Communicative openness within adoptive families: adoptive parents' narrative accounts of the challenges of adoption talk and the approaches used to manage these challenges.

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Communicative openness within adoptive families: adoptive parents' narrative accounts of the challenges of adoption talk and the approaches used to manage these challenges.

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ABSTRACT: Policy and practice relating to openness in adoption has changed substantially in the last 30 years. There is a growing body of empirical research which supports both structural and communicative openness and there is widespread consensus that communicative openness is desirable within adoptive families. Despite this, there is evidence that some adoptive parents and their adopted children struggle to achieve the level of communicative openness to which they aspire. This paper presents data from a small scale exploratory study of adoptive family life. It draws on the narrative accounts of adoptive mothers and fathers to explore some of the sensitivities of adoption talk, the communication challenges experienced by adoptive parents and the ways that adopters manage these challenges. Finally, some suggestions are made for practice.

KEYWORDS: Adoptive parents, open adoption, openness, adoption communication.

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DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CONCEPT OF OPENNESS

The concept of openness in adoptive family life has a relatively long history within adoption theory and practice and owes much to the work of David Kirk. Kirk highlighted the importance of acknowledging the differences between adoptive and non-adoptive family life as well as the need for open communication and empathy between adoptive family members (Kirk 1964). In recent years a greater sophistication has emerged in the understanding of the concept of openness and the professional practices related to the concept. Openness no longer refers simply to open communication between adoptive family members but also relates to the degree to which information passes between birth and adoptive families and to the level of contact and ongoing relationship between these enmeshed families. McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) have described three types of adoption openness, namely, confidential adoptions where little or no information is exchanged, mediated adoptions where only non-identifying information is exchanged and communication is through a third party and fully disclosed adoptions where identifying information is exchanged directly between the parties and face to face contact is arranged without the intervention of the adoption agency. The concept of openness has also been influenced by theories of child development and the human lifecourse. As a consequence, the requirements for openness are understood to change as life events unfold (Brodzinsky, Singer & Braff 1984; Hajal & Rosenberg 1991) and there has been a recognition that openness operates as a continuum and that patterns of contact and information exchange between adoptive and birth families may change over time (Triseliotis, Shireman & Hundleby 1997; Grotevant, Perry & McRoy 2005). Brodzinsky (2005) has helpfully differentiated between communicative openness and structural openness. Structural openness relates to the arrangement of the adoptive kinship network. By contrast, communicative openness is concerned with the process of exploring the meaning of adoption for those within the adoptive family. Building on Brodzinsky's writings, Neil (2007) has recently described five key elements of communicative openness. These include communication with the adopted child about adoption; comfort with, and promotion of, dual connection; empathy for the adopted child; communication with the birth family; and empathy for the birth family.

While the majority of evidence is in support of structural openness, there remains some controversy about the potential benefits for adopted children, birth mothers and adoptive parents (see Brodzinsky 2005). In contrast, there is broad consensus in the academic and practice literature that communicative openness is desirable both in terms of outcome for the adopted individual (Howe & Feast 2003; Brodzinsky 2005) and as a human rights issue (Dukette 1984). However, there has been relatively little empirical research in this area. The research that has been undertaken has shown an association between communicative openness and the wellbeing of the child (Brodzinsky 2006), the development of a positive identity as an adopted person (Howe & Feast 2003) and higher levels of satisfaction with the adoption expressed by the adoptee in adulthood (Raynor 1980; Howe & Feast 2003). Secrecy and discomfort in discussing adoption have also been associated with reductions in wellbeing, adjustment and identity formation for the adopted child (Triseliotis 1973; Raynor 1980; Rosenberg & Groze 1997). There is some evidence relating to the content and process of communicative openness in adoptive families. Research has demonstrated that children's ability to engage with the adoption story changes as their understanding and social knowledge grow (Brodzinsky, Singer & Braff 1984; Brodzinsky 1987). It is not until the adolescent years that adopted children begin to understand the complex motivations for adoption (Brodzinsky 1987) and questions

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about adoption are most frequent (Palacios & Sánchez-Sandoval 2005). Howe and Feast (2003) also found differences between early and late placed children with older placed children finding communicative openness more difficult.

