded and transcribed, and how long the interviews might take. They knew their consent to answer questions would be required for their participation, and they agreed to their answers being analysed. In the analysis, it was important to capture their body language, when they paused, displays of emotion, when they laughed and sighed, changes in tone and facial expressions, as my interpretations added to the richness of the data (Mason 2012).

Approaching the interviews chronologically was an important aspect which helped the adults construct their adoption narratives over time when a sequence was evident which could be situated within a social and historical context (Mason 2002). Given the adults' age range between 44 and 78 years and the time span that they were invited to look back over, it was important that questions were asked in chronological order to help them to tell their stories and remember past events and conversations. This particular order

captured their childhood and teenage years in discovering when and how they found out they were adopted, which was, for most of the participants, during their childhood.

To analyse the narratives, thematic analysis was chosen, as it sets out to search across data sets to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006). Attention was given to how an overall story was created via a sequence of events over a period of time that linked them together (Somers 1994). The thematic analysis approach was compatible with a narrative methodology in that it helped me ascertain and understand the personal stories and dominant narratives that the adult adoptees illuminated. It was possible to see their stories and overall adoption narrative as a cohort, and I was aware that, as well as paying attention to their personal stories, I also needed to analyse and interpret their stories through a lens that highlighted their common experience (Lainson et al. 2019). This focus was enabled by looking for repeated patterns across their stories to see common aspects. Given that the most important aspect of the research was to capture the stories of the adults over their life courses and foreground the impact of adoption, I wanted to elicit in-depth stories from when they were told they were adopted or found out about their adoption to the point where they were now in their lives. In doing this, I anticipated that the adoptees would move backwards and forwards through accounts as they remembered particular times, events, people and contexts, and stories would become intertwined. Therefore, an important element in choosing a thematic approach was the ability to be flexible, which allowed the researcher to constantly look backwards and forwards within the data for personal stories that highlighted the participants' experiences as a distinctive cohort (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In keeping with the narrative approach, the themes created interpretive stories about the data (Braun and Clarke 2019) and patterns identified across all the data. When the particular theme of searching for birth information and making contact with birth families was analysed, it became evident that most of the participating adults spent a considerable amount of time making decisions. The 'rear view' mirror lens of the Life Course Perspective (Hutchison 2019) enabled these adults to look back at this particular time and reflect the challenges they encountered and the dilemmas they faced throughout this process of an attempted search, largely unsupported by professionals.

Their stories brought to light unknown and under-researched aspects of the adoption experience. These aspects generated evidence with information about contemporary adoption whilst providing a deeper awareness of the ongoing experiences of adopted people years after they were adopted. I believed it was important to foreground the stories of adult adoptees throughout their life courses, especially as the practice of secrecy and confidentiality is still impacting on many people now.

Table 1 below provides brief details of the adults who participated in the study.

Table 1. Introducing the participating adopted adults.

Name; DOB	Context of Adoption	Age at Interview	Year When Adopted/Age	Told by Whom/Discovered	Year of Search and Age
Agnes; born 1942	Adopted by her father's brother's family	78	1946/age 4 years	Always knew/from age 4	Did not contact, was contacted by birth sister in 2014, age 72
Eva; born 1945	Adopted via a mother and baby home; only child of adoptive parents	74	1949/age 3 years	Adoptive parents/age 4	Did not contact, was contacted by birth sister in 2010, age 65
Joy; born 1947	Adopted via Social Services	72	1948/age 6 weeks	Accidentally discovered adoption certificate/age 17	Made contact with birth sisters in 2010/2014, age 63/67

