

Searching, reunion and transracial adoption

Derek Kirton, Julia Feast and David Howe report on findings from qualitative interviews with transracially adopted adults, carried out as part of a research project by The Children's Society. Findings show that those adopted transracially shared many experiences with other adopted people, including almost invariably feeling that they have gained from searching and/or reunion. For many transracially adopted people, issues of racial and ethnic identity figured prominently within motivation for searching, but their needs and aspirations in this regard often went unmet. Finally, the implications of the research for family placement work and post-adoption services are considered.

Key words:

searching, reunion, identity, transracial adoption

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The following account reports on findings from qualitative interviews with transracially adopted adults, carried out as part of a research project entitled 'Adopted people's search for identity and reunion' undertaken by The Children's Society. Findings from the overall project are published in Howe and Feast (2000), but the scope of the study can usefully be summarised here. In the first stage, 472 adopted people responded to a questionnaire, of whom 394 were seeking birth relatives, the remaining 78 not searching. In total, 35 respondents were transracially adopted, 32 of whom were 'searchers'. Subsequently, in a second stage, 74 more in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out, including 13 with transracially adopted adults which form the primary focus of this article.

Introduction

Very little is known of searching and reunion in the context of transracial adoption. This applies both to research and to official data collection, where the absence of ethnic monitoring of those seeking access to their birth records makes it impossible to gauge whether searching rates differ between transracial

and 'same-race' adoptions. Within research studies, quantitative information on the relative likelihood of searching is extremely limited (Feigelman and Silverman, 1983, p 113; Simon *et al*, 1994, p 93; Feast and Howe, 1997), and this applies even more so to qualitative data. Given the contentious nature of transracial adoption, it seems pertinent to consider if, and in what ways, searching and reunion are undertaken and experienced differently by those adopted transracially and those in ethnically matched placements. For example, are the former searching for some sense of racial or cultural identity as well as for birth family members, as has been suggested (Feigelman and Silverman, 1983, p 219; Feast *et al*, 1998, pp 57–61)? What part does perceived physical difference from the adoptive family play, given the wider finding that it often acts as a motivation towards searching (Schechter and Bertocci, 1990, p 68; Hollingsworth, 1998).

Research study and methodology

This article focuses primarily upon material drawn from 13 interviews with transracially adopted adults who had searched for birth relatives. With one exception, they had experienced reunion with at least one member of their birth family. Interviews were carried out by a team of interviewers. In the case of those adopted transracially, this meant five interviews being carried out by a black interviewer, the remaining eight by white interviewers. A semi-structured interview format was used, which followed what might loosely be termed a 'process' model of searching and reunion. This entailed starting with childhood experiences in the adoptive family, including the degree of 'openness' shown by parents, the child's sense of belonging and/or awareness of difference and their childhood interest in birth relatives and searching for them. The next phase

examined the process of searching – its triggers, issues of preparation and support – and that of reunion. Finally, the impact of reunion was examined, with its gains and losses. These included experiences of rejection from birth family members, and changes both in relationships within the adoptive family and in the adopted person's sense of identity. This format was used for all interviews, but those adopted transracially were asked additional questions about how they saw their ethnic identity and the significance of 'race' as a factor during childhood. With the exception of these questions, respondents were not being asked directly about 'race' issues and hence enjoyed considerable discretion in the extent to which they raised and addressed them. This 'leeway' was reflected in wide variation, ranging from accounts where 'race' and ethnicity figured very little to those where it dominated, albeit in different ways.

Of the 13 transracially adopted people interviewed, two were male and eleven female, while ages ranged from 22 to 53, with a mean age of 33. Most had been placed for adoption as babies, and all but one adopted by the age of five. Among those in employment, the most common occupations were in 'welfare professions' such as social work/care, nursing and teaching, although the sample also contained two actors. Thus, the common finding of 'career success' for the majority of those adopted transracially was replicated here. Other factors more widely associated with transracial adoptive families were also found, with parents predominantly from the 'liberal middle class': teachers, lecturers, social workers and clergy. Of the 13 families, eight had both birth children and other adopted children, three had only the former and two only the latter. In all, the families contained 53 children of whom 28 (including the interviewees) were adopted (or permanently fostered). Almost all the latter were from minority ethnic backgrounds. In the case of those interviewed, two had African-Caribbean birth parents, while the other eleven all had white birth mothers and black birth fathers coming from a range of locations

in Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean and in one case the United States.