Despite widespread support for communicative openness, there is nevertheless evidence that some adoptive parents and their adopted children struggle to achieve the level of communicative openness to which they and professionals aspire (Raynor 1980; Howe & Feast 2003; Palacios & Sánchez-Sandoval 2005). In a study of adult adoptees Howe and Feast (2003) found that between 47% and 71% of these adults felt uncomfortable asking for information about their adoption and only 53% and 29% said that were satisfied with level of information given about their adoption. The former figure relates to adoptees placed before their 3rd birthday and the latter to adoptees placed after their 3rd birthday. Raynor (1980) found that it was common for some aspects of the adoption story to be withheld. In a more recent study Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval (2005) found that the majority of adoptive families in their sample discussed adoption only once or on a very few occasions although there was a trend over time towards more communicative openness.

The specific research reported here forms part of a larger and ongoing study of adoptive family life conducted in the North East of England using data from a longstanding voluntary adoption agency. The study addresses four key questions:

- In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the family lives created through adoption changed over the last 30 years?
- What challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
- What resources have adoptive families drawn upon, developed or had made available to them, in what circumstances, and what impact have these had on adoptive family life?
- What lessons can be drawn from adopters' views and experiences to shape policy and practice?

This paper draws on the in-depth accounts of a small number of adoptive mothers and fathers to explore some of the sensitivities of adoption talk, the communication challenges experienced by adoptive parents and the ways that adopters manage these challenges. It reports adoptive parents' experiences of openness and examines the gaps between adopters' aspirations for openness and the lived reality of adoptive family life.

METHOD

A narrative approach was adopted for the study and data were collected though a series of one-to-one interviews with adoptive parents. The data presented in this paper relates to eighteen qualitative interviews with nine adoptive mothers and nine adoptive fathers from nine families conducted as part of our ongoing study. All of the parents interviewed were married couples, all couples were white and all had adopted through the voluntary adoption agency. Participants were recruited to the study voluntarily 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.

A total of twenty children were adopted domestically by these nine families. The children's age at the time of the interviews ranged from 10 to 26 years old. Three of the couples taking part in interviews adopted children as babies in the early 1980s. These families were provided with relatively little information about the birth family at the time of the adoption and had no contact with birth relatives

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as children were growing up. In two of these families, an adult adoptee had been reunited with their birth family. One family adopted two babies transracially in the late 1980s. They also had little information about the birth family and had no contact with birth relatives as children were growing up. This family was the only one within the study also to have a birth child. The remaining five couples had children placed with them between 1992 and 2001. They adopted older children who had been looked after by the state for a range of reasons including abuse, neglect and death of a single parent. Only one of these families currently had direct contact with birth relatives. The remaining four families had indirect contact ranging from annual letterbox contact to cards and presents at birthdays and Christmas. Two of these families had previously had direct contact with birth relatives but this had faded away or had been discontinued.

A broad topic guide was developed with specific questions seeking to elicit stories relating to the adoptive parents' experiences of family life. The emphasis was on establishing the narratives of participants' experiences using the least amount of direct questioning, but with the interviewer intervening in the narratives as necessary to support and encourage participants using prompts such as "tell me about….." and "what happened next...". Interviews were between two and two and a half hours long and most took place in the adopters' homes. Each adopter was also asked to choose a small selection of family photographs to talk about during the interview as a way of communicating key stages and experiences throughout the adoptive family's lifespan.

The data generated through interviews were analysed both thematically and narratively. The findings presented herein were derived mainly from a thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). As is usual with qualitative research, the analysis of data began early in the research process with a preliminary analysis of emerging issues being undertaken after each interview drawing on interview notes and observations. Following the formal transcription of interviews, an initial coding frame was developed in order to interrogate the data cross-sectionally. Some codes were predetermined by the research questions whilst others were developed inductively from the data. These codes were largely descriptive. As the analysis developed, some codes were revised or combined with others and some new codes emerged. These, together with additional margin notes, memos and conceptual maps were used to build meta-level explanatory codes and more interpretive themes (Grbich 2006). Nvivo software was used to facilitate the process of analysis.

