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Close Relations? The Long-Term Outcomes of Adoption Reunions

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Abstract: There has been a number of studies on the outcomes of adoption reunions, most of which have focussed on relatively ‘fresh’ reunions. Very few studies have looked at long-term outcomes. Fewer still have discussed reunions and kinship with controversy over firstly, the longevity of reunions, and secondly, what such reunions might engender regarding the relative kinship statuses of adoptive and birth families. This paper critically discusses the existing literature on reunions and kinship, and then reports on the long-term outcomes of 200 ‘matches’ on the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland between 1996–2006, presenting qualitative detail from the 75 respondents who completed questionnaires and sent in stories. The paper invites us to think about how adoption can form an adoptive family and deform a birth family, and how adoption reunions re-form both and everyone included. However, it will especially focus on what a coming together of two people separated by adoption means for the way that they frame their relationship with each other and those around them.

Keywords: adoption reunions; kinship

1. Introduction

There is a growing amount of literature on adoption reunions ([March 2014](#))¹. As can be expected in a relatively new body of knowledge, certain areas and concerns have dominated, with consequent gaps in our understanding. The experiences of adopted people have traditionally made up most of the literature ([Baden and Wiley 2007](#)), followed by those of birth mothers ([Evan Donaldson Institute 2006](#)), adoptive mothers ([Feast et al. 2011](#)), and then, far back in the field, birth fathers ([Passmore and Feeney 2009](#)), adoptive fathers ([Feast et al. 2011](#)), and other birth relatives such as siblings ([O’Neill et al. 2018](#)). Other gaps include perspectives from within sets of reunions, e.g., the experiences of both the birth mother and the adopted person ([March 1997](#)). A dearth of knowledge also exists in relation to the time frames for explorations of the reunion process. Most studies have focussed on the experiences of the early weeks and months. A small minority of studies have explored longer outcomes ([Browning and Duncan 2005](#); [Howe and Feast 2001](#); [March 2015](#)).

This paper explores the long-term outcomes of reunions, and has a specific focus on kinship that examines debates surrounding the identity and status of birth family members, especially birth mothers, and the nature of the ‘new-found’ relationship between adopted adult and birth mother.

For decades, writers and scholars have been struggling with what sort of kinship is formed when adoptions take place. Kirk’s notion of adoptive families as different, neither the same as families created

¹ The word ‘reunion’ will be used here for ease of flow; however, its usage is discussed later. Secondly, the adoption reunions that are referred to in this paper are those that have involved the ‘closed’, mostly infant, adoptions of the 20th century, and are not related to the contemporary adoptions of children from state care.

by biology, nor more deficient than the latter (Kirk 1964), has been lastingly influential. With the rise of studies of adoption reunions, the meaning of adoption has come to the fore again. Is the adoption of a child a legal change of kinship relations (Jones and Hackett 2012)? Is it a temporary occlusion of birth relations, a question concretely posed when adoption reunions occur (Robinson 2002)? Does adoptive family life create indissoluble kinship ties that suggest a hierarchy of kinship relations with some families that are deemed to be ‘primary’ (the adoptive family) and others (birth family) secondary (Browning and Duncan 2005)? Do the emotions released in some reunions indicate the strength of a persistence of biological ties (Verrier 1993)? Are these complementary emotions (Verrier 1993)? Adoption reunions raise these issues (Leinaweaver 2018). This paper offers a contribution to the debates by reviewing the literature with a specific eye on kinship discussions, and shares the relevant insights from a study of long-term outcomes of adoption reunions.

2. Adoption Reunions: An Overview

The reunion of birth parent and adoptee constructs an unparalleled relationship, and is truly, *sui generis*, a totally unique emotional experience (Bailey and Giddens 2001, p. viii).

A first thing to be noted is that most writings have come out of the experiences of ‘first flushes’, the early days after adopted people and birth mothers have met (Browning and Duncan 2005). Another observation is that there are considerable disagreements about reunions, some of which relate to the first point, that it might be too early to assess their value (Cavoukian 2005), and about whether or not the relationships that are formed at the point of reunion will endure (Carsten 2000).