Two brief comments should be made regarding the 'representativeness' of those interviewed. The first is that within the wider survey, there were only three transracially adopted people who had chosen not to search, thereby preventing comparison between searchers and non-searchers. A second is that those interviewed can be regarded as reasonably representative of the wider sample of 32 transracially adopted people who completed the questionnaire. Interviewees were selected on a random basis from those (in fact, virtually all) who indicated on their questionnaire a willingness to be interviewed. Based on questionnaire responses, adopted people were categorised as 'integrated' (a term used to describe those who did not feel different to their adoptive families and felt they belonged), 'differentiated' (those who felt different but also that they belonged in their adoptive families), or 'alienated' (those who felt different and that they did not belong) (Howe and Feast, 2000, p 99). Of the 32 questionnaire respondents, seven were categorised as 'integrated', eleven as 'differentiated' and 14 as 'alienated'. Among the 13 interviewed, the respective figures were one, six and six.

Findings

Openness regarding adoption

In the wider questionnaire sample, transracially adopted respondents (67 per cent) were much more likely than their white counterparts (40 per cent) to describe their parents as open to discussion about adoption and more satisfied with the information they received from them (67 per cent and 47 per cent respectively). Most of those interviewed similarly described their adoptive parents as 'open' regarding adoption, while often recognising that the physical differences would have made secrecy extremely difficult. What also emerged indirectly, however, was the complexity of openness itself. In some families, openness seemed restricted to early acknowledgement of adoption, sometimes through a particular 'story' which was not developed as the child grew older and

asked more difficult questions. Openness also has an important emotional dimension, which is perhaps most starkly manifest when adoption is the focal point of conflict. Several interviewees described throwing comments like 'You're not my real mum and dad' at their adoptive parents, but while some seemed to cope reasonably well with such jibes, others reacted in ways which increased the atmosphere of closure.

He [adoptive father] went absolutely berserk, absolutely mental. I remember it terrified me and I never mentioned it again. (Rachel)

There was also a small minority of parents who never seemed emotionally 'open' regarding the adoption:

If I brought it up . . . it was just painful I think for them. You could see it in their face, in the fact that the conversation was a bit stilted. (Clare)

Finally, and crucially in the context of transracial adoption, there is the question of openness regarding 'race' and its place in the lives of adopted children and their families – an issue to which we will return below.

Relationships in adoptive families: difference and belonging

Most interviewees described feeling close to and loved by their adoptive parents during childhood, mirroring the broader survey finding that roughly two-thirds of respondents (a figure which did not vary by ethnicity) expressed happiness about their adoption and reported loving relationships with their adoptive parents. However, analysis of the survey also shows that those adopted transracially into white families (71 per cent) were markedly more likely to indicate feelings of difference from their adoptive family than were their white counterparts (48 per cent). Two factors identified from questionnaire responses were those of being treated differently by members of the extended family and by people within the community, factors which were explored more fully through the qualitative inter-

views. Among those who talked about their extended family, there was a fairly even split between those who viewed them as welcoming and inclusive and those who found a significant measure of rejection, which was usually attributed to issues of 'race'. The impact of 'community' could be seen to operate at different levels. All those who referred to the ethnic composition of their area described it as all or predominantly white. Apart from experiences of overt racism (to which we return below), this worked powerfully to create a sense of difference and isolation. Several described meeting or knowing virtually no other black people during their childhood and being at most one of a handful of black children in their school. More directly, community could serve as the source of special treatment – such as staring, questioning or commenting directly on the adoption – which could exacerbate any sense of difference from the adoptive family. Some interviewees spoke of a sharp contrast between a warm, caring environment within the family and a cold, hostile one beyond. Trevor talked of being made to feel special, of being shown off as cute within the family 'and then I was having to deal with feeling like a piece of shit' (cf Dalen and Saetersdal, 1987).