FINDINGS

All interviewees expressed support for communicative openness with adoptive families, although the way this was practiced differed from family to family. It is clear that one of the special tasks associated with adoptive parenting is that of discussing adoption with one's child. The task typically falls to adoptive parents because of their relationship with the child and their daily accessibility. It involves giving children information about the circumstances that led to their adoption and details of their birth family and for children adopted as babies the task includes revealing their adoptive status. Some of the sensitivities around adoption talk highlighted by adoptive parents are reported below, as well as some of the ways in which adoptive parents made sharing of adoption stories a positive experience for adopted children, a meaningful task for them and a manageable process within the adoptive family.

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The challenges of adoption talk

The complexity and sensitivities within the adoption stories

One of the most striking characteristics of the adoption narratives told by participants was their complexity. The adoption narratives typically involved the telling of not one but at least three stories, namely that of the adoptive parents', the adopted child's and the birth parents' journey towards and into adoption. Some stories, particularly those of parents who adopted older children from public care, referred in addition to a fourth party, namely, the placing agency. The adoption stories told, therefore dealt with multiple actors, experiences, feelings, motivations and potentially competing interests. When the adopted child asks the question 'who am I?' these complex constellations of actors and experiences may all have an impact on the process of shaping identity.

A further characteristic of the adoption narratives told by adoptive parents was their highly sensitive nature. A number of sensitive topics were discussed in interviews including:
- adoptive parents' experiences and choices relating to infertility investigations and treatment;
- adoptive parents' gratitude towards birth mothers having chosen adoption over abortion;
- the great societal pressures on women in previous decades to relinquish babies conceived outside of marriage;
- birth parents placing babies for adoption and then later going on to marry and have more children together creating full siblings living in different families;
- stories of abuse, neglect and extreme poverty experienced by children looked after by the state;
- some birth family's dependence on alcohol;
- sibling groups who had been placed separately and had lost contact; and
- rejection of a child by a birth mother or father.

Adoption talk between adoptive parents and adopted children, therefore, can involve not only the imparting of sensitive information about the adoption but also the exploration of complex moral and ethical issues, deeply personal and sensitive matters, potentially contentious social and political issues and emotionally laden topics such as infertility, abortion, poverty and abuse.

Some adoptive parents reported that there were some details of the children's history and origins that were so sensitive that the only other person within their family or circle of friends who knew the details of these was their spouse. They did not share the details of these with the researcher. Adoptive parents were also concerned about the emotional impact of these stories on their adopted children. For example, one mother stated:

> "but knowing [my adopted son's] background, he could possibly find the mother but the father didn't know anything about him, unless she told him later on, but they were out of the relationship and the father was engaged to someone else, and the mother didn't want to upset anything, and [my adopted son] knows this, he knows the background and I think he may be frightened of rejection" (Mother 3)

Another mother described her son's negative feelings towards his birth mother:

> "I think [my adopted son is] very very angry inside, but he won't talk about anything to anybody, and I think it probably all stems back to the fact that his mam could have had him if she wanted to but she chose her boyfriend instead, I don't know whether he will ever decide to

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find her or not." (Mother 6)

Presenting positive yet honest accounts of adoption

The promotion of a positive adoption identity and a positive regard for birth families has been highlighted as an important aspect of communicative openness (Raynor 1980). Brodzinsky (2005) emphasises the need to tell stories in a way that supports the child's self esteem and psychological growth. Adopters were very aware of the need to tell stories which maintained a sense of self worth for their adopted children. One adoptive mother said:

> "you know, and you try when you've got an adopted child to make it a positive thing, you know you don't want it to be negative, you make it a positive thing and you kind of say to them even when they're little, 'your special, because we chose you'" (Mother 5)

This was a theme that was taken up, similarly, by an adoptive father who stated:

> "we were keen to ensure that she didn't feel as if she hadn't been loved, and had been you know, jettisoned. In fact I'm sure we did say to her that probably because her mum did love her so much, that she wanted the best for her, that's why she'd given her up." (Father 8)

Adoptive parents also showed a high level of empathy for the birth families, the circumstances that led to the adoption and their feelings of loss:

> "whenever they've talked about things, I'm just open and honest about [my son's birth mother], I've never said a bad thing about her and I never would. [My son] knows a lot about what went on and if he starts to talk about it I will just say 'yeah but there were other issues why [your mum] ended up the way she was', and I think that's possibly one of the reasons why our adoption has worked because I've never hidden anything from them." (Mother 1)

Similarly, a father expressed a deep awareness of the troubled biography of the birth family of his adopted child:

> "I often wonder what it must have been like for [birth parents], it must have been extremely difficult for [birth mother] but it seemed like she had the support of her mam and dad ……I'm delighted [birth mother and father] eventually got back together again, but I do wonder what it's like for them and for their kids knowing they've got an older sister out there somewhere" (Father 8)

However, there was evidence that some adoptive parents struggled to achieve both positive and honest accounts. Talking of the birthday cards that were sent by birth parents an adoptive mother of a baby said:

> "it got to the point where, when she was younger, we would have [birthday cards from birth parents] out, when she was 7 and 8 and wanted to know who these [birth mother's name] and [birth father's name] were, 'always in our thoughts', it gets difficult to explain it, without being deceitful." (Mother 8)

Meeting individual needs

A further challenge evident in adoptive parents' narratives related to uncertainty about which aspects

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of the adoption story should be discussed at which point in time. While research evidence provides some guidance about the ability of children to engage with adoption issues at various ages and stages (Brodzinsky, Singer & Braff 1984), there were clearly great variations in individual children's needs and expectations.

Adoptive parents described a range of levels of curiosity about adoption in their adopted children with some children being characterised as questioning, curious or searching from an early age and as "deep" and "thinkers" while other children were characterised as lacking curiosity, disinterested or more contented. There were often both intensely curious and seemingly disinterested children within the same family. Two adoptive fathers described it this way:

> "[my son] and [my daughter] as I've said before, have different characters, different temperaments, [my son] didn't want to know at all, he had no intentions, even when he was reaching 18 ……. we always knew that [my daughter] was always searching, because from being very little, she used to say 'do I look like my uncle [name]?' or 'do I look like this?' and she was always sort of looking for family resemblance." (Father 3)

> "we've got two complete opposites, [my older daughter] has always wanted to know where she came from, always …… so from way back [she] has always had this hole…… [my younger daughter] doesn't want to know …. she's got her family and she might eventually you know when she gets a few more years down the line, she might want to know where birth mum is and all those things, but at the moment she's a floater." (Father 4)

While the differences in levels of curiosity were mostly explained by adopters in terms of personality differences, for children adopted at an older age the role of memories of early childhood experiences in shaping questioning and curiosity was highlighted. For example, one mother said:

> "[My son]'s still the one who will talk about [his birth mother] on and off , its getting less and less as the years go by, at the beginning he talked about her quite a lot and some of the things that had happened. [My daughter] remembers nothing, nothing of it, she can barely remember the 4 years she was with [her foster mother], unless [my son] reminds her." (Mother 1)

Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant and McRoy (1998) have stressed that all children are curious about their birth family. However, adopters were often unsure about how to approach adoption talk particularly where children showed an enduring lack of interest. Adopters expressed concerns about pursuing a proactive approach to adoption communication too aggressively fearing the introduction of emotional upset and tension into the adoptive family or revealing information which children were not ready to hear. One mother expressed her uncertainty thus:

> "I mean I don't think you can do anymore than say its there if you want to look at it and talk about you can, because I don't want her to be embarrassed or feel that she's upsetting me, you know maybe she feels that. I'm not sure." (Mother 5)

An adoptive father vividly described his dilemma as follows:

> "It might be a problem but you don't want to pre-empt it, you know… cause it… by pushing the wrong buttons at the wrong time. " (Father 3)

Timing of adoption talk was further complicated in some families where the needs of siblings were

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out of step or conflicted. This same adoptive father, talking of his son's reaction to his daughter's search for her birth family said:

> "at first he was dead against it, he put all the spokes in the way because she listens to him and respects what he says, and he used to say to her 'I don't know how you can put mam and dad through this'" (Father 3)

A further adoptive mother explained the difficulties she experienced when she gave information to an older sibling whom she felt was mature enough to hear it whilst asking the older sibling not to disclose the information to his younger sibling. The older sibling was not able to maintain this non-disclosure and the adoptive parents had to deal with the consequences of early disclosure to the younger child.