Table 1. *Cont.*

Name; DOB	Context of Adoption	Age at Interview	Year When Adopted/Age	Told by Whom/Discovered	Year of Search and Age
Sonya; born 1961	Adopted via Social Services; only child of adoptive parents	58	1961/age 8 weeks	Accidentally discovered from a friend/age 28	1989, information found and contact with birth family made, age 28
Tom; born 1962	Adopted via an agency; one adopted sibling	57	1962/age 8 weeks	Adoptive parents/age 5/6	1995, information found and contact with birth family made, age 33
Simon; born 1963	Adopted via an agency; adoptive family already had a birth daughter	56	1964/age 3 months	Sister and then adoptive parents	Chose not to search for birth information
Susie; born 1964	Adopted via a church adoption agency; was the third adoptive child in the family	55	1965/age 6 weeks	Adoptive parents/age 8	2014, decided not to make contact after birth information found, age 50
Adam; born 1966	Adopted privately via a GP; one adopted sister	53	1967/age 6 weeks	Adoptive parents/age 8	2019, information found and contact made with birth family, age 53
Nate; born 1966	Adopted via an agency; only child of adoptive parents until remarriage and then had two sisters	53	1967/age 4 months	Adoptive father/age 4	1999, decided not to make contact after birth information found, age 33
Kathy; born 1967	Adopted via an agency; only child of adoptive parents	52	1967/age 6 weeks	Told by school friend and then adoptive mother/age 8	1995, contact made with birth family and decision not to continue after meeting, age 28
Connor; born 1975 (prior to new legislation)	Adopted via an agency; another boy adopted later	44	1975/age 3 months	Always knew and was then told by adoptive parents/age 4/5	1998, contact made with birth family and decision not to continue after meeting, age 23

3. Results

The following themes were identified as points throughout the lives of the participating adults when adoption had an impact: (1) secrecy within adoptive families and across generations, (2) searching for birth information and decision making, (3) contact with birth family members, (4) adoption and identity and (5) stigma. In particular, the themes of searching for birth information and making contact with birth family members highlighted the layers of secrecy, the barriers they encountered and the decisions they took in order to access information and families. This was a significant aspect that the participating adults foregrounded, as much of the literature on adult adoptees' searching has focused on outcomes of searching for birth families (Triseliotis 1973; Modell 1997; Triseliotis et al. 2005; Carsten 2000; Browning and Duncan 2005; Clapton 2018). Whilst this aspect is significant for adoptees and important to investigate, equally important to explore are the stages before this, as these stages illuminate individual journeys, ethical challenges and dilemmas, and nuances across their stories. Prior to starting this study, I anticipated discovering similar stories from the adoptees of a settled upbringing and possibly searching for birth parents. What the adoptees talked about led to a much broader understanding of the ramifications of secrecy on their decision making and on other people connected to them.

3.1. Deciding How to Search

For some of the participating adults, this was a long and arduous task both in time and length, taking sometimes months and sometimes years. Joy, Tom, Sonya and Susie visited different parts of the country. Nate, Kathy, Connor, Joy, Sonya and Susie went to the agency that had arranged their adoptions. Tom searched birth and marriage records at Somerset House (where records were kept historically). Adam and Agnes were both

involved in a family tree search. For Sonya, Tom, Adam, Kathy and Connor, deciding to make contact with birth relatives and meeting them happened quite quickly.

Parts of the participating adults' searching involved gaining access to information via an adoption agency and required the adoptees to have compulsory counselling. Some counsellors viewed the adoptees' visits as engaging in counselling, rather than seeking information about their adoption. Given that counselling is associated with seeking support for a problem, the adoptees may have been perceived as having problems because they were adopted or maybe needing counselling because of the information they received (Haimes and Timms 1985). Some of the adoptees, in their searches, described the compulsory aspect of counselling as a type of test they had to pass, and as a result, they found it off-putting. These meetings could certainly have been viewed as a challenge to the adopted adults by social workers. Their descriptions of the conversations highlighted, for them, a more complex pathway when trying to discover their birth details. The challenges they encountered may have encouraged some of the participants to halt their searches for a period of time, stopping altogether or producing further dilemmas. Both Joy and Eva's descriptions show a somewhat personal challenge presented to them by different social workers:

> *'The social worker who interviewed me and obviously was asking me questions trying to find out if I was ready emotionally and psychologically to receive this information. I felt very much like she had my information in front of her and that somehow, I had to pass some kind of psychological test to get that information. However, I obviously did pass it because she handed me my birth certificate'.* (Joy)

Eva described meeting with the social worker at the age of 67 after she was found by her birth sibling and had a similar description to Joy:

> *'The social worker says, "are you physically able, you know, mentally able to take on the information that we are going to give you?" So, I didn't do that until I was, sort of, 67. So they're now saying, you know, are you mentally capable. I'll tell her, I think so, you know'.* (Eva)

Kathy described the response of the social worker as being challenging, saying that she '*made a thing about meeting my birth mother*', suggesting there may have been some reluctance on the part of the social worker to discuss or arrange contact.

Connor described his visit to the adoption agency very vividly and proceeded to act out what had happened. What he encountered was the challenge of time and bureaucracy in order to gain his birth information:

> *'I wonder if you can help me . . . I'm adopted. This is my name now, and there's my birth certificate. This is my adoption certificate. I'm trying to find, yeah, you know, trace any information I can on my natural parents. I was wondering if you can help me. They said, "Yes, certainly. Fill that in for me. We've got file here on you with all the records pertaining to your case". I was like, All right, great. Can I have them? "No". I was like, Why not? This is long before GDPR, you know, where you're just filing an information request. So, she was like, "Well, you've got to go through a process". I'm like, Right, what do you mean? "Well, you'll have to be assessed of . . . you have to speak to one of our counsellors to make sure you don't mean any harm to your natural mother or . . ." I'm like, Are you joking with me? So, I said, "Hold on. I'm the person who's been adopted. That's my file". I say How long does these shenanigans take? She said "about six weeks". I said, I haven't got six weeks. I've got six days. She went, "Well, unfortunately, there's nothing I can do for you". (Pause) 'So, I jumped in the car, went down to the local Births, Deaths, and Marriages, talked with the woman behind the counter who was lovely. I just said, look, this is me. Tall story. She said, "If you were born here, if that says you were, there'll be a birth certificate for you". I said, Right, great. She came back five minutes later. "I've got your birth certificate". I said, Brilliant, thanks very much. She says, "Do you want a copy?" I says, Can I do that can I buy it? She went, "You can buy anyone birth certificate". I said, Really? So, I bought three copies. And obviously, on your birth*

certificate, it's got name of child, date of birth, where they were born, and it's got the mother's name'. (Connor)

3.1.1. Decisions after Accessing Birth Information

Of the eleven adoptees, only two, Nate and Susie, had decided to search for birth information and not make contact with their birth families. Their accounts clearly show ethical challenges and dilemmas in doing what they felt was the 'right thing' for them after accessing information and not proceeding further.

Nate brought up the aspect of searching for birth information:

'I decided that I wanted to find out—find my birth mother or find a little bit more about her . . . I wanted to get hold of the adoption papers . . . the charity involved explained to me that I had to go and talk to a social worker and all of these documents would be revealed to me, so I went and talked to them and started the process of trying to contact my birth mother . . . I wasn't sure if I got bored because I started sending letters out to find out whether or not she died . . . and I thought there are two directories that birth mothers could put their name on that allow their children to contact them and she hadn't put herself down in those. So, I kind of thought, "well if you've not put your name on that, it possibly means that you don't really want to get contacted". I knew that you could hire a private investigator . . . you could probably find her pretty quickly . . . So by the stage I made those kind of reflections, I just thought actually I don't really want to contact her because I don't know what on earth the benefit would be you know . . . I went through if I was to make that decision to do, I would then have quite a lot of responsibility for the effects that this caused . . . disruption to her own life, disruption to my life . . . and why on earth would I be contacting her . . . I don't know. If I felt there was some kind of hole that needed to be filled . . . then possibly there might be some benefit to be gained from it, but I don't feel it at all . . . I don't feel there are any questions that I could possibly ask . . . and "why did you do it for a number of reasons", but they are all pretty good ones, so because of that I never took it any further really. I understand why I started doing it because I just had my own first child and this seems to be a very important process and family becomes very important'. (Nate)