Responses to questions on what facilitated or inhibited a sense of belonging to the adoptive family were dominated by references to physical similarity and difference. This may be slightly misleading as physical difference can act as a 'lightning rod' for other issues of family dynamics, and may come more readily to mind in the interview situation. Nonetheless, the pervasion can scarcely be coincidental and its significance is readily apparent from the testimony of interviewees. Almost all indicated that differences of colour had some impact on their sense of belonging, although this varied widely in terms of its nature and strength. Four described physical difference as part of a wider pattern of alienation. This appeared to reflect either a sense of being 'completely different' from the adoptive family in many respects or a feeling of insecurity rooted in adoption itself and loss of birth family:

I don't have a sense of belonging anywhere. (Sarah)

I don't think I actually thought that I didn't belong in my family, I just felt I didn't belong anywhere. (Rachel)

The importance of physical difference was often made explicit in references to the similarities among other family members:

You imagine taking yourself off the photo and taking John [black adopted brother] off and you think 'That's the family.' (Clare)

Looking at everybody, they all look the same and that sometimes really gets to me. I did use to feel like I don't really belong. (Donna)

Two other interviewees described how their sense of physical difference had given them an enduring fascination with family likenesses. The salience of physical difference was equally apparent within otherwise positive adoptions, as when Teresa qualified her statement about belonging with:

. . . if you take away the colour. Do you understand? I feel like I was a kind of non-entity.

Or Ann's statement that:

I didn't feel I belonged, not because of the way I was treated but only because I was so different. It was obvious that they weren't my parents.

Finally, it should be noted that two adopted people mentioned their relative physical similarity to darker-skinned members of the adoptive family as contributing to their sense of belonging.

'Race' and racism in childhood
Experiences of 'race' are, of course, much wider than issues of colour difference within the adoptive family. An open-ended question on the significance of 'race' as a factor during childhood produced a varied response. Three interviewees made reference to poor hair or

skin care – 'She used to butcher my hair' (Hazel) – while a further three referred to their own attempts at 'whitening'. Almost all recounted experiences of racism during childhood, particularly those of verbal abuse and physical violence, with school the most frequent site. This situation was clearly exacerbated by being, almost invariably, one of very few minority ethnic children in the school and local community. Joyce, who at one point was hospitalised after being hit by a brick, recalls fondly the time when the family was fostering five older black boys who acted as protection at school and on the journeys to and from home.

The threat posed by racism could be equally powerful – 'I used to have this constant dream of being chased by racists' (Teresa) – while the isolation of life in 'white' communities could also be oppressive:

It was out in the middle of nowhere – that's how it felt – surrounded by white people. You feel like people are staring at you as you are walking down the street. (Donna)

Parental responses to the racism faced by their children were almost invariably described as fairly limited, with even the kindest verdicts tending towards 'damning with faint praise'.

My parents, they always fought it as best . . . but I suppose, looking in hindsight, I deal with it very differently with my children now than they did then. (Joyce)

More typical was Teresa's summation:

They'd be very sympathetic and 'Ooh, they don't know' and 'Don't worry about it' and 'We know' and 'We love you', and all this sort of stuff, but . . .

Some adopted people also expressed some anger at their parents for the environment in which they were raised:

I sort of blamed them, I think, for adopting me and bringing me to this community that was obviously quite hostile. (Clare)

Support from siblings and close friends was sometimes of crucial importance to 'survival', especially in relation to bullying at school. Two interviewees specifically mentioned the value of friendships with other transracially adopted children.

'Race', ethnicity and identity

Issues of racial or ethnic identity have always occupied a central place within debates on transracial adoption (Gill and Jackson, 1983; Small, 1986; Tizard and Phoenix, 1993; Kirton, 2000). Interviewees were asked how they would describe their ethnicity, but responses to other questions also give a broader picture of racial and ethnic identities. Only one of the 13 conveyed a strong and confident sense of black or other minority ethnic identity. Of the rest, four gave little or no indication of the significance of 'race' in relation to sense of self. Their accounts indicate that little importance was attached to 'black heritage', which also did not figure in motivation to search. Even within this group, however, there were glimpses of a hidden significance. Helen, who spoke rather dismissively of identity issues ('I only use my identity to shut up white do-gooders'), nonetheless also confessed to having a deep fear of her birth father's Indian culture and its 'difference'. The remaining eight interviewees all gave clear signs of experiencing some degree of confusion and uncertainty regarding racial or ethnic identity, as children, and frequently as adults. While the pseudo-clinical term 'identity confusion' may be unhelpful, there is no doubting the considerable difficulties experienced:

I haven't got a clue. I have quite a huge problem with it. (Teresa)

I don't really feel anything; I don't feel black or white. (Clare)

Two further quotes from Clare reveal the problems of wrestling with the effects of racial stereotypes, isolation in 'white' communities and ambivalence towards black people.