Often adoption talk was triggered unexpectedly by events outside the family. Several adoptive parents reported incidents where schools had set assignments that involved drawing a family tree, writing a story about where you come from and reading it out in class, or bringing in baby photographs to talk about in class. These exercises proved difficult and painful for children with little knowledge about their background and origins or no baby photographs. In some cases this led to classmates asking rather blunt questions about the reasons for the child's adoption. One adoptive mother explained:

> "one little girl was absolutely fascinated by the whole process of 'having a new mum and dad', you know, 'how odd is that'. She asked [my adopted daughter] a lot of questions that she had not even thought of and I think it made her feel different and she had a lot of problems coping with that...." (Mother 2).

Adopters expressed irritation that schools did not take account of their child's adoptive status and therefore placed children and families in positions of potential vulnerability and powerlessness.

Brodzinsky (2005) has written that, while communicative openness has demonstrable benefits, research suggests that it is over-simplistic to adopt a "more is better" approach as individuals' needs differ over time. He has cautioned against extreme positions on openness such as denial or insistence of difference in adoptive family life (Brodzinsky 1987). Instead, he has recommended a middle road in acknowledging difference and has suggested that the most important factor to consider in relation to communicative openness is the satisfaction of the adoptee(s) and adopter(s) with adoption communication (Brodzinsky 2005). However, questions remain about the best way to achieve this middle road and mutual satisfaction. Adoptive parents face the dilemma of being proactive in adoption talk and risking the revelation of certain details of the adoption stories before the adopted children are cognitively and emotionally able to deal with them or being more reactive to children's questioning and risking the perception that they are withholding important information. In addition they face the challenge of communicating complex and sensitive adoption stories in ways that maintain the adopted person's self worth and give an honest account.

How adoptive families make adoption talk manageable

Given the difficult and emotional nature of adoption talk, it is not surprising that adoptive family members look for ways to make communicative openness more manageable. Some examples of this are described below.

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Creating child-friendly stories

One way of approaching adoption talk used by adopters was the telling of child-friendly adoption stories to younger children. These were most frequently used by adoptive parents of babies:

> " …… we told her this little story, about how we would go along the cots, how the adoption happened and saying 'no we don't want that baby, we don't want that' and then we came to the one she was in and 'we'll have this baby'" (Father 8)

Sometimes these were told as bedtime stories as one mother explained:

> "Well I used to… tell them a bedtime story …. 'this is the story about when you came to our house', you know, and then I would tell them 'this is what we did and we went to Mrs so and so's house, and we had a look at you and one thing and another….. and we picked you up and you cried all the way home', which she did, and I used to do it like a bedtime story, and sometimes they might say 'tell me the story about how we came into this family', and that was like one of our bedtime stories…." (Mother 5)

These stories appeared to offer parents an opportunity to convey the excitement felt when the child joined the family in an attempt to increase the child's sense of belonging and welcoming into the family. However, the stories often did not include birth family members or foster carers and so tended to be a relatively simplistic account of the child's journey into the adoptive family. They, therefore, were unlikely to meet the child's needs as the child matured and asked more searching questions.

Creating openings for adoption talk

Adopters gave examples of the ways in which they and their adopted children offered each other openings to talk to each other about adoption. It appears that these were intended to be less threatening than direct questioning and they negotiated the middle ground between being proactive and reactive in adoption communication. For children adopted beyond infancy, families used life story books and photograph albums of birth or foster families as a reference point for conversations about adoption. These were often kept in an accessible location agreed by both adoptive parents and their adopted children giving adopted children easy access to them. Adopters' intended that children could choose when to look at them and when to ask questions and referring to these was part of adoptive family life. Life story books and photograph albums were not typically available to families who adopted infants twenty or more years ago. Therefore, this group of adopters and their children had to look elsewhere for openings for adoption talk. Instead, adopters made available agency documents or letters held by them to adopted children in late adolescence in order to offer information and open up further discussion.