Various measurements have been applied to determine adoption reunion outcomes. Sachdev’s measures are often cited to determine successfulness: how often meetings took place (frequency), the nature of the initial relationship and changes over time (intensity), the degree of satisfaction with the relationship, and overall feelings of accomplishment within the relationship (Sachdev 1992). Overall, the literature relates mostly to adopted people, and this seems occupied with two main themes. The first theme is that the reunion outcome is defined as a success, because no matter how the relationship turns out, the meeting with the birth mother was worthwhile in itself for the assuagement of curiosity, access to medical information, and acquiring the “story” of their conception and birth so as to “complete the jigsaw” and develop a more cohesive sense of identity (Browning and Duncan 2005; Howe and Feast 2003). The other theme relates to, in the event of continuing contact, the meaning and definition of subsequent relationships with birth families. As we shall see when we look at work relating to the experiences of the different parties in an adoption reunion and how this relates to familial ties, issues of time (significance of time spent in, and with, the adoptive family, time spent pre and post-birth with the birth mother, time spent in a relationship after reunion), hierarchies of families, and notions of the psychobiology of parental and filial ties recur. An interesting feature of the bulk of the literature is that it is taken up with the dynamics of the dyad of the adopted person and birth mother (Evan Donaldson Institute 2006), and neglects the other parties that are invariably involved in the coming together of two adults (e.g., their respective families, Müller et al. 2003). One thing seems settled: adoption is a process and not an event, and in keeping with this, the negotiations that follow a reunion are also likely to be a lifelong process for all involved (Browning and Duncan 2005).

As for kinship issues, it is difficult to find a substantial body of work compared to the vast amount of reunion-related literature that deals with the experiences, motivations, and feelings of the various parties. The next discussion identifies and examines the key threads in the extant literature.

3. Adopted People: The Question of Kinship Relationships with their Birth Parents

The work of Modell (1994, 1997, 2002), Carsten (2000), and Melosh (2002) represent an influential—and sceptical—perspective on adoption reunion outcomes and the (re)formation of kinship ties insofar as these writers argue that at the point of reunion, there ought to be no promise of the (re)establishment of kinship between the adopted person and their birth mother, as is often depicted in popular media accounts.

For Modell, adoption as practiced in the Western world provides a lens through which it may be seen that all kinship is made or constructed, rather than the product of biology or blood relations. In this sense, she argues, relationships created by adoption are not *sui generis*, or givens; rather, they are “made” (Modell 2002). Modell goes on to, I would argue, set up a straw man. This is that the relationships formed from reunions do not approximate that of parent–child, and at best, the biological parent (mother) might develop a role along the lines of “favourite aunt”, or relative in general rather than a parent in particular (Modell 1997, p. 58). The straw man to be knocked down, I suggest, is that of the reunion as re-igniting kinship ties between the parties and displacing the adoptive parents in some hierarchy of parenthood. Perhaps this was a reaction to the literature on reunions in the 1980s and 1990s that, mostly from a birth mother perspective, celebrated a “coming home” of their adopted out sons and daughters (Hughes 1995), and is also exemplified in adopted adults’ accounts: “I immediately felt a kinship with her that had no parallel in my adoptive family”, (quoted in McCollm 1993, p. 203).

Carsten’s paper discussed her study of 13 adopted people who had met their birth parents in the “relatively recent past” (Carsten 2000, p. 688), and concluded that, “In just a few cases, my informants described being able to establish some kind of harmonious relations with their birth kin”, (Carsten 2000, p. 690), and observed that, “In the majority of cases, I would say that these relations had a doomed quality about them” (Carsten 2000, p. 691). In addition to the limitations that Carsten’s sample is too small to talk of majorities and there were no experiences of long-term outcomes on which to draw, there are a number of additional observations that engage with issues not already referred to in the discussion of Modell’s paper. The first is the comment that Carsten’s respondents had a “strong disavowal of the notion that, in the absence of such sustained nurturing, there is an automatic bond of kinship given by the fact of birth . . . interviewees strongly assert the values of care and effort that go into the creation of kin ties... In the context of adoption, birth does not imply certainty or endurance or solidarity” (p. 691). This reference to the “fact of birth” somewhat downplays the relation between mother and child that is formed during pregnancy. It also neglects that for most birth mothers, there was contact between themselves and their baby following the birth, and this carries significance of a relational nature not only for birth mothers, but also for adopted people (see for example, the words of ‘Ethan’ in Browning: “We didn’t have a relationship for the first 20 years of my life, but we did have a relationship for the first nine months”, (Browning 2005, p. 124). To return to Modell, it is suggested that the diminution of the birth mother–child tie is present in her comments about the adopted people in her study that had met their birth mothers: “the thinness of a purely biological relationship became apparent” (Modell 1994, p. 164).

Fonesca pointed to the way that official and judicial adoption processes can marginalise the birth mother and terms this “de-kinning” (Fonseca 2011, p. 307); minimising birth mothers’ birth and the surrounding experiences is a common feature of many accounts of birth mothers (Kenny et al. 2012). Carlis pointed out that, “It is widely accepted in both traditional and contemporary psychological research that the earliest relationship does not begin at birth” but rather before, and this is a two-way phenomenon (Carlis 2015, p. 246). Carlis quoted Verny: “The unborn child is a feeling, remembering, aware being”, and that the “nine months between conception and birth molds and shapes personality, drives, and ambitions in very important ways” (Vernay 1981, p. 15). This is in alignment with the more populist work of Nancy Verrier that posits adoption as a primal wound that separates birth mother and adopted child, resulting in the lifelong urge to mend this and re-establish ties (Verrier 1993).