I thought, 'Well, if I'm achieving does that make me a good black person or a bad black person?'

I thought there must be some cities somewhere where there's black people and I thought 'Do I want to see black people or not?'. I didn't know. When I saw them on television I'd switch it over because I felt ashamed of something, so it confused me a lot.

For Rachel, negative images on television were reinforced by her adoptive father who would argue:

that black people were unintelligent and were responsible for most of the crime and black men had too many children and black families didn't look after their children.

Such overt racism seemed thankfully rare, but more covert forms had powerful effects. Trevor told of how, as a child, the refusal of his parents and teachers to acknowledge the racism he experienced in school made him feel confused and question his self-worth. Laura saw blackness largely as a deficit, a pretext for ostracism, 'so heightening my awareness of my blackness was to me, at that time, a weakening of my state'. Teresa described her discomfort watching white reactions to other black people, but crucially, how this translated into a fear of black people and a degree of internalised racism:

It scares me I think to this day, whether or not I'm a little bit racist because of it.

Many of these concerns continued into adult life, with roughly half of those interviewed recounting difficulties in relating to people from their minority ethnic 'community of origin'. This was manifest most powerfully when in all-black groups:

Sometimes when I'm in completely black settings, I feel very very white. Which is the weirdest experience because I've not ever been treated like a white person in my regular community. (Laura)

In similar vein, Rachel spoke of feeling 'totally out of my depth' among groups of black people, continuing:

... so yes, it's about belonging again. I don't feel I belong in a black environment and I don't feel that I belong any more in a white environment.

Despite popular belief in their decline, 'cultural differences', lack of understanding in relation to food, haircare and language could all produce significant embarrassment and discomfort.

I was believing I was black and that I should understand this [language] and I don't know anything, I really don't know anything. (Teresa)

I feel as if I'm a fake going into a hair salon and asking them questions, and they look at you and you think 'I can't say where I've been all these years'... You watch people and you think 'How do they know that?'. It's just like a different world sometimes, and I just shy away thinking I can't handle all this blackness. (Clare)

Beyond discomfort, such unease and ambivalence could also make for vulnerability. Hazel described how her naivety about black culture led her into a violent abusive relationship with a black partner:

It was obvious I linked into him for an identity thing and that clouded my vision.

The childhood significance of birth family

Birth relatives occupied very different places in the childhood thoughts of the 13 interviewees, ranging from apparent disinterest to near obsession, and from strongly positive to strongly negative sentiments. Five reported having thought very little about birth family as children, perhaps only on occasions such as birthdays. A further five can be described as having had a significant interest, which tended to focus, though not exclusively, on looks and physical similarity. Fantasy played an important part in this, and often took a racialised or ethnicised form:

I decided Louis Armstrong was my father. (Laura)

I suppose I imagined him to be sort of young and handsome and sort of quite dashing. It was all these fantasies about India or whatever. (Sarah)

For the remaining three, a sense of alienation from the adoptive family combined with concern over racial identity to create and sustain a passionate interest in birth family during childhood. Rachel imagined a conspiracy to keep her from her birth parents and consequently used to 'see' them everywhere, while Donna spoke of a deep desire to be with her 'real mum and dad' and a feeling that 'my life would be different if I'd been brought up by black people'. Both the interviews and the wider survey revealed some links between difficult experiences in the adoptive family and the strength of desire to search for birth family experienced during childhood. Interestingly, however, only two interviewees gave any indication of idealising birth relatives, in both instances involving an image of more (openly) loving parents. At the opposite end of this continuum were three who expressed strong negative feelings towards birth relatives, either based on information about them and the circumstances of adoption, or blame for the situation of an unhappy adoption:

To a certain extent I feel like she... not ruined my life but she had a big part in why my life is the way that it is. (Donna)

Motivation to search

The factors behind searching for birth relatives comprised a predictable mixture of particular triggers and concerns of longer standing. The triggers included the example of, or encouragement from, other adopted people, health problems, becoming a parent (including in one instance an adoptive parent) and bereavement in the adoptive family. Ann demonstrated the powerful combination of specific triggers and the underlying importance of 'blood ties' when she described how going through divorce prompted a feeling that:

I needed to relate to somebody who was my blood, who might understand my thinking. I felt a strong desire to belong to other people who I could identify with to help me go through a dreadful traumatic time.