Adopters and adopted children also used books, television and other media to open up a dialogue. For example, one adoptive mother read a novel that included a story line about a particular adoption issue and then discussed an aspect of her daughter's adoption with her through the issues raised by the book. Another adoptive mother told of her surprise and delight when her grown up adopted son called her and told her that a television programme was about to start showing a reunion between an adopted son and his birth mother. The adoptive mother was pleased as her son had previously avoided talking with his adoptive mother about the possibility of reunion with his birth mother. She saw this as an invitation by her son to talk. She was then disappointed when a friend who was having a problem telephoned and she missed most of the programme. It appeared that she did not feel able to open up

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the conversation fully with her son without being able to refer to the specific content of the programme. She recalled:

"I missed it and I was annoyed because I wanted to talk to him about it because I felt like that was him saying he wanted to talk, but the moment had been lost, but really all through its been times like that, you would sort of pick your moment or just manipulate a conversation around a little bit around what you want to say." (Mother 3)

Adoptive parents described a number of situations in which they would take a more deliberately proactive stance. For example, adopters of infants felt strongly that they should be the ones to reveal their adoptive status to the child. Adopters of older children felt that they were best placed to explain sensitive issues related to the adoption stories to their children:

"I would like to think I'm the best person to help them deal with whatever issues are in those files and ….. so I know I can't control it and I totally accept that it's up to them when they want to look or if they want to look I wouldn't encourage them or discourage them either way, but I would like to think that they would talk to me if there was anything in there that even worried them and there are some issues that I would like to talk to them about before they read about them." (Mother 1)

Adopters of both infants and older children were anxious to reveal information in a timely fashion, perhaps before it was revealed by another source or through gaining access to adoption records. They also tended to be more proactive around key life stages such as at the approach of the child's sixteenth or eighteenth birthday.

Drawing on other's stories

Another important way in which adoptive parents made adoption talk more manageable was to draw on other people's life stories. Adopters used opportunities which presented themselves when the life experiences of family and friends paralleled their own family's adoption story in some way in order to explain sensitive information to their adopted children. For example, one parent explained that she had considered for a long time that at some point she would need to explain to her adopted children that they were not, as they had thought, full siblings but were in fact half siblings, each having a different father. This information had never been shared with the children and the children did not have life story books. An opportunity arose to tell the story of their different parentage when the daughter's best friend at school announced that her mother and step-father were having a baby. In this case, this strategy appeared to make the information more palatable by providing her daughter with a way to be 'like' her best friend rather than 'different' in some way, both living within a 'blended' family.

Another adopted child had been born unexpectedly when her birth mother, who had no idea that she was pregnant, had suddenly developed stomach cramps. She gave birth two days later and decided that the best course of action for her and her baby was adoption. When a similarly unexpected birth happened in the extended family when the daughter was in her teens her adoptive mother took the opportunity to tell her of the circumstances of her birth. Unlike in the first example, the adoptive mother in this case viewed this example of sharing information less positively than the first adoptive mother as her daughter was upset that in her own story her birth mother decided to 'give her away' whereas in the more recent story the mother had decided to keep her baby. It appears, therefore, that drawing a parallel between a familiar situation and the adopted child's past can be an effective way to

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give sensitive information. However, adoptive parents need to pay attention to the meaning attached to stories by their adopted children and possible discrepancies between their own and their children's interpretations of the stories. Stories told and comparisons made, therefore, cannot be seen as an end in themselves but part of an ongoing dialogue which is part of the child, the adopter and the family's process of identity formation.

'Emotional attunement' to the (un)discussable

It was apparent in the stories told by adopters that one of the ways that they and their adopted children made adoption talk more manageable was by stepping into each other's shoes. The important role of parental empathy in adoptive relationships was first highlighted by Kirk (1964) and has been written about more recently by Neil (2002). Brodzinsky (2005) has also referred to the importance of emotional attunement within communicative openness.

Adoptive parents spoke frequently of trying to imagine themselves in their adopted child's position in order to decide how to communicate with them about adoption. Equally, adoptive parents reported that even relatively young children showed empathy for their adoptive parents' feelings about the adoption and became more self-conscious about asking questions as they got older. One adoptive mother explained that when her adopted son was seven or eight years old he would frequently talk about his life with his birth mother and ask questions. By the time he was in his early teens, becoming aware of his adoptive mother's own story and emotions relating to adoption, he began to ask:

"is it okay to speak to you about [birth mother's name]?" (Mother 1)

She felt she successfully reassured him that it was good to talk even when the talk was painful.