Similar to Nate, Susie described in detail how she started to search for birth information:

'I think it's important to say . . . it was after my mother died that I actually found . . . went up to Scotland and accessed all my records. I did some investigation around it and I went to the Scottish Adoption Society and asked there is a list of birthmothers who put themselves on the list. On the register to say, yes please, I would like contact. And I think I . . . we've got to be careful about rejection as well and that feeling that . . . I think rejection is a really big thing and that might be wounds . . . in terms of underlying . . . oh, why didn't she want me? That kind of situation. And rejection is huge if you put yourself again. I didn't want to put myself again in the situation where I looked at her. I just . . . and she hadn't put her name down. And then I'd feel again that there was a bit of rejection. She doesn't want contact with me. She doesn't want to make me as part of her life that she would rather completely forget about, which is, you know, her right too. So . . . yeah and the fact that got married literally six months after I was born to some . . . not my birth father, someone else, you know, was . . . was kind of told a bit of a story. mean I could . . . don't know the whole story because I haven't found out, but . . . There is a possibility that I could go all the way along the line, I'll find my birth mother and she turns around says, "no thank you, it's a part of my life that I didn't want to deal with". So, putting yourself into a window where you might be rejected again, is also a consideration . . . I still feel there is a piece of the puzzle missing . . . even though I kind of say . . . I'm far too busy with my life . . . I can't allocate time'.. She then mentioned that she had 'signed up to one of the adoption agencies . . . I've decided I'm going to pay for them to search'. (Susie)

Nate and Susie both dwelt on the aspect of rejection in their stories, and their hesitation about continuing to try to make contact appeared to be because they feared being rejected and the possibility that their birth mothers would not want to meet them. The fact that Nate appeared to be clear in feeling that he did not believe he would benefit from such contact suggested that he may still have wanted to avoid the very real aspect of being rejected. Susie's powerful account highlighted rejection (like Nate), and maybe because of this prevailing thought, she felt she needed more support from adoption agencies or social services to be able to take the step in making contact with her birth mother.

3.1.2. Making Contact with Birth Families

After searching for information, Tom, Kathy, Connor, Sonya, Joy and Adam made further decisions to make contact with their birth mothers and other birth relatives. How some of the adoptees made initial contact with their birth families highlighted a range of random routes with further challenges and dilemmas.

After finding his birth mother's married name, Tom traced her very quickly. He described finding his birth mother's workplace, saying the following:

> *'It didn't take me long. Through a phone call actually, I said "I'm trying to track down a Pauline Brown, I believe she might work with you" . . . and they said, "Oh I'll transfer you" . . . Anyway I rang back got an address and wrote a letter'.* (Tom)

When Tom met his birth parents, he found out that they had married after he was adopted and had gone on to have two more children. Tom recalled this meeting as one where his birth parents took control and where he agreed to their request, perhaps unwittingly:

> *'And they kind of insisted that they would only meet me and introduce me to my birth sisters so at this point, I'd found out that I had two full sisters. If I agreed to kind of stay around and at the time, I just said, "Yeah, whatever. You know, I'm really interested to meet my sisters, I don't suppose that's going to be an issue". That was really naïve of me. If I was a counsellor, I would have said, back away from that. That's way too heavy way too quick. But I just piled in both feet as you do and I met them, they were incredibly nervous, I wasn't. We chatted there soon afterwards they introduced me to my sisters'.* (Tom)

Similar to Tom's experience after receiving information from the adoption agency, Connor described how quickly he made contact with his birth mother. He rang all the phone numbers with her surname, saying the following:

> *'I drafted a script, telephone. I was calling myself, William Bell from Bell Johnson Solicitors . . . with a matter that was private and only could be discussed with the person'.* (Connor)

After some phone calls, an individual eventually returned Connor's call, telling him that the person he was looking for was her daughter:

> *'So now, I'm on the phone to my natural grandmother who doesn't know it's me, still thinks I'm a solicitor'.* (Connor)

After a few more minutes of talking, the woman revealed that her daughter was with her, and she then took over the phone call. Connor continued:

> *'So now, I'm speaking to my natural mother within an hour of being told by the Adoption Society it would take six weeks'.* (Connor)

Adam was the only participant who had used a DNA website to trace his birth family. He already had his original birth certificate and had gathered information from the ancestry.co.uk website about his birth family and by searching electoral registers. He appeared to be at a turning point where he was ready to take the next step:

> *'I've not spoken to them or contacted them . . . but I do know where they are . . . I've not decided myself what I wanted to do about it . . . I even know where they live . . . But it's just knowing . . . If I decide to do it, I will probably decide to do it. It's how do I do it?*

How do you make that first contact? Do you get somebody else to do it? Just write a letter or you . . . it'd be terrifying to just knock on the door and just . . .' (Adam)

Adam clearly needed help to navigate the next step, and this again illuminated that there was no one way that the adoptees knew about that would support them in progressing their searches. Adam had asked me how to search for his adoption file, and I guided him through the information already given prior to the interview, which included a helpline number and what to do if he needed support. He was adopted privately; therefore, he did not have an agency to go to or access to social services. It was up to him to navigate his search.

3.1.3. Finding Birth Siblings and Being Found

Three of the participants in the study, Agnes, Eva and Joy, were birth siblings who found each other later in life.

Joy proceeded to talk about how searching for her birth information in detail, describing the long and arduous task of many closed doors and not being able to find a birth certificate for her birth mother in spite of finding her birth mother's name. Over a long and complex search, taking years, Joy found that her birth mother had had five babies who were all adopted. Eventually, after searching birth records, she found one sister. Joy explained the following:

'I couldn't do anything about the sister because the law before 2007 wouldn't allow you to search for siblings'. (Joy)

After 2007, the National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and Parents (NORCAP), which provided support for adoptees and parents, found Eva in 2010 and then Agnes in 2014. Both of these sisters were found by NORCAP on behalf of Joy. Joy accessed her third sister (who was not part of this study) through Facebook in 2014, and they met a few months later.

Eva continued to describe this new story in great detail, recounting how she had been contacted and how she had met her sister at the age of 65 years:

'I got a lovely two-page letter saying she didn't want to interrupt and all that sort of thing . . . then in September 2011 I was going to a wedding and thought it might be an ideal opportunity to meet Joy as she lives in the area and that's what we did. We had a coffee together. It felt very odd, this lady who said she was my sister. Very . . . it was very odd. It really is odd. It's weird'. (Eva)

'We see each other about twice a year for a couple of days really . . . I don't worry about it one way or the other. When it's this late In your life, I don't think affection is automatic . . . And they are all lovely. I mean I haven't got a problem with any of the . . . of my sisters, but they're more like friends than . . . I imagine sisters are'. (Eva)

Similar to Eva, Agnes described in detail how she was found by Joy:

'I remember it 27th October, 2014 . . . I got this phone call . . . the adoption agency person . . . to say that there was a lady . . . called Joy who thought she might be related to me. Would it be alright if she sent me a letter. So, I thought about it and I thought 'what can I lose' and she wrote me a letter, a very long letter and it was lovely'. Agnes added 'Oh God . . . I was the last to be found and it's been amazing. I can't tell you'. (Agnes)

Asked if she wished they had come into her life earlier, Agnes replied as follows:

'God, yes . . . I don't miss them growing up . . . I never felt that I was deprived in that way but I do wish they had been around. I wish I would have known them a lot sooner . . . time goes very quickly . . . nobody knows how long they've got you're 78 going to 80s . . . that time you could have spent knowing each other would have been lovely. But anyway, we are trying to make up for it'. (Agnes)

Joy found her youngest sister through Facebook and described the reaction from her younger sister, who was excited and emotional at being found, saying the following:

'Wow, wow, wow! I've waited for this moment for the whole of my life . . . it was like magical'. (Joy)

The stories of Joy, Eva and Agnes again highlighted a long and bureaucratic process to find each other and learn of each other's existence. NORCAP appeared to be a more neutral way to approach letting adopted people know the details of unknown birth siblings. However, receiving information would still be very much a shock, and it raises questions of whether it was ever possible to put ethical guidelines in place for adoptees searching after 1975, as their main task was trying to dismantle layers of secrecy to find their birth information.