Like two other interviewees, however, Ann's search only began in earnest after the death of her adoptive mother. Such bereavements exerted a dual influence. On the one hand, birth families potentially offered 'somewhere to turn', at least in some senses acting paradoxically as a 'substitute family'. On the other, the death of an adoptive parent could remove or diminish feelings of disloyalty (or 'betrayal') which acted as an obstacle to searching:

I didn't want my parents to feel that I was dissatisfied in any way with my life so far, or that they had been in any way lacking. (Laura)

Information and searching

The simple label of 'searching' masked a complex, multi-faceted reality. Depending upon the difficulty of the search and the motivation of the searcher, the process might be fairly swift or be spread out over many years. Similarly, the responses from birth family members, once contacted, could range from warm welcome to cold rejection. Gaining access to birth certificates and adoption agency records were the crucial first steps in this process, and interviewees were almost invariably very positive regarding the support they received at this stage and beyond, leading on to reunion. For some, agency records revealed little or nothing new, while for others the information went significantly beyond that which had been available to them via their adoptive parents. The most important new factual information usually related to the existence of (half)siblings – seven in one case – and the circumstances leading to adoption. Brian, who had always imagined his mother as young and unmarried, was rather shocked to find out she was 35 and married, and that he was born from an extra-marital affair.

Of greater significance, however, was

information which gave insights into the attitudes of birth relatives towards the children. Indications of being wanted or even 'fought for' were particularly valued. Clare describes how, on reading a letter from her birth mother, 'I just felt very attached to her, almost as if she was looking after me even though I'd never seen her', while Sarah was delighted to discover that her birth father had been trying to find her as an adult. For some, the value lay in making adoption more understandable through appreciation of its circumstances. More commonly, however, the circumstances evoked little sympathy and merely heightened a sense of anger towards birth parents. This was most pronounced when the adopted person felt singled out, for example when other illegitimate children were kept within the family, when the parents went on to marry and have other children, or when the rejection was clearly racist in origin. Reading agency records could also provoke anger against the professionals involved in the adoption, including the use of racist language and suspicions of racist attitudes towards birth family members.

Reunion

Of those interviewed, two had made contact with both their birth parents, six with their birth mother and five with birth father only. Of the remaining birth parents, one had died and the rest were divided fairly evenly between those who had been approached but rejected contact, those currently being searched for or likely to be so in the future and those in whom the adopted person claimed to have no interest. In qualitative terms, reunions were similarly varied, from the generally positive to the very disappointing. Apart from the obvious factor of a birth parent welcoming the contact, more positive outcomes appeared to depend on a delicate combination of inclusiveness and respect for the inevitable distance created by adoption. Where these conditions were met, there could be a sense of adopted people 'gaining a family'. Conversely, the most fraught reunions were characterised by birth parents who seemed preoccupied with

their own needs and problems and who were unable to give to their children, either in terms of information or emotional warmth. For two interviewees who had had quite unhappy experiences within the adoptive family, such encounters with birth relatives proved extremely frustrating:

I felt I had to tread carefully around and cater to her needs and sensitivities at the expense of mine. (Rachel)

It's like she had never really heard what it's done to me. (Donna)

Between these extremes were those whose experiences of reunion can be described as mixed. In some instances, the mix was relatively volatile – a case of relationships which blew hot and cold. In others, relationships were more stable but characterised by a degree of superficiality beyond which the adopted person felt unable to progress.

Finding physical similarity with birth relatives was welcomed (and lack of it disappointing) but inevitably limited in its effects. In other senses, the degree of 'connection' was restricted in most cases:

We don't connect . . . we have a different vocabulary altogether. (Laura)

Yet perhaps the most challenging element in reunion was negotiation of the relationship between adopted people and their birth parents. Almost all the former described wanting their birth mother or father as a friend rather than in any parental role which had been rendered inappropriate by separation and the passage of time. Difficulties arose when birth parents attempted to assume the parental role and so transgressed this hidden boundary:

I'm thinking 'Oh, you don't think you're my dad do you, 'cause you're not? You're just this guy and that's it.' (Teresa).