Some adoptive parents described the way they and their adopted children seemed to reach an unspoken agreement about the degree to which open discussion about adoption was welcomed, tolerated or discouraged in different situations and at different times in order to avoid any invasion of privacy or unnecessary emotional upset:

"There's a kind of a line somewhere, where if she tells me things I can ask subsidiary questions, but I can't plough in and straight ask…. I don't want [my daughter] to think that I'm prying and needing to know what's going on in this other part of her life, and I think I'm almost certain she doesn't want to upset me by telling me about things down there. It's still relatively new, it's over a year since they met, but it's still relatively new." (Mother 4)

Emotional attunement, therefore, appears to play an important role in establishing the boundaries of what is and is not discussable and when to withdraw. When these boundaries were perceived to have been overstepped this could be seen as catastrophic. For example, an adoptive mother described the night her grandson was born. This was a very emotional time for both her family and her daughter-in-law's family who were all present soon after the birth. As she held her grandson for the first time and tears poured down her face, she said to those present:

"do you know this is the youngest baby I've ever held" (Mother 3)

However, afterwards she felt that she should not have said this and was concerned that she had raised the issue of adoption inappropriately and had caused her son, who was adopted when just a few weeks old, to feel distress. She imagined that her comments would have caused him to think about

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who held him when he was hours old and perhaps caused sadness at what should have been a happy family event.

Adoptive parents of adult children frequently referred to their children's hesitance to discuss the possibility of a reunion with birth parents as they wanted to avoid causing any emotional hurt to their adoptive parents. Adopted children's concern for adoptive parents' feelings and vice versa can therefore, also be a potential barrier to dialogue and self expression.

Additional benefits of adoption talk

As stated earlier, the benefits of communicative openness have been associated with the wellbeing of the child (Brodzinsky 2006), development of a positive identity as an adopted person (Howe & Feast 2003) and satisfaction of the adoptee in adulthood (Raynor 1980; Howe & Feast 2003). The data from the current study suggests a further potential benefit, namely the development of shared family values and a family identity. For example, one adoptive father told the researcher about his adopted children's first Christmas with the family when his adoptive son was aged six:

> "…when he was given a Christmas present from his family, his real mother and father, next day it was taken off him and sold and so he never had anything. And for his first Christmas here, we got them a bike each. And [on the] second day, was it boxing day or the day after, he came across and said to us …. 'is this my bike?'. We said 'well yes, Santa Claus brought you the bike. It's yours'. He said 'yes but is he coming to take it away again'. I said 'no when Santa gives a present it's yours, it's forever yours'. So he said 'what, forever?' 'Well yes, forever, what you get it's yours now'. And he just cried because he didn't realise that it wasn't going to be taken away from him". (Father 7)

This situation presented the adoptive father with a number of difficult tasks relating to adoption talk including dealing with his adopted son's pain, understanding his past experiences and how they influence his expectations of family life now and teaching his son a new set of values without damaging his memories of his birth mother. Engagement with these issues presents great challenges to adoptive parents but at the same time can provide great opportunities for shared family values and a shared family script to emerge.

DISCUSSION

The exploratory nature of this study meant that a small sample of adopters' were interviewed in-depth. The study extends understanding of communicative openness within adoption families and highlights a number of difficult issues that adoptive families face in developing and maintaining communicative openness. It also points towards some fruitful areas for further research such as further exploration of the 'props' and 'tools' that facilitate communicative openness, the role of siblings in promoting or hindering communicative openness and the wider benefits of communicative openness for the development of a family identity. The voice of adopted children and adults and their experiences of openness are beyond the scope of this study and there would be great value in further research which addresses this.