Melosh is the third of the writers from the sceptical ‘camp’ on adoption reunions and kinship relationships that includes Modell’s views that “love does not play a central part in the enduring solidarity between adoptee and birth parent” (1997, p. 63), and the best that might be is possibly that of favourite aunt/niece/nephew relationship and Carsten’s ‘doomed’-ness. Melosh’s view is bleak: “reunited kin do not establish close or sustained relationships . . . Rarely do reunions result in radically reconstituted families . . . Faced with the daunting prospect of assuming all the mutual obligations associated with two sets of kin, many adopted persons back off” (Melosh 2002, p. 252). Again, there is a feeling of tilting at windmills here with the declaration that reunions do not result in “radically

reconstituted families". Howe and Feast provide another example of answering a question that was not articulated when in their study of long-term outcomes of reunions, they observe that adopted people's "primary relationship was still with their adoptive mother" (Howe and Feast 2001, p. 364).

This group of sceptical views towards ideas of birth family kinship ties rekindled by reunion rests on the argument that "Ties to birth kin required time as a necessary but not in itself sufficient input to establish themselves" (Carsten 2000, p. 693). The expenditure of time and effort, the "steady accumulation of everyday events" (p. 697), it is argued, is what creates kinship, and this is not bestowed by biology alone.

So, what does the literature tell us about the kinship and the biologically related parties in adoption reunions?

4. Birth Parents: The Question of Kinship Relationships with their Adopted Child

The literature on birth parents in adoption is increasing, and in the main, it has concentrated on birth mothers. The 300-page report by Kenny et al. (2012) offers one of the more recent and useful reviews of pre-1980s adoption, and includes a study of over 500 birth mothers' experiences. The report spans over 30 years of writing on the issue, and in the discussion of birth mothers, concludes and echoes all of the previous literature: the birth mother experience is chiefly characterised by abiding emotions of grief and loss that deeply affected their lives and those around them, and that their (adopted) child is rarely far from their thoughts. This is echoed in a major United States (USA) review of research relating to the experiences of birth mothers that concludes "research on birth parents in the era of confidential (closed) adoptions suggests a significant proportion struggled—and sometimes continue to struggle—with chronic, unresolved grief" (Evan Donaldson Institute 2006, p. 5). Similar emotions have been found in the few studies of birth father experiences (Clapton 2003).

4.1. Birth Mothers

It seems axiomatic from the literature that birth mothers will feel that they have a kinship connection with their adopted child. This is based on not only the blood relation that they have, but also the period between conception and adoption when they carried their child and, in most cases, had contact with them that may have included nursing and care. Comments abound relating to the problems and solutions to the question of how many children a birth mother has and the dilemmas this poses (Battalen et al. 2018), but also the commonly expressed need to include the adopted child as in "there are three children in my family" (when the first of the three has been adopted; see for example Council of Irish Adoption Agencies (2012)). This declaration of felt familial ties can be found in both the birth mother and birth father literature (Clapton 2003). Another constant feature of the literature is the frequency in which the issue of whether a birth parent is a mother or a mum (or father or dad), and this too seems to have been settled in that birth parents acknowledge that whilst they are the mother, they are not "the mum" (Kelly 2006). See Passmore and Coles (2009) on fathers: "I would love her to call me Dad, but I haven't earned that right" (p. 6).

What of the few studies of long-term outcomes of reunions for birth mothers, and what can they tell us about kinship connections once contact with their child-as-adult develops (or not)? In the study by Kenny et al., 80% of the mothers had been in contact with their adopted child for over 10 years. When asked to describe the type of contact they had with their son or daughter, almost two-thirds of mothers said they had "an ongoing relationship (64%); however, one-quarter of mothers said that although they had met their son or daughter, they did not have an ongoing relationship" (Kenny et al. 2012, p. 56). In another study of the experiences of 33 birth mothers in reunions up to 12 years old, which is "long past the honeymoon stage in their reunion relationship" (March 2015, p. 110), March discusses the conflict experienced by mothers who had a felt bond with the infant they had relinquished for adoption and contact with their adult son or daughter. March saw the conflict arising from a disconnect between the birth mother's belief in the "essentialism of motherhood" from which they had derived a sense of a lifelong bond with their baby (p. 114) and meeting an adult

stranger. This disconnect has to be negotiated if the contact between them is to develop. Although 28 of the mothers in March's study were in a relationship with their son or daughter, there was considerable differences in how these relations were viewed, from "sporadic" to similar to that of a "mother-child", with the majority describing the relationship as a "friendship" (p. 115). When asked how they saw their role, March quoted one mother who exemplified the majority: "My family is complete now. But, for me, it's not exactly a parental role. She sees us as family. That's how I think of us and our relationship. But, she has another family, too" (p. 118). So, two families, two sets of kinship relations? March concluded that whilst adoptive family kinship ties are a matter of history, present, and future, and as such are more or less set in stone, ties that birth mothers form with their adult children after reunion are experienced as provisional (there is "boundary ambiguity") in that the relationship formed at reunion could cease at any time.