One time it was really getting on my nerves and I just turned round and said to her; 'To be honest you are just the woman who gave birth to me.' (Donna)

Relationships with other birth family members, such as grandparents and (half)siblings were at least as diverse as those with parents. In a few cases, 'special relationships' were formed but rejection and hostility were also common.

The place of ethnicity in searching and reunion

As noted earlier, issues of 'race' and ethnicity were prominent among motivations for searching for several interviewees. Judged from their testimony, this interest can be seen to operate at two levels. The first of these was to obtain basic information, bearing in mind that some grew up with great uncertainty as to their ethnic background. Joyce said of her early meetings with other black students:

One of the things they always ask you is 'Where are you from?' and I could never answer that, and you feel a bit silly saying 'I don't know actually.'

For some adopted people, their interest seemed to go no further, but for others there was a second stage, namely one of meaning and understanding in relation to racial and ethnic identity:

A big part of wanting to find was some kind of sanity and some sort of equilibrium about my sense of race. (Rachel)

What became clear was that for those of mixed parentage, the respective ethnic identities of birth parents exerted a significant influence over the processes of search and reunion. The general pattern was for the minority ethnic parent, usually a father, to take on an additional significance, for a variety of reasons. One was that for transracially adopted people, their 'white side' was catered for in other ways:

I wasn't that interested in my birth mother so much, because I had a white mother . . . so that area was covered. (Hazel)

Not negating that my mother was English in any way but you have that side of you

all the time because you live in this country. (Joyce)

The other side of this coin was an expectation of greater identification with a black parent:

I think I would probably find more to identify with because we would look more alike in colour. (Ann)

Teresa, who saw her adoption and continuing rejection by her birth mother as rooted in attitudes to 'race', said of her birth father:

I knew it wouldn't be a racial issue. It's very unusual for a black person to hate black people.

Such concerns also influenced the course of events after reunion, with Trevor for example, explaining his disinclination to develop ties with his mother's family:

They were very very English and there was no motivation, nothing there to help me develop my cultural identity by forging a relationship with these people.

Within the wider survey, transracially adopted people were found to search for birth fathers more frequently than their white counterparts, both initially (16 per cent compared with four per cent) and subsequently (42 per cent and 25 per cent respectively).

Given the aspirations which were frequently held in relation to racial or ethnic identity, it is pertinent to consider how far these were met through the reunion process. Amid the inevitable diversity of individual stories, the overall tendency was fairly clear, namely that the value of reunion for racialised aspects of identity was limited. It was most successful in two senses, first in relation to the basic factual clarification referred to above, and second, in the crucial task of 'bringing the parent to life'. Moving beyond this, however, had proved difficult, principally because the life courses of adopted people and their minority ethnic birth parents were as divergent in terms of culture and racial identity as

they were in other respects. Only one of those interviewed, Joyce, seemed to have gained significantly in terms of racial and cultural identity from the process of reunion, and rather ironically, she appeared even prior to the search to have the clearest sense of black identity and the strongest black networks of any of those interviewed. Within these networks, her major concern was to find out whether her father came from Africa or the Caribbean. Discovering it was the former, Joyce explains:

It grounded me, so I could then focus on the fact that I'm Ghanaian.

Making what she referred to as a 'spiritual return' to Ghana, Joyce was received with a vast family celebration and had her African name bestowed upon her.

For others, aspirations towards ethnic identity went largely unmet. In some cases, this simply reflected a disappointing reunion in which no meaningful relationship was found. In others, the 'ethnic dimension' of the relationship was muted and the minority ethnic networks of birth parents remained inaccessible. Sarah related how, although her birth father had retained strong connections with India and she had always 'wanted to know a bit more about the Asian part of me', this had not happened. Some interviewees speculated that their birth parents might see a 'distance' between them:

I think she was disappointed because I wasn't black enough. (Clare)

Such difficulties may help to explain findings from the wider survey, namely that those adopted transracially (23 per cent) were less likely than white counterparts (54 per cent) to say that they felt 'at home' with birth relatives or that reunion had made them feel more complete as a person (44 per cent and 63 per cent respectively).