4. Discussion

The ways in which the adoptees searched for birth information and made contact with their birth families highlighted the challenges and dilemmas they faced during this process. The findings suggest that most had no clear way to approach this aspect of searching, which resulted in creative and random methods. The adults were uncertain about what may happen when they found birth information and the subsequent impact that further decisions may have on other people. This hugely significant personal knowledge created dilemmas and challenges for all of them, no matter which decisions they made in the future.

If an ethical dilemma is thought of as knowing what is the 'right thing to do' in a situation and how to do it, it could be argued that some of the adoptees were faced with ethical challenges in the process of searching for and responding to what they found. They may not have thought that their decision making and dilemmas had ethical implications. Finding themselves within a process that denied or blocked access to information about themselves and their origins created other ways of discovering personal information which they had been unable to access legally and which had been kept secret from them. This was unique to this specific cohort; their personal decision making, challenges and dilemmas were borne out of a bigger historical and cultural landscape. The impact of the secrecy surrounding adoption cannot be underestimated; there is no doubt that once layers of secrecy were uncovered, this created huge ramifications for many people. Certainly, as the Adoption Act (1976) made access to birth information legal for adopted people over the age of 18, it was impossible to know what would happen.

Prior to 1975, birth parents had understood that when their children were legally adopted, they could not be traced or known to them in the future; birth information could possibly change this as adoptees processed this change to their lives. Once the birth details were known and adoptees wanted to make contact, the lives of other individuals are inevitably impacted as part of their searches (Campbell et al. 1991; Triseliotis et al. 2005). The study's findings highlight that, upon accessing their birth information via an adoption agency or with social services, the adult adoptees attended a compulsory counselling session. Social workers had the job of determining in an interview what information the adoptee may already have regarding their birth, as well as making them aware of the implications of searching for their birth family (Haimes and Timms 1985; Gannon 2005). At this point, there was the opportunity to highlight the ethical nature and impact to the adoptees if they contacted their birth parents. However, the accounts from some of the adoptees foregrounded questions from social workers regarding whether the adoptees were able to receive the information fully, decisions about how much information the social workers would offer and when such information could be relayed to the adoptees. This meeting, intended to support the adoptee in making ethical decisions, achieved the opposite. The questioning by the social workers seemed to perhaps clarify and explain what the adoptees wanted but produced dilemmas and further challenges as the adoptees' requests for legally accessible birth information were questioned, as highlighted in the accounts of Connor, Joy and Kathy. This indicated a shocking lack of awareness on the part of social workers about the impact of secrecy and suddenly knowing birth details after many years.

Ultimately, 10 of the participating adults found details about their birth parents (one participant did not want to search for birth information and meet their birth parents). This information could be deemed 'new', but only in the sense that it was new at the point of discovery to the adoptees and could not be now unknown to them. This hugely significant personal knowledge created dilemmas and challenges for all of them, no matter which decisions they made about whether and how to act on that knowledge. Although social workers could also act as intermediaries between adoptees and birth families (Haimes and Timms 1985; Campbell et al. 1991; March 1995), the counselling interview highlighted by the adoptees did not necessarily involve support from social workers to proceed to the next step, concerning how to find birth families or how to make actual contact. As the adoptees talked about uncovering birth details and dismantling layers of secrecy, it was clear that this process took place without the support of professional help to manage or process significant new knowledge and people, understand how to make sense of this or learn how to move forward to integrate all of this information into their lives.

