

## Durham Research Online

---

### Deposited in DRO:

10 May 2013

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Jones, C. and Hackett, S. (2012) 'Redefining family relationships following adoption : adoptive parents' perspectives on the changing nature of kinship between adoptees and birth relatives.', *British journal of social work.*, 42 (2). pp. 283-299.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr060>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

This is a pre-copy-editing author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *British journal of social work* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Jones, C. and Hackett, S. (2012) 'Redefining family relationships following adoption : adoptive parents' perspectives on the changing nature of kinship between adoptees and birth relatives.', *British journal of social work.*, 42 (2). pp. 283-299 is available online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr060>

### Additional information:

## Use policy

---

The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a [link](#) is made to the metadata record in DRO
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Please consult the [full DRO policy](#) for further details.

**TITLE: Redefining family relationships following adoption: adoptive parents' perspectives on the changing nature of kinship between adoptees and birth relatives.**

**AUTHORS:** Dr Christine Jones is Lecturer in Social Work at Durham University. She completed her PhD in 2009 and has produced from her doctoral research academic journal articles, a co-authored book and a book chapter focussing on post-adoption family relationships, contact and support. Dr Jones has recently joined Durham University following a one-year ESRC funded Postdoctoral Fellowship at Edinburgh University. She is also an adoptive parent. Contact details: School of Applied Social Sciences, Elvet Riverside 2, New Elvet, Durham, DH1 3JT, UK, [christine.jones@durham.ac.uk](mailto:christine.jones@durham.ac.uk)

Professor Simon Hackett is Deputy Head of Faculty (Research) at Durham University. Professor Hackett's research and publications over the last twelve years have focussed on professional responses designed to safeguard children's welfare. He is currently working, with Professor Helen Masson of the University of Huddersfield, on a large scale ESRC funded study of the outcomes of professional interventions with children and young people. Prior to working in a university setting, he was a practitioner in the child welfare field. Contact details: Faculty of Social Sciences and Health, Ground Floor EGG Building, Durham, DH1 3LE, UK, [simon.hackett@dur.ac.uk](mailto:simon.hackett@dur.ac.uk) Correspondence to the first author at the above address.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank all adoptive parents who contributed their stories to the research and the staff members within DFW Adoption who helped with the recruitment

of participants. They would also like to acknowledge the contribution of Helen Charnley, Lecturer in the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University and Margaret Bell, Practice Manager at DFW Adoption for their valuable input into the supervision of this doctoral study. Finally, thanks go to the Economic and Social Research Council and DFW Adoption for their financial support of the study.

## **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary child adoption in the UK and USA has been conceptualised as an extended kinship network of adopted children, birth relatives and adopters (Reitz and Watson, 1992; Grotevant and McRoy, 1998). This contrasts sharply with the traditional model of adoption as a form of family substitution. Yet, such a reconceptualisation raises many questions about the meaning of kinship for those involved. This paper draws on data from a series of biographical interviews with 22 parents who adopted children within the UK over a 24-year period in order to explore post adoption ‘family relationships’ from the perspective of adoptive parents. It develops an analysis of definitions of ‘kinship’ created by adoptive parents in order to shape family relationships following adoption, in particular, the processes through which birth relatives are rendered marginal or integral to adoptive family life. The relevance of current adoption policy and professional practices to these processes is explored.

**KEYWORDS:** Adoption, openness, kinship.

## INTRODUCTION

Great changes have taken place in the adoption of children within the UK and USA over the last thirty years. The model of domestic adoption as a form of family substitution has been replaced with an expectation of ongoing contact and openness between the adoptive and birth family. An emphasis has been placed on the dual connection of the adopted child to both adoptive family and birth family and the formation of “*a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child*” (Reitz and Watson, 1992, p11). Much adoption research to date has conceptualised adoption in terms of psychological adjustment. It has focused on the characteristics of adopted children, adopters and birth relatives and the influence of these on adoption outcomes. Relatively little attention has been paid to social or structural influences on adoptive family life. Recently however, sociological theories of family relationships have emerged that have the potential to provide fresh insights into contemporary adoptive family relationships and adoption practice. This paper draws on these theories to explore the definitions of kinship created by adoptive parents following the legal adoption of a child. It is concerned, in particular, with the role of adoptive parents in the crafting of post-adoption family relationships and the facilitative and constraining effects of professional practices on this process. The epistemological position taken within the paper is that adoption is both a legal reality and a socially constructed phenomenon achieved through co-production or active ‘work’ on the part of social actors. We begin with a brief outline of the key sociological work to which we refer before moving on to describe in more detail the study from which our data are drawn.

Within the sociological literature there has been a shift away from viewing 'the family' as a predefined and clearly demarcated structure and towards the conceptualisation of family as a fluid set of relationships that are created and recreated over time. Particularly influential in this shift were sociologists such as David Morgan, Carol Smart, Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason. Their analyses focus on the role of human agency in the creation of personal relationships, that is, the ability of individuals to make choices and act upon these (albeit within the context of cultural expectations and social structures). This throws into question conventional notions of what counts as 'family' and creates room for diverse forms of relatedness to emerge. An emphasis is placed on the meanings individuals attach to relationships and the creative abilities of individuals to craft family relationships. This contemporary work challenges the assumed inevitable connection between family and biological relatedness or co-residence. Families are no longer solely defined in terms of bloodlines or the marriage contract. Instead, an emphasis has been placed on the ability of individuals to define relationships as 'family' relationships regardless of biological relatedness or legal status. There is also a recognition of the fluidity and mobility of family relationships (Smart, 2007) and the role of negotiation in the process of family construction (Finch and Mason, 1993). This work builds on but also challenges the largely pessimistic predictions of family disintegration within individualization theory (Beck and Beck-Gernstein, 1995, 2002; Bauman, 2003). In contrast to individualization theory it emphasizes the continuing importance of 'connectedness' (Smart, 2007) and an ethic of care and commitment (Williams, 2004) within increasingly diverse family forms. Much of the sociological literature has focused on family relationships following divorce (Smart and Neale, 1999) and gay and lesbian

families or “families of choice” (Weston, 1991; Weeks *et al.*, 2001). The studies of ‘friends as family’ by Pahl and colleagues (Pahl, 2000; Pahl and Spencer, 2003) have also been influential. There has been little attention, however, to the relevance of these theoretical developments to adoptive family life.

## **METHODS**

The analysis developed in this paper draws on data generated through a series of in-depth biographical interviews with adoptive parents. 22 qualitative interviews were undertaken with 11 adoptive mothers and 11 adoptive fathers from 11 families. The participating adoptive parents had all adopted children from within the UK who were unrelated to them (known as ‘domestic stranger adoption’). All of the adoptive parents interviewed were married couples, all were White, and all had adopted through a voluntary adoption agency. A total of 23 children were adopted by these eleven couples between 1977 and 2001. The children’s ages at the time of the interviews ranged from 7 to 31 years old. Ten of the children had been adopted as babies having been ‘relinquished’ by birth parents, while the remaining thirteen had been adopted at slightly older ages having spent time in the public care system. Age at placement ranged from one week to eleven years old. All names used as identifiers in this paper are pseudonyms.

Following approval of the study by the Durham University ethics committee, adopters were recruited to the study through letters of invitation or as a consequence of adoptive parents responding to an advertisement placed in a local newspaper explaining the study and calling for research volunteers. Interviews undertaken with adoptive parents were intended to elicit narrative accounts of adoptive family life from before the placement of

eth child to the present day. With this in mind, a broad topic guide was developed and a series of prompt cards were used as visual cues during the interview. These cards contained key words or phrases such as 'family' and 'openness'. Adopters were also asked to choose a small selection of family photographs to talk about during the interview as a way of communicating key experiences throughout the adoptive family's lifecourse. Interviews were between 2 and 2.5 hours long and most took place in the adopters' homes.

The interviews generated rich dense texts, some of which were in story form and some of which were not and data were analysed both thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and narratively (Riessman, 1993; Plummer, 1995; Mason, 2002; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Narrative analysis of the texts involved, firstly, an examination of each transcript as a whole in order to identify changes over time and family processes. Attention was then paid to shorter narrative segments in order to explore language and the meaning conveyed through these accounts. Adopters' accounts were also examined in relation to the historical, cultural and social context of adoption and the circumstances of their production. The thematic analysis was assisted by the use of Nvivo software (version 8). The six stage process of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted: reading through transcripts several times to become familiar with the data, making notes of potential codes, themes and links to the research questions and existing literature; developing an initial coding frame in order to begin to interrogate the entire data set cross-sectionally; developing summaries of codes and organising these schematically in order to transform these into themes; collating data segments applicable

to each theme and moving back and forth between these and the transcripts to ensure that the themes adequately reflected the data and that all relevant data were coded. As the analysis progressed, some themes were revised or combined with others, some new ones emerged and more interpretive themes were also developed. A number of thematic maps were developed in order to move between these more abstract constructs and the concrete data. Through the continual process of writing, reading existing literature and reflecting on the data, an analysis was produced.

Given the first author's status as an adoptive parent, a reflexive diary was kept throughout data collection and analysis in order to make transparent the potential impact of personal experiences on the research process. Particular care was taken to ensure that initial interpretations were not taken as confirmation of personal perceptions but instead were used to raise new questions that could be interrogated through the data.

## **FINDINGS**

All adoptive parents who participated in the research, regardless of the year of adoption, type of adoption or contact arrangement were highly sensitive to the potential continuing significance of birth relatives for adoptees. For example, a woman who had adopted three older children from care described her feelings regarding this in the following way:

Nina: I knew that that link [between the adopted children and their birth family] would still be extremely strong.



This acknowledgement of birth relatives' continuing significance following adoption is perhaps unsurprising within contemporary adoptive families given the emphasis on openness within adoption policy and practice today. However, the same awareness was also evident amongst those who adopted children more than thirty years ago. An adoptive parent of two children adopted as infants through the traditional confidential system of adoption explained:

Theresa: From day one we've said if [our adopted children] want to look [their birth parents] up, we'll help, because I think you've more chance of keeping your kids if you help them, than saying 'oh you want to forget about them', you know. You've got to put yourself in their position, and I would want to do it.

Adopters referred to a number of practices that were central to adoptive family life and played a role in redefining kinship after adoption. These included:

- face-to-face meetings and telephone contact between adoptees, adopters and birth relatives;
- the exchange of gifts and written communications between adoptive and birth families;
- searching out birth relatives when adoptees reach adulthood;
- adoption-related conversations between adopters and adoptees; and
- the careful safekeeping of objects related to the birth family such as jewellery, photographs and other treasured possessions.

While some of these practices were formal arrangements put in place by adoption support agencies, others were less prescribed by adoption services and fell largely within the private realm of the family. A significant feature of adoptive family life, however, was the need to integrate these public and private practices into day-to-day family life.

In a previous paper, we focused on the ‘kinship work’ in which adoptive parents engage in order to *gain* and *maintain* a family relationship with adoptees; and *retain* the significance of birth relatives as family members within the adoptive family (Jones and Hackett, 2010). In this paper we focus on the challenges presented to adoptive parents when faced with the task of ‘redrawing the boundaries of kinship’ following adoption, specifically in cases where arrangements exist for ongoing contact between adopted children and birth relatives.

Eight of the children adopted by interviewees had some direct contact with birth siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles and in one case a birth parent as they were growing up. These were all children who had been adopted from local authority care. Twelve adopted children of interviewees, including some of those with direct contact, had experienced some indirect contact with birth relatives via an adoption support service. This group included both children who were ‘relinquished’ for adoption as babies and children adopted for care at an older age. The remainder of the paper draws on the accounts the seven adoptive fathers and seven adoptive mothers of fifteen children with post-adoption contact. The number of children with contact arrangements in place within each family

ranged from one to three and in several cases adoptive parents were in contact with more than one birth family.

### **Maintaining family ties between adoptees and birth relatives**

Adopters' accounts of direct and indirect contact with birth relatives suggested that family relationships between adoptees and birth relatives can be reinforced in a number of ways through such contact. For example, adopters viewed the sending of gifts and cards by birth relatives on special occasions as an expression of care and concern and, therefore, tangible evidence of continued family ties. This was particularly the case where birth relatives had maintained regular and consistent contact with an adopted child over a number of years. An adoptive parent whose children have 'letterbox' contact explained:

Cindy: '[the girls] have always had indirect contact with birth parents, and bearing in mind we've had them for 12 years now, their parents have never ever ceased to send birthday cards and presents, Easter cards and Easter eggs, Christmas cards and Christmas presents, religiously every year they have done it... I admire them for the fact that they've stuck with it for so long.

Adopters stressed the importance of the regularity, reliability, consistency and persistence of these gestures of care and concern. They appeared to appreciate such persistence given the difficult or uncomfortable nature of contact at times. An adoptive parent with direct contact with her adopted daughter's birth mother said:

Nina: '[Birth mother] is to be admired for allowing us to take [adopted daughter] there. How they do that! How you let your child walk in the house with someone else she's calling mother. And how you sit with this sort of middle-class woman sitting there telling your daughter not to eat that way or do something. I don't know how they do it. I mean, although I can see all her faults I admire her wholeheartedly for that.'

Face-to-face meetings were also seen as reinforcing family ties where these meetings made apparent physical similarities and shared traits between adoptees and birth relatives. One adopter speaking about her adopted son's contact with his birth sister said:

Cindy: It's funny as they've both got older they've become more and more alike, I mean ... she's got a brace on at the moment which [our adopted son is] going to have in another couple of years, so they've obviously got some similarities.

These physical similarities and shared traits became the subject of subsequent family discussions, which again appeared to reinforce the child's connection with birth relatives.

Finally, adoptive parents emphasised the importance of providing children with a sense of connection to family relationships that are dynamic. One adopter explained:

Simon: ... the names on the Christmas cards are ever growing, because [our adopted daughters have] got a brother and sister who are a fair bit older and both

brother and sister have got partners and children of their own so [our daughters] were over the moon when they found out they were aunts.

A view of kinship begins to emerge from these accounts that is constructed in terms of a number of key dimensions: care and concern; regularity and consistency; persistence and longevity; and shared affinities.

### **Sources of fragility within family relationships following adoption**

It appears that adoptive family practices can play an important role in acknowledging the continuing significance of birth relatives following adoption. However, adopters also frequently characterised relationships between adoptees and birth relatives following adoption as fragile. One source of fragility within post-adoptive kinship highlighted was the ambiguous nature of 'family' relationships following adoption. Speaking of her adopted daughter's experience of contact with her birth mother, an adoptive mother explained:

Nina: '... the first few times it was awful because [our adopted daughter] didn't believe she could love two people, you know, I have to love that mummy and not this mummy, because she was only seven or eight.'

The adoptive mother's description reveals the complexity of the task of constructing a version of kinship following adoption that is inclusive of both biological and adoptive kin where uncertainty exists concerning the relative status of birth mother and adoptive

mother in the new arrangement. The same ambiguity was apparent within ‘family’ relationships other than the mother/child relationship. One adopter described a situation that arose when contact ceased between her adopted children and their birth uncle following his divorce and move to a new area. Following this loss of contact with the uncle, contact between the adopted children and the uncle’s ex-wife, the children’s non-biological aunt, came under threat. This loss of contact was a source of concern as the uncle and aunt had cared for the children for a period of time before the children’s adoption and during their birth mother’s terminal illness. The adopter explained the dilemma facing herself and the children’s aunt in the following way:

Trisha: ... really [the children’s birth uncle] is the actual relative as it were... [Their aunt] always felt incredibly guilty about giving them up. But once [the children] seemed settled and they seemed happy enough [their aunt] said ‘I’m just going to fade out of the picture. You don’t want me hanging over you all the time’.

The adopter’s account conveys uncertainty about the relative value given to biological ties and legal family ties created through marriage or adoption. Also implicit in the adopters’ account is an expectation that only one set of relationships can thrive, while the others must wither away. This suggests that the model of adoption as ‘total substitution’ persists within the public consciousness. While a broad consensus has developed among adoption academics, policy makers and professionals that ‘openness’ in adoption is desirable, it appears that there is much more uncertainty about how this should be

achieved and the degree to which this should be a private or public matter. While public policy enables contact to take place it does little to recognise the complexity of the process of renegotiating the boundaries of kinship following adoption for all those involved.

The potential diversity and divergence of meanings attached to family relationships was evident within the account of another adoptive parent. She and her husband first adopted two daughters, both of whom had mediated contact with their birth parents. They then went on to adopt two boys from two other birth families who did not have contact with their birth parents creating a complex set of relationships. Speaking about her contact with her adopted daughters' birth family, the adoptive mother explained:

Cindy: ... it's usually mam who writes to me, puts a little note in for me, and on a couple of Christmases, they even sent a great big box of sweets for us to share as a family, and they sent [youngest adopted son] a present the first year [he] was living with us, until I wrote back to them saying 'it was very kind of you but [he's] nothing to do with you really so you don't need to send him any presents' (laughs), so they've been fine, and I'm pretty sure if we do meet up at some time, they'll be fine.

The adopter's account again highlights the personal and social ambiguity within such an arrangement. While the birth mother expanded her boundaries of kinship to include the new adoptive sibling of her birth daughters, the adoptive mother resisted such

inclusiveness. It also suggests a need for ongoing negotiation between the parties as relationships change and develop. Again policy and practice guidance does little to address such complexity.

Another source of fragility within post-adoption relationships identified by adopters was the loss of day-to-day intimacy and, related to this, the loss of current and intimate knowledge of family members following adoption. For example, an adoptive mother whose children had occasional face-to-face meetings and telephone contact with their birth grandmother said:

Trisha: Oh yeah we still speak to her a couple of times a year. But it's all very brief. She'll give the children a few seconds of her time and then she wants to talk to me... usually. I don't think it's that she doesn't want to speak to them, it's just that after so much conversation she's got nothing else to say to them. She doesn't really know what they're up to or what they're doing... but we make a point of ringing her up at Christmas and on their birthdays.

Adopters' accounts highlighted the active effort required to maintain family relationships where there is a loss of day-to-day contact. However, they also viewed this effort as a long term investment, recognizing the potential for the changing meaning of adoption as children's cognitive understanding develops (Brodzinsky *et al.*, 1984; Wolfs, 2008). One adoptive mother explained her son's growing awareness this way:



Cindy: We usually see [my adopted son's biological sister] during the summer holidays and go bowling or something and have a meal out together. But it's only this last year that [our adopted son's] started to understand who she is really. Because we used to say to him 'come on we're going to take you up to [local city] to see your sister', and you could see him thinking to himself 'well this is a bit stupid, I only have two sisters and they're here'. But I think he understands now that he has another sister who doesn't live here.

A further source of fragility in post-adoption family relationships highlighted by adopters was the need to manage any potential or perceived risk in the relationship between adopted children and birth relatives, particularly those birth relatives who have been assessed as unable to parent a child adequately and who may have ongoing mental health issues, drug or alcohol dependence or other vulnerabilities. The concepts of 'risk' and 'family' sat uneasily together for adoptive parents. A story told by an adoptive parent of older siblings adopted from care highlighted the contradictory nature of relationships where there are perceived risks. She said:

Sylvia: I remember the first Christmas birth Mum sent the presents... and I found it awful because [our social worker] said we'd have to go through them all, you know. She said 'open them all up and see what's in, in case there's anything in them that shouldn't be in them'.

This adopter's account juxtaposes the happy family event of gift giving at Christmas with the social worker's instructions to ensure that the children are not exposed to harm and this appears to throw into question the 'family' quality of the act of gift-giving. However, the nature of the risk perceived by the social worker seemed unclear to this adopter. While adopters were able to provide examples from the past of birth parents' perceived inadequacies in their parenting role (for example, not turning up for supervised contact or attending contact while drunk), their current risk to children through mediated contact appeared to be less clearly defined.

From adopters' accounts an increasingly rich picture of kinship emerges that encompasses intimate and current knowledge and a feeling of safety as well as expressions of care and concern, regularity, consistency and shared affinities. It appears, however, that the aspects on kinship emphasised by adoptive parents are those that are more easily achieved within adoptive families than between adopted children and birth families. Birth relatives who wish to promote intimacy, mutual knowledge or a sense of affinity, care and consistency are significantly disadvantaged given their physical separation from their adopted relative. While the key purposes of direct and indirect contact are considered to be maintaining significant relationships and providing adopted child with information about their adoption and their birth relatives (Neil, 2003) it appears that this goal must be achieved in the face of considerable ambiguity and fragility.

### **Supporting direct and mediated contact**

While practices such as direct and indirect contact provided a means of retaining some level of communication between adopted children and birth relatives, the data suggest that the maintenance of meaningful family relationships was not an inevitable outcome of such practices. Instead, adopters' accounts suggested that formal or professionally mediated contact arrangements raise many contradictions for adopters concerning the meaning and practice of kinship and can be experienced as "unfamily-like" or can amplify disconnections.

Mediated contact provided particular challenges to adoptive parents' understandings of kinship. Adopters' accounts suggested that the ability to acknowledge and promote dual connection for adopted children could be severely hindered by mediated contact as it is currently practiced. Adopters often referred to adoptees' struggles to know how to engage with birth relatives and vice versa. Where there was written, mediated contact between adoptive and birth relatives there was often an unequal exchange of information. While adopters wrote detailed letters updating birth relatives about events in the children's lives, these were usually only provided every twelve months. Adoptive families typically received cards from birth relatives containing a short message when it was the child's birthday or at Christmas and some received no response from birth relatives. This lack of a mutual exchange of information and photographs was a source of frustration for adopters. An adoptive father expressed a deep sense of regret about the lack of response from his adopted child's birth mother despite him writing an annual letter for several years saying:

Tim: ... she hasn't responded, so I've got nothing ... apart from the locket and the photograph, I've got nothing.

Another adopter of two older children said:

Orla: ... it annoys me that the letter box scheme was presumably set up for [the children's] benefit mostly and I don't think they're getting much of a benefit because we're not getting the letters back. It's [birth mother] who's getting a lot of the benefit, because I send a very detailed letter back that tells her exactly how they're doing.

Her husband also expressed frustration about the lack of current photographs from his adopted children's birth family. It appears that while adopters saw the potential for indirect contact to be an opportunity for birth relatives to express care and love towards the adopted children and for children to have current and meaningful information about birth relatives, this was not always achieved. Adopters' accounts also indicated that indirect contact often highlighted birth relatives' lack of intimate or current knowledge of children, for example, when birth relatives bought gifts for children that were inappropriate for their age or did not match their personal interests or expectations. Where this occurred they perceived relationships to be devalued and disconnection amplified:

Sylvia: They weren't really appropriate, because she hadn't moved on. She was still thinking that they were smaller than they were.

The birth mother's lack of current knowledge of the children's needs appeared to highlight for the adopter the inadequacies in the relationship between the birth mother and children rather than the enduring nature of these family ties. It appears that the way that indirect contact was practiced and mediated did not necessarily result in those involved being tuned into the relationship in the present.

While adopters drew attention to the thought and effort invested by birth relatives in maintaining family ties through the sending of cards and gifts, these expressions of affection were also perceived as potentially problematic. An adoptive mother of two older girls described the great care with which her adopted daughters' birth parents had written in gold letters "*our precious daughter*" on every greetings card sent to the children over the years. However, the meaning conveyed through such expressions was far from straightforward. The adopter said:

Cindy: If you saw some of the stuff, the cards, that they send them. They're the most sloppy, I don't know where they get them from, they're the most sloppy and sentimental cards you could ever imagine (laughs).

The adopter contrasts what she perceived as over-sentimentality with the children's adoption story which featured serious abuse at the hands of their birth father. The

difficult entwined histories of children and birth relatives were often foregrounded in adopters' narratives suggesting that the resolution of difficult past experiences was an important aspect of current and future family relationships. There was little evidence, however, of this being actively addressed by agencies supporting indirect contact between the adopted children and birth family.

The publicly managed nature of contact was also unsettling for some adopters. Some adopters' accounts contrasted the responsiveness and spontaneity of family relationships with the, often, mechanistic nature of letterbox services and, therefore, the 'unnatural' or 'unfamily-like' quality of contact. An adopter of older siblings explained that her adopted children regularly receive birthday and Christmas cards from birth relatives. Recently her adopted son had completed his GCSE examinations and the adoptive mother had included news of the child's exam success in her annual letter to his birth mother. The adoptive mother described her disappointment at the lack of acknowledgement of her adopted son's exam success by his birth family. She had hoped that her son would receive a congratulations card from his birth mother just as he had from members of his extended adoptive family. This story highlighted the inadequacy of formal, externally managed contact arrangements in supporting such spontaneity.

Adopters' accounts also highlighted inequalities in adopters' and birth relatives' opportunities to influence the reconstruction of kinship following adoption. Speaking of her experiences of mediated contact, one adopter said:

Cindy: ... we made a conscious decision that we wouldn't give [the gifts from birth relatives] to [our adopted children] at Christmas or on their birthday, we would do it a few days before hand, so they could get them, open them all up, and forget about them and we could have a normal Christmas.

While the adopter's intention may have been to make indirect contact less disruptive for the adoptive family and more appropriate for the children, her decision to open the gifts on a date further from the intended date of opening appears to remove some of the family significance from these objects. There is, therefore, a danger that the intended meaning of gifts and cards becomes distorted or lost altogether through the interventions of adoptive parents. . The role of the mediator, where there is no direct contact between the giver and the receiver of cards, gifts and letters, therefore, is highly important in order to avoid birth relatives becoming unnecessarily marginalised in such situations.

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that despite the great challenges of post-adoptive kinship described above, adopters persist with such arrangements. They appear to do so as they are anxious to act in the best interests of their adopted child and find the 'right' way to include birth relatives in day-to-day adoptive family life. Talking of a contact meeting between her adopted children and their birth relatives, an adopter said:

Orla: I think it was the right thing to do for [my adopted children] ... that's how I've tried to think.

However, adopters also expressed uncertainty about the 'right' place for birth relatives following adoption and the 'right' way to 'do family' following adoption. The answer to the question of the 'right' way to do adoptive kinship does not appear to be obvious from adoption policy and practice and adoptive parents expressed strongly their desire to avoid simply following professional prescriptions around contact and openness in adoption or, as one adopter put it, "*follow the latest orthodoxy*". This opens up the possibility for both great uncertainty and much creativity within family relationships following adoption.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. First, it is likely that adopters who are willing to participate in research such as this have a more open attitude to talking about adoption than adopters who are less willing to participate. This has implications for the transferability of the findings. In addition, adopters participating in the study were all white non-disabled married couples. The study, therefore, has little to say about black adoptive family life, gay and lesbian adoptive parenting, disabled adoptive parenting and single parent adoptive family life. Also, the study has focused specifically on adoptive parents' perspectives. Further research is needed in order to understand family relationships following adoption from the perspectives of children and birth relatives. Despite these limitations, however, the study throws light on some relatively unexplored aspects of adoptive family life.



Adopters' accounts seem to confirm the inappropriateness of a single model of adoption as the total substitution of one family with another. Rather, they suggest that a diverse range of relationships are possible following adoption. At the same time, adopters' accounts highlight the fragility of relationships between children and birth relatives, the ambiguous status of birth relatives within the new family arrangement and the lack of inevitability of a permanent connection between birth family and an adopted child following legal adoption. This suggests that biology alone is an insufficient basis for kinship following adoption.

The lack of inevitability of biological kinship and importance of permanence were central to Weston's thesis of lesbian and gay kinship and her concept of 'families we choose' (Weston, 1991). However, her analysis was concerned primarily with adult to adult relationships and adopters' accounts in the present study suggest a more complex process at work in family relationships between birth relatives and adopted children following adoption than merely the exercising of choice and achievement of permanence. In particular, choice as the central concept of adoptive kinship is problematic. The rhetoric of choice has a long history in adoption. Traditionally the explanation given to adoptees of their journey into adoption was as the 'chosen child'. However, the 'chosen child' analogy has been demonstrated to inaccurately capture the experience of those adopted as infants whose testimonies exposed the paradox that to be chosen by adopters relied on them being rejected by birth parents (Modell, 1994). Equally, the discourse of choice obscures the limits of autonomy placed on members of the adoption triad, especially in the case of adoptions of children from care. Weston's (1991) emphasis on mutuality and

reciprocity in order to maintain kinship also suggests an equality within relationships that is difficult to attain between members of the adoptive kinship network. Adopters' narratives intimate that the maintenance of kinship may be motivated as much by a sense of obligation as choice. For example, adopters described their continued effort to maintain indirect contact between their adopted children and birth family members despite this contact being one-way and their dissatisfaction with the arrangement as it was viewed as the 'right thing to do'. Placing choice as the central concept of kinship, therefore, is inappropriate as it does not adequately acknowledge the limits of agency within adoptive kinship and does not take account of the power imbalance between adults and children and between adopters, adoptees, birth family members and the state. Importantly, it pays little regard to the social and cultural barriers to kinship that exist and the moral framework in which it operates. Weston herself acknowledges the constraints of structural forces on agency in the closing pages of her book.

Adopters' accounts suggest a more complex picture of kinship characterised by intimate knowledge, spontaneity and responsiveness and a feeling of safety as well as expressions of care and concern, regularity, consistency and shared affinities. Above all the importance of the currency or present relevance of the relationship was stressed and 'permanence' was re-conceived as 'persistence'. While adopters' accounts suggest that family relationships between adoptees and birth relatives are not inevitable but are possible, they also reveal that these require a significant active investment of time and effort in order to facilitate, establish and maintain such relationships. This is a process that occurs not only in the immediate months following an adoption when professionals

are more closely involved, but is largely determined by the ongoing efforts and negotiations that take place throughout the adoptees' childhood and into adulthood. The importance of 'kinship time' has been highlighted by Carsten (2000) in her study of relationships following reunions between adult adoptees and birth relatives involved in confidential adoptions. The term refers to the sense of continuity of past, present and future that is a feature of kin relations and everyday kinship practices, a continuity that, Carsten suggests, is missing and difficult to regain for adoptees and birth relatives separated through confidential adoption. From the data, the concept of 'kinship time' appears to have relevance across a wider range of adoptive arrangements including adoptions from care and adoptions with ongoing contact. The "dislocations of kinship time" described by Carsten (2000, p.692) in the case of confidential adoptions are also perceived by adoptive parents as a feature of adoptive family life for some adopted children who have letterbox contact, especially where they receive occasional or inconsistent communications from birth relatives. Rather than providing a sense of continuity, adoptive parents perceive these arrangements and the relationships that result from them as lacking currency. Even in the case of adoptions with ongoing contact, therefore, achieving a sense of continuity of 'kinship time' provides considerable challenges to adoptive families.

It appears, also, that while the complexity of the task of renegotiating family boundaries following adoption is great, this is often undertaken by adoptive families largely without direct professional support. Even where professional agencies are involved, there is great uncertainty regarding the role of the state in this task. The data suggest that the

professional practices that have emerged with the introduction of an ethic of openness have done little to address the issues of ambiguity and fragility. Adopters' accounts raise concerns that direct and indirect contact can sometimes be practiced in ways that amplify a sense of disconnection between adoptees and birth relatives. Mediated contact in particular was characterised as unnatural and emptied of care and spontaneity. While 'information giving' is acknowledged within the practice literature as a key aspect of direct and indirect contact, the data indicate that this is more complex than the term initially suggests and is seldom achieved. Adopters viewed 'knowing' as a central aspect of contact and, therefore, as central to kinship. This was more than merely having information but encapsulated intricately connected ideas around the currency of information, the intimacy of information, memory work and the transmission of information. The challenge for social work is to ensure formal contact arrangements and professional interventions are practiced in ways that promote 'knowing' in ways that avoid devaluing the family ties between both the child and birth relatives and the child and adoptive relatives. Adoption social workers must carefully assess the potential impact of interventions on post-adoptive relationships. In particular, given that 'risk-reducing' measures are likely to be perceived as "unfamily-like", support services must ensure that such measures are proportionate to risk. There is much work to be done to develop an evidence-based for such assessments of risk.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the complexities involved in the reshaping of family relationships between adoptees and birth relatives following domestic adoption and points towards a

need for more proactive facilitation of post-adoption relationships by adoption support professionals. It is also clear that adoptive family relationships are dynamic and adoptive family practices require an ongoing process of active negotiation and involvement of those affected by adoption and, in some cases, the support of welfare services. While the reshaping of family relationships following adoption is a complex process, the diversity of definitions of kinship used by adopters such as intimate knowledge, spontaneity, responsiveness, care, consistency and persistence indicates that there is much room for creativity within the process. We suggest that those affected by adoption must be at the heart of negotiations around family relationships and the social work practices that seek to promote these. Wherever possible, formal contact arrangements should build on existing family practices if they are to be meaningful for those facing the challenge of 'redrawing the boundaries of kinship'. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) clearly sets out the state's long-term responsibility for the support of those affected by adoption. In doing so it creates potential for a re-evaluation of the support needed and available to adoptees, adopters and birth relatives as well as the development of sensitive policy and practice guidance to underpin such developments.

## REFERENCES

- Bauman, Z. (2003) *Liquid Love*, Cambridge, Polity.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernstein, E. (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Cambridge, Polity.
- Beck, U. and Beck-Gernstein, E. (2002) *Individualization*, London, Sage.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, **3**, pp. 77-101.
- Brodzinsky, D.M., Singer, L.M. and Braff, A.M. (1984) 'Children's Understanding of Adoption', *Child Development*, **55**(3), pp. 869-878.

- Carsten, J. (2000) 'Knowing Where You've Come from': Ruptures and Continuities of Time and Kinship in Narratives of Adoption Reunions', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6(4), pp. 687-703.
- Elliott, J. (2005) *Using Narrative in Social Research. Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, London, Sage.
- Finch, J. and Mason, J. (1993) *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*, London, Routledge.
- Grotevant, H.D. and McRoy, R.G. (1998) *Openness in adoption: Exploring family connections*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.
- Jones, C. and Hackett, S. (2010) 'The Role of 'Family Practices' and 'Displays of Family' in the Creation of Adoptive Kinship', *British Journal of Social Work*, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcq017.
- Mason, J. (2002) *Qualitative Research*, London, Sage.
- Modell, J. (1994) *Kinship with strangers : adoption and interpretations of kinship in American culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Neil, E. (2003) 'Adoption and Contact: A Research Review', in Bainham, A., Lindley, B., M, R. and L, T. (eds), *Children and Their Families. Contact, Rights and Welfare.*, Oxford, Hart Publishing.
- Pahl, R. (2000) *On Friendship*, Cambridge, Polity.
- Pahl, R. and Spencer, L. (2003) 'Personal Communities: Not Simply Families of 'Fate' or 'Choice' ', *Working Papers of the Institute for Social and Economic Research, paper 2003-4*, Colchester, University of Essex.
- Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling sexual stories: power, change and social worlds*, London, Routledge.
- Reitz, M. and Watson, K.W. (1992) *Adoption and the family system*, New York, Guilford.
- Riessman, C.K. (1993) *Narrative Analysis*, London, Sage.
- Riessman, C.K. (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, London, Sage.
- Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Smart, C. and Neale, B. (1999) *Family Fragments?*, Cambridge, Polity.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan, C. (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies*, London, Routledge.
- Weston, K. (1991) *Families We Choose. Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Williams, F. (2004) *Rethinking Families*, London, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.
- Wolfs, R. (2008) *Adoption Conversations*, London, BAAF.