Search, reunion and adoptive parents
In this section, we focus upon the impact of searching and reunion on adopted people's relationships with their adoptive

parents. It should be remembered here that the adoptions in question took place at a time when 'closed' adoption was the norm. Almost all those interviewed talked of feeling guilty, aware that searching for birth relatives might be perceived as a slight against their adoptive parents. As noted earlier, some interviewees delayed searching until after adoptive parents had died, and others carried out their searches with varying degrees of secrecy. The responses of adoptive parents varied widely from the supportive via the indifferent to the openly hostile:

She said it was like a chapter in her life closed now that I'd done this. She could never see me the same again. (Trevor)

There were also families in which the hostility came from siblings 'defending' their parents. Despite the challenges presented by searching and reunion, some of those interviewed believed that successfully meeting these challenges had brought them closer to their adoptive parents. There were also at least three instances where contacts had been established between members of the birth and adoptive families, though only one of these had involved meetings between parents. Exceptional or not, there is no doubting the integrative value of such contacts for adopted people. Reflecting on the process of reunion, Laura described her favourite memory as:

. . . seeing my natural father and my adoptive mother sitting next to each other chatting at my wedding . . . It was fantastic.

The tensions surrounding loyalties within the adoption circle are never more apparent than in use of the term 'real' in relation to parents. The childhood use of the term for birth parents has already been noted, but for some this designation continued into adulthood. Rachel spoke of her disappointment that, given her unhappy adoptive experiences, her 'real family' showed no remorse. Discourses of 'real parenthood' in the context of adoption demarcate the relative importance attached to adoptive and birth parents respectively. The

starting point for such judgements appeared to rest with the 'psychological parenting' of the adopters, whose description as 'real' simultaneously acknowledged their role and marked the failings of birth parents. Broadly, the tendency was for ultimate loyalties to rest with adoptive parents, sentiments which appeared to reflect their love and hard work in bringing up the children:

It's my mum that's got me through. It's my mum that's made sure I'm educated . . . if it wasn't for her I wouldn't be where I am now to a certain extent. (Donna)

Also evident was the way in which birth parental absence during the formative years of childhood left a gap that could never be bridged. This was most apparent in the phenomenon of 'role transgression' referred to earlier, and seemed to apply even when other factors might push adopted people towards their birth parents:

Whatever my feelings for my adopted parents, I don't think I'd ever be able to love my real, my birth parents in the same way, even though I like my birth parents a lot more than my adopted parents. (Rachel)

One clear exception to this was Clare:

I know I love my birth mother and I can't explain why, but I just know that I'm always going to love her more than anybody else.

Two interviewees made explicit reference to 'race' in relation to the tensions with adoptive parents over searching and reunion: 'White family, black children, very difficult' (Teresa). Joyce explained how she had fallen out with her adoptive parents when she began to assert her identity and questioned why she and her brother had been brought up in isolation from other black people.

Gains and losses from searching and reunion

Entries were plentiful on both sides of the balance sheet for searching and reunion, with varying individual balances

reflecting the hopes and expectations of adopted people and the extent to which these had been met. Overall, experiences ranged from those who felt they now had the 'bonus' of a second family, to one interviewee who could scarcely believe she had three families (her birth parents having gone their separate ways) with so many problems. Despite varying degrees of disappointment, almost all felt that searching and reunion had been worthwhile. Successful searching often gave rise to particular 'highs':

I was so happy. There was a grin on my face for so long. (Teresa)

I was ecstatic – I was on the phone for weeks! (Joyce)

Even more basic gains could be greatly appreciated. Recalling how 'pathetic' she had felt lacking such knowledge, Rachel continued:

I know as much as I can now, which is a damn sight more than I did before. I've met them, I've seen them – it's quite important to have a face. I know who my extended family is, whether I know them as people or not.

A few interviewees referred to 'new' sibling relationships as a major gain. Once again, however, the most commonly cited 'best thing' about reunion was that of witnessing physical similarity with birth relatives:

It was very exciting. Just the shock of looking at somebody who looks like you is amazing, really lovely. (Joyce)

The losses associated with