What was raised by the adoptees here is that making decisions about whether and how to make contact and managing this was a crucial aspect in the adoptees' search as they dismantled secrecy. What happened in reality was a random, rather inconsistent way of making contact. How birth information is accessed and subsequent searching by the adoptee are not explored in much depth in research to date (Triseliotis 1973; Kowal and Schilling 1985; Feast and Howe 1997; Howe and Feast 2000; Muller and Perry 2001; Triseliotis et al. 2005). This aspect is important to highlight, as what happens after secrecy is dismantled has ramifications for both adoptees and birth families. The question raised for the adoptees is whether they thought of the challenges and dilemmas they encountered within the context of ethical decision making and whether they were doing something 'right or wrong' in how they searched and made contact. Further questions are also raised for lawmakers, adoption societies and social workers concerning what they deem to be 'ethical' in their decision making. The decisions the adoptees made must be considered and understood within the cultural and societal context at the time of their adoption. Using the 'rear view' mirror aspect of the Life Course Perspective allowed the participating adults to look back at their decision making at that time in their lives. The decisions they made within this particular historical context led them to perhaps carry an 'ethical burden' as a consequence since they faced the process of constantly dismantling layers of secrecy to find birth details.

Implications

Given the contemporary context of adoption, in which social media and genealogy websites are much more commonplace, it is becoming more of the norm for people to want to find out about their past and research their family history. Accessing birth information has moved on from accessing official records via conventional methods. Through DNA testing and matching, adult adoptees may find that dismantling the secrecy surrounding their adoption happens suddenly. Understanding the impact of historical secrecy, as well as navigating searching, making decisions to do so, managing the pace of searching and controlling information, may require much more professional help and support.

If adopted adults choose to use these pathways because they are more immediate and easily accessible, quick and easy access to practical and emotional support from trained professionals seems all the more important. There can be significant ramifications for adopted people, who may be in the position of suddenly finding or being contacted by birth relatives. Therefore, it is more important for organisations that offer support to adults adopted before 1975 to be aware of the specific needs of this cohort and indeed the needs of their birth relatives and adoptive family members. There are clearly different individual paths to dismantling the secrecy surrounding adoption for adoptees, from only wanting information about birth parents to wanting to make contact with them—but, however they want to pursue this support, from the very first step and beyond, options need to be available.

As a researcher, I was aware, in delving into their lives and being invited to reflect on the aspect of secrecy, that the participating adults had to think about how being adopted had had an impact on their life courses, and this would be a sensitive and sometimes emotional journey. It was very likely that these adults had not told their stories from the beginning to anyone else. Given the nature of this research and the well-being of the participating adults, ethical values concerning respect for what they were talking about and a responsibility towards them highlighted by Birch and Miller (2002) were, for me, crucial throughout the process. Each adoptee recounted very powerful personal stories when constructing their adoption narrative, detailing how this had impacted them at different times over their lives.

It is important to highlight that thinking about birth parents, searching for birth information and making contact with birth families are significant for adopted adults *because* of the secrecy surrounding their adoption. This rather confusing and frustrating situation that they faced when attempting to uncover birth details, for some of the adoptees, would have led to stress and anxiety. Given this, professionals who are in the position of offering support to adult adoptees in a contemporary context, as well as people connected to the adoptees, should be fully cognisant of the historical context within which adult adoptees were adopted. Understanding the impact of institutional secrecy that existed as they grew up and the extent to which secrecy infiltrated into aspects of their lives highlights the need for adult adoptees to be supported throughout their life courses.

5. Conclusions

This specific aspect of how some adults searched for birth information and made contact with birth families cannot be generalised to all adoptees. However, what this research emphasised is that, for adults who made such decisions, challenges and dilemmas were encountered due to the huge impact of the secrecy surrounding adoption. Their stories offer a particular lens from which to view searching for family history which remains significant for adopted people today in spite of the changed landscape.

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