4.2. Birth Fathers

Clapton (2003) and Coles (2011) pointed to instances of men "holding their child in mind" and, similar to birth mothers, dealing with the dilemma of being asked how many children they have. In Clapton's study, a number of the birth fathers had meetings with their (now adult) sons and daughters, and according to them, they were in the process of establishing relationships with each other. However, as indicated earlier, they respected the difference between themselves ("I didn't bring her up, her dad did, I'm her father"). Half of the men in one of the very few studies that has looked specifically at the reunions of birth fathers and their adopted children reported that they "had established a reasonably close relationship with their relinquished child, though more described it as a family relationship" (Passmore and Coles 2009, p. 7). The reference to "family relationship" was not explored any further, although the writers went on to note that in relation to the question of biological and social father, "these roles did converge for some birth fathers as the reunions progressed" (p. 8).

Hughes (2016) cited one of her birth father respondents as offering his adopted daughter "a safe space in which she could explore her genealogy and form her story". She goes on, "But the idea of exploration is markedly different from notions of 'homecoming' and *hierarchies of kinship systems* and knowledge to which the canon is committed" (p. 162—emphasis added). Here, Hughes implicitly critiqued both the notion of a reunion as a 'homecoming'—there had never been a physical connection between the birth father and adopted daughter, but she also referred to hierarchies of kinship systems that do not fit the relationships formed with birth fathers, and also siblings. This suggests that reunions with birth fathers (and those with siblings) both disrupt any fixed essentialist ideas of kinship between adoptive people and birth mothers, but also poses the question, as Hughes did, of the helpfulness of ideas of kinship hierarchies.

This brief overview of adoption reunions and kinship raises two central issues. The first relates to kinship in adoption as requiring time and effort, on which the emergent literature on long-term reunions might shed more light. The second refers to the notion of hierarchies, which is a more contested and sensitive matter.

4.3. Time

If kinship consists of time and effort, what happens to the relationships borne out of 'reunion' that continue for 10 years or more? Do these not (because of time/work) make this 'new' kinship earned and therefore real? On the other hand, without the daily work of mutual transmission of kinship and its memories, is the gap between birth and 'reunion' unfillable for adopted adults and their birth mothers? What happens when the amount of time spent in a post-reunion relationship is the same or longer than the time spent separated, creating another 'past' (though not as lengthy as that of adopted persons and their adopted parents)? Are the views of Modell, Carsten, and Melosh premature and speculative, because the reunions that were explored in their studies had been relatively short-term in duration?

Bergin speculated that the rule rather than exception is that post-reunion relationships benefit from the passage of time. She suggests that less than one year represents very little time in which to develop a relationship: “After three years, and more realistically around five or six, significant turning points are reached, and a sense of resolution may ensue for both parties”). Browning countered: “The idea that growing a shared history resolves all issues falls short in terms of the experiences presented in this study” (Browning 2005, p. 190). Indeed, Cavoukian (2005) argued that if a more longitudinal approach was taken, it might be found that many reunions will not continue on to become relationships. However, much of the work on long-term outcomes suggests the opposite.

Throughout the 2000s, a number of studies appeared and supported the finding of continuity of relationships after contact. Howe and Feast (2001) surveyed the experiences of 48 adopted people whose first meeting with their birth mothers was at least eight years previous, and found that 65% were still in touch with each other. Triseliotis et al. (2005) found an even higher percentage of successful relationships when they asked 93 birth mothers (70%). Kelly researched the experiences of 10 birth mothers contacted by their adopted children (as adults), and in eight cases, they were still in touch with the adopted person, although most of these relationships were under two years in length (Kelly 2006). In a large study, Sullivan and Lathrop (2004) surveyed the views and experiences of 575 birth parents and 432 adopted people who had been in touch with each other for between 12–20 months. When asked about their expectations of ongoing contact, 94% of birth parents and 91% of adopted people said that they expected to sustain a relationship. However, does ‘ongoing’ contact, being ‘in touch’ mean the (re)establishment of kinship ties?

Despite her reservations about the limitations of “growing a shared history”, Browning (2005) chronicled invitations to join birth family gatherings that situate the adopted person as “a family member amongst the wider kin network”. By this means, “they are often treated no differently from other family members. In this instance, the adoptee is in a ‘family’ situation” (p. 117). Browning’s respondents were explicit about the nature of the relationships that have developed with their birth families: “I fit, I belong” (Browning 2005, p. 106). For ‘Maia’, “hearing family stories made her feel as if she had a ‘lineage’ (p. 169), “everybody’s just kind of relaxed and I’m part of the fold” (pp. 169–70).

Browning’s reservations were made clear when she stopped short of considering these family situations and the kinship ties that they evoked to be on a par with that of adoptive families: “... all others considered their birth parents to be ‘like extended family’, an aunt, uncle, closer than good friends, but not as close as Mum and Dad” (p. 170). She concluded that her findings “support the idea that social and biological relatedness are complementary rather than imply one is more important than the other” (p. 63–64). Although she employs the ‘primary’ nomenclature as in here: “The participants in this study have shed light on this question by illuminating the importance of a sense of genetic relatedness and identifying with similarities and likeness. However, by retaining a primary relationship with their adoptive parents, they have also highlighted that the social ties forged in childhood, and a shared history, are more important” (p. 194), she also opens a door to a revised model. This model is something closer to the adoptive family being primary, and the birth family being secondary additions when she comments: “It is clear too that biological relatedness with the birth family is more than a set of rediscovered relationships” (p. 194).

This status issue of adoptive family and birth family will now be explored.

4.4. Primary or Secondary Family?

The conclusion that is common throughout the literature is that the adoptive family is ‘primary’ and the re-discovered birth family is ‘secondary’ or just not primary. In other words, as posed in the discussion of Modell et al., there is a suggestion of a hierarchy of families, including ideas about their fixed order being disrupted by reunions. Jones (2008) argued against a binary (primary/secondary) approach to familial relationships by suggesting that it is possible for both biological and adoptive kinship to be experienced as real and enduring, fictive and fragile. She concluded that all forms of kinship are fictive in the sense that they are made and remade over time and have the ability to endure

or be lost (2008, p. 201 cited in [Logan 2013](#)). This opens the way to thinking about the quality of adoptive person–birth family relationships when seen over the long-term, and suggests that there may come a point where quantity becomes quality; that is, in long-lasting reunions, the primary/secondary hierarchy may shift, not to displace the adoptive family, but to become a *horizontal* set of families and familial relationships that are different but equally valued.

Anthropologist [Yngvesson \(2007\)](#) wrote about people who have been adopted transnationally and their reunions with birth families, and discussed the concept of ‘plasticity’ in relation to understanding and recalibrating kinship in adoption in terms of its helpfulness in transcending the “biogenetic versus adoptive” debates. She argued that “biogenetic kinship is both realized and complicated through what begins as a search for or ‘return’ to origins” (p. 571) by the adopted person. A reconfiguring of kinship inevitably takes place in reunions: “This refiguring reaches back to rework the past and reaches forward to construct the future, as well as stretching ‘across’ the national borders that transnational adoption has both secured and unsettled over the past half-century. Refiguring both incorporates familiar dichotomies of Euro-American idiomatic kinship (“nature” versus “nurture”; “blood” versus “law”; “biogenetic” versus “adoptive” families) and reworks them in ways that have the potential to create new forms of consciousness as well as transform everyday practices of relatedness” (p. 576). This idea of plasticity posits new forms of consciousness and transformed practices of relatedness that may transcend the binary unhelpfulness of categories such as primary/secondary families.

So, as discussed, we can surmise from the literature that whilst our knowledge of the reunion experience is growing, less research has explored the long-term outcomes of reunions, and very little research on reunion outcomes has focussed on what kind of kinship has developed, if any ([Logan 2013](#)).

5. Our Study

Our study was by means of a four page, semi-structured questionnaire containing 13 questions for adults that had been involved in an adoption reunion. The limitations of data gathering by the mail-out of questionnaires have been well rehearsed. These include a reduced ability to explore sensitive issues, poor response rates, and a tendency for non-reply from those who have not had a positive view or experience of the matter being studied ([Denscombe 2014](#)). Another limitation was that because of the predominance of studies of reunions that were under 10 years old ([Browning and Duncan 2005](#)), we chose to look at reunions that were at least 10 years old with the consequent possibility that the people who had been involved in these reunions may have moved address. The choice of length of time since the reunion was made on the basis that very few of the existing studies of long-term outcomes had looked at those of this age. Finally, regarding the limitations and influences governing questionnaire content and data analysis, the author has over 20 years of conducting research on the topic of adoption, 40 years as a practitioner, and 50 years of being a birth father. This lived experience necessarily informs my approaches. As a counterpoint to this, a birth mother and adopted person assisted in the drafting of the questionnaire, and in this sense, a member of each of the categories most directly involved in reunions was instrumental in content design.

Over 220 links that had taken place via the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland² were identified between 1996–2006 (i.e., at least 10 years old with some being over 20 years since link)³. The paper work was then sifted and inadvisable contact links were removed from the sample, e.g., those that had ended in severe acrimony and had no wish for further contact. This resulted in a settled sample of 203 links, and a list of names and addresses was compiled, resulting in 405 separate sets of names and

² A database where expressions of mutual wishes for contact are held and at the point when the second party registers, a ‘link’ occurs and both registrants are placed in contact with each other. This mutuality dimension provides another possible limitation on the findings in that the responses are all from a population that, at least at the point of registration, shared a wish to meet each other.

³ It should be remembered that the adoptions involved in this study date from the pre-1980s period of ‘closed’ adoptions in which there was no adoptive parent–birth parent contact post-adoption.

addresses. For reasons of survey mail-out complexities (e.g., having to include a USA-stamped and addressed return envelope), non-United Kingdom (UK) addresses were omitted. In total, we sent out a covering letter, the questionnaire, and a stamped return envelope to 368 people.

6. The Findings

The study findings are in two parts. The findings from the first part, which focusses upon the value of using the Adoption Contact Register, have been reported and published elsewhere ([Clapton 2018](#)). The second part gives in-depth voice to those who responded to our questionnaire, and is discussed here. We received 75 replies to our mail-out. We believe that over 20% is a successful rate of return, given that the links in our study were at least 10 years old, and some were from 20 years before. Many letters were returned ‘address unknown’ or ‘addressee gone away’. However, those that did come back arrived in all sorts of ways. We received photographs, short notes, lengthy covering letters, follow-up emails, and a dutifully completed questionnaire. Due to the uneven nature of people’s circumstances—e.g., some birth parents were deceased, they and other parties could not be found or declined to respond—there were very few returns from both parties in the initial link.

The following is drawn from three central questions that invited qualitative responses: “What happened after the link, did contact continue onwards or did it cease? What has happened in the ensuing years, does contact exist and what does it consist of? Did contact cease, and why?” These were followed by an invitation to say more, which was taken up by 58 of the 75 that replied. A specific relevance to kinship has been sought in the data.

Of the 75 returns, 58 were indicative of the continuation of a relationship). The following are exemplary extracts from the accounts of adopted people and birth mothers, and are discussed in turn.

6.1. *Adopted People, Kinship, and the Long-Term Outcomes of Reunions*

A large majority (37/40) of the links of adopted people with birth mothers continued onwards from the first meeting, and remained “in touch” with one another⁴. Eighteen reported that both parties participated in each other’s family events such as weddings, described contact as regular, and talked of “being in each other’s lives” and meetings with wider family in other parts of the world.

One respondent was jubilant:

“I see my birth mum as much as possible, we have an amazing relationship. It has been 17 years now and I feel like I have known her all my life. I treat her like a mother and I treat my step dad, B., like a father. It couldn’t have gone better for us. We meet up at least every two months and I stay at their house in Yorkshire for weeks at a time. We are very alike in a lot of ways. My kids, who are 13 and 15 have always known S. and B. as their Grandparents 100%. My husband is also very close to them both.”

Being in each other’s lives meant a variety of what resembles kinship work: “We shared some very poignant experiences together, for example the death of my (birth) grandfather when I felt I was at last able to be a daughter to my father and support him and my (birth) grandmother”. Some are as decisive about having found a family: “we have become a family 18 years on”, “there is a great bond between us all”. The endorsement by children was also interesting: “My children are very accepting and consider it normal to have three sets of grandparents”. Greater self-knowledge was bound up with the recognition of familial traits: “I know myself so much better now from knowing my father and grandparents. Being able to recognise familial traits has meant so much to me now that they, my birth family, have gone”.

For one of those reunions where contact had ceased, there was an account that was painful to read:

⁴ 29 women and 11 men. Space precludes fuller demographic description of e.g., age, marital, and parental status.

“Got on with mother but sister was jealous, a nightmare. Mother was weak, sister had power over her so I told them to stick it. Time later was asked back, told sister sorry. Stupid me went back. In that time father died. As older brother, I helped them. Found out my brother getting married but I was not invited. I confronted my mother, knew it was my sister’s doing. Told them it’s over and they disgust me. Total waste of time, they’re dead to me.”

Arguably, this is not so much a failed reunion as more a complex account of kinship matters, notwithstanding the negative outcomes. If our questionnaire had been more pursuant of these, or if we had the opportunity to interview this man, he might have agreed that his found family were kin to him (as well as ‘dead to him’).

Other expressions of loss were present: “With the highs of ‘reunion’ also comes deep feeling of loss at the life you didn’t have with the people you were meant to be with”. There is also regret: “My birth mother is now in a home with dementia and I can only visit infrequently, but I am in contact. My sister has emigrated to Florida, but we are in touch and have been out to stay. I feel we are a family although maybe not as close as we would have been if brought up together”. Also, given the time span covered by the study with some reunions having first taken place over 20 years ago, and involving mature adults, deaths feature: “I am certain that if my sister was still alive, we would be in constant touch. Found we had many things in common, felt I at last ‘belonged’. My brother welcomed me too, but he died in Australia—met him and stayed with him on two occasions. Discovered many similarities—genetically too”. One respondent updated her questionnaire response to add that she had been left a legacy by a member of her birth family.

The comments about destiny, loss, and regret also sit alongside a point made frequently, which is that, “Obviously my adoptive parents will always be my parents”. Another respondent made a comment about terminology relating to when she met her birth mother, and it is often found in the literature: “My mum is the lady who chose to have me and has brought me up”.

A ‘provisional’ quality was detected in the nature of one or two of these relationships, with one woman wondering: “It would be interesting to find out what my birth mother’s relationship with me is. I have never had the courage to ask this”. This emerges more in birth mothers’ accounts below.

Overall, it seems that contrary to any notions of a tailing-off contact, for the adopted people in this study, the majority of relationships that began at reunion continued, and closely approximated those in the lives of non-adopted people in that they became involved in the births, marriages, and deaths of their birth families.

6.2. Birth Mothers, Kinship, and the Long-Term Outcomes of Reunions

Unlike the positive reports from the majority of adopted people, birth mothers’ accounts and assessments were more varied. Ten mothers reported that the link with their child had developed into a satisfying relationship ranging from absolute pleasure (“in each other’s lives”) to regular meetings and contact between both sets of family members. Five mothers reported a mixture of “positive/mixed” feelings. These were the result of post-link relationships levelling off to occasional contact by email or Facebook. Six mothers were unhappy, and reported the link and subsequent experience to have been a negative one.

The mixture of mixed feelings or dissatisfaction was the result of the cessation or dwindling of relationships where it had been expected that these would continue. Those relationships that endured produced a mix of accounts that conveyed familiarity in all senses of the word:

“It is a good feeling to know that my daughter comes and goes freely to my house and she doesn’t feel left out. We remember to include her in everything and I see her about every three weeks”.

and:

“My son met my sister and husband on several occasions. As time passed we met just the two of us, fairly often. We shared a lot of views about life and philosophy. After about five

years, our contact diminished and he became understandably more engaged with his young daughter. I anticipated this development and always took the view that this was not only appropriate but was representative of the rhythm of normal family life."

Expressions of a sense of kinship are often demonstrated with reference to other (birth) family members: "My whole family welcomed my daughter with open arms. She was introduced to my husband (not her father), my two daughters, my sister, brothers, aunts, cousins, friends, and people in the small village where we live. And, of course my mother—my father had by this time passed but he knew about her beforehand". And: "My son is a good uncle to my daughter's two children and a good brother to my daughter—they are very close." A sense of joining up comes over in one account: "My family were delighted to welcome her to our family and so very pleased that our relationship is as close as if we had never been apart. I always told my spouse and friends that I had had a daughter adopted. My spouse could not love her more". An endorsement by a birth mother's children echoes that of the children of adopted person cited above: "When I told my sons the news in 2001 one said: "That's great mum, I've always wanted a sister!" Both boys have become close to their half-sister".

Some these relationships had a provisional or delicate nature, even at a minimum of 10 years after first contact emerged. Some mothers reported insufficient contact in their relationships; others wrote of the relationship being subject to external and negative influences such as hostile partners. Still others wrote of bonds, but with differences: "We keep in touch at Christmas, but we have little in common. My family ethos is quite different to the one in which she was brought up. For example, I taught English, and she has poor literacy. I found her to be quite suspicious and lacking curiosity about the facets of her adoption. So, a strange bond exists, with little affection". Another mother wrote: "Contact is occasional, which is fine for both of us. We aren't close geographically, and transport is a problem. Generally, we keep in touch by mobile phone—he's abroad a lot. It's tricky, I think we are both aware of the awkwardness of the history. And we disagree strongly about politics and various other things. Have to tread carefully. And I'm still guilty about it".

This mother captures the awkwardness that is present more than a decade after first meeting her son, but she also expresses something about the long shadow in her life that was cast by adoption.

Of the seven siblings and two birth fathers who experienced links up to 20 years ago, three brothers or sisters reported that after meeting, contact was at a "minimal" level ("Met twice—text at Christmas and birthday but no other contact"), but one went on to add that, "Even though it's only Xmas cards, it's nice to know he's there. I always thought I was an only child so knowing I have a brother is comforting". Three other siblings were very happy after they had met their birth brothers or sisters, with one making an interesting point about terminologies: "I feel so lucky to have found an amazing brother and sister. We don't like to say half brother and half sister. From the first day we all met each other, we just clicked. My brother comes to visit once a year and I find it difficult when he leaves. My sister comes over once a year with her family and I have been to Texas and stayed for four weeks".

Of the two birth fathers that joined the survey, the first reported that he and his daughter often met, and were "now a part of each other's lives"; the daughter of the second father lives overseas, but visits him when she holidays in the UK and stays overnight along with her partner and their son.

So, as far as the birth mothers in this study are concerned, less of them compared to the adopted people reported satisfaction and longevity of post-reunion relationships. March's point about reunions causing a resurfacing of grief emotions for birth mothers, and thus experiences of ambiguity towards the event, may be relevant here ([March 2015](#)).

7. Discussion

7.1. *The Language of Adoption Reunions*

7.1.1. Reunion

“Reunion” is often used by professionals to describe the meetings between an adopted person and birth relatives. The widespread use of the term is also notable in the academic literature. A reunion between birth mother and her adopted child is arguably, in the physical sense, an accurate description, given that the birth mother carried the child for nine months, and may have cared for their baby in a mother and baby home for days and weeks. However, reunion applies much less to meetings with birth fathers and other birth relatives such as brothers and sisters. Neither is it a word in widespread use by adopted people to describe their meetings with birth parents. More importantly, the word “reunion” implies joining together again, and therefore imposes and raises expectations all round that may not be fulfilled (Clapton 2003; March 1997; Trinder et al. 2005). Interestingly, just two of the study’s 75 respondents used the word, and in one of these cases, quote marks were placed around it.

7.1.2. ‘Mum’ or ‘Mother’, ‘Half-Brother’/‘half-Sister’

One adopted woman wrote about her birth mother: “I didn’t feel anything for her as she is not my mum. My mum is the lady who chose to have me and has brought me up”. This echoed a familiar theme in the literature of the distinction between mums and mothers (Tattenbaum-Fine 2013). However, she was in a very small minority of the 37 adopted people who reported that they remained in a relationship with their birth families. The words “adoptive mum” and “birth mum” were often used, with one woman referring to her birth mother as “bio mum”. As also indicated in the literature on siblings’ relationships in reunions (O’Neill et al. 2018), there were very few complications in developing relationships between the adopted people and their birth brothers and sisters. Reports ranged from social media connections to “we have settled into being brother and sister as if we had grown up together”, with frequent uses of the word “half” as in “half-sister”. An interesting remark was made in one of the accounts about the wish to dissolve awkward nomenclature: “I feel so lucky to have found an amazing brother and sister. We don’t like to say half brother and half sister”.

7.2. *Kinship Ties: Displacement, Replacement, or Additional?*

Yngvesson (2007) challenged the long-standing viewpoint in adoption that “a child can only be one thing or the other and whose adoptability requires the cancellation of one identity, so that identity can be replaced by another” (p. 569). This paper has drawn attention to notions of displacement and hierarchies of primary and secondary families in the literature. On close examination of the dynamics of long-term adoption reunions, it has been found that displacement of the adoptive family by the birth family is extremely rare, and that what seems to be emerging are horizontal kinship networks whereby adoptive and birth families co-exist, to a greater or lesser extent for all parties. Although research has concentrated on the adopted person–birth mother dyad (Howe and Feast 2003), in reunions that continue down through the years, the role of siblings, birth grandparents, spouses, and the children of both parties has been neglected (Passmore and Feeney 2009). This research has uncovered that these groupings may play an instrumental part in the development and maintenance of kinship ties. They also may not.

We have also seen that long-lasting reunions produce a shared history of their own, and that whilst this does diminish the work of kinship involved in raising an adopted child, the relationships that develop after reunion can be as expressive of familial ties as any other.

8. Conclusions

The study of the adoption reunions discussed in this paper sheds greater light on the complex dynamics that are set into motion (or tapped into) when reunions occur. The accounts from the study

suggest that over the long-term, most reunions develop into some form of relationship that is neither a replacement for adopted persons nor as lacking in depth and meaning as simply that of “favourite aunt”. A binary approach to the kinship of primary family (adoptive) and secondary family (birth) seems an inadequate characterisation. This paper has suggested that ties of a more horizontal nature seem to be forming rather than any hierarchy, and when reunions are assessed over a lengthy period, it can be seen that for most, these ties deepen and develop a longevity that carries with it many expressions of kinship.

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