The study suggests that there are some differences, both in terms of process and content, between the adoption talk that takes place between adoptive parents and children adopted several years ago as 'relinquished' babies and adoptive parents and children adopted more recently beyond infancy from

the public care system. These differences relate to, for example, the reasons for the adoption, the level of information available, expectations of, and preparation for, openness. However, the similarities between the two groups are striking. Both groups described the complex and sensitive nature of adoption talk throughout the course of adoptive family life. Both share the dual dilemmas of not wanting to reveal too much too soon whilst at the same time not wanting to be perceived as holding back essential facts and seeking to give positive yet honest accounts of the adoption. Finally, both groups described the potential vulnerability of adoptive families within a society that renders adoptive family life invisible or taken-for-granted.

There remains a question about the best ways in which to meet the needs of adoptive families for support and advice in promoting communicative openness. It was striking that the majority of adoptive parents who took part in the study had had very little contact with adoption services since the legal adoption of their child(ren) and were reluctant to draw upon the expertise of adoption agencies for support and advice. This appeared to be viewed negatively as an unwarranted acknowledgement of difference and inadequacy on the family's part. This was a particular issue for families where adopted children had reached adulthood and where there had been a longer history of dealing with issues without professional intervention. Instead, such families relied on advice from non-adoptive friends or 'learning from doing'. While adoptive families have a right to live their lives without further state intervention, it could also be argued that the state has a moral obligation to ensure that adoptive families are equipped with information and evidence relating to current best practice in order to give adoptive families the greatest chance of success. How this is delivered to families needs to be researched further and negotiated with adoptive families but could include provision through schools or peer support groups, written and electronic media as well as direct support from specialist adoption agencies. Active and ongoing provision of information and support could have multiple benefits such as providing adoptive family members with additional 'openings' for adoption talk, encouraging the acknowledgement of the changing nature of adoptive families and needs of family members across time and communicating the changing evidence base relating to openness.

While, the available research evidence is helpful in general terms in providing guidance relating to the ages and stages at which children are likely to understand different aspects of adoption, there is little guidance available about how to talk about adoption, the actual words to use, helpful metaphors, careful descriptions that achieve the goals of honesty, maintaining a child's sense of dignity and self worth and demonstrating empathy towards the birth family. There does not exist amongst adoptive families at present a shared language of adoption and specific adoption circumstances. There would be great value in developing stories of adoption that could be shared with other adopters. These could help adopters reflect on their specific family's situation and needs, the content of stories they wish to tell and the language they wish to use. They could also provide some sense of how other families negotiate the 'discussable' and the 'un-discussable'.

Adoption practitioners can play an important role in facilitating communicative openness in a number of ways. First, they can alert adoptive family members at the stage of preparation and assessment to both the complexity of the task as well as the potential rewards. Second, they can ensure that adopters understand the value of tools such as reports, life story books, photograph albums and later-in-life letters. All of these tools help may help to provide permission to talk and a springboard for dialogue about adoption within the adoptive family. Third, they can assist adoptive family members to develop a specific language, style and set of skills that meets their family's needs over time. Finally, they can provide adoptive family members with support to develop the confidence to use this language and to deal with the emotional aspects of adoption talk.

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The task could be facilitated by increased awareness of adoption issues in schools and in society more generally to ensure that adoptive family life is acknowledged and valued as way of 'doing' family life. Schools need support to recognise and deal with the consequences of setting assignments that raise issues for adopted children. There may be value in tackling these issues within the context of an emphasis on 'family diversity' as opposed to an adoption issue per se, as similar problems may be faced by children from other diverse family forms such as step families, gay and lesbian parented families and single parent families. This would also help to ensure that adopted children are not inappropriately singled out and made unnecessarily visible and pathologised within their peer group. More sophisticated treatment of adoption in the media which moves away from sensationalist storylines such as atypical reunions, child abandonment and celebrity international adoptions could also provide further openings for positive experiences of adoption talk within and outwith the adoptive family.

Communicative openness is both a life long issue and an evolving challenge facing adoptive family members. The value of adoption talk is typically presented in the literature in terms of the rights and wellbeing of the child. While it can play an important role in shaping the adopted child's identity and helping the child to make sense of his or her past, present and future, this study suggests that it can also have a much wider role in developing the identity of all adoptive family members and the formation of a shared sense of family values. It is important, therefore, that adoptive families have adequate information and support made available to them to allow them to be the families they aspire to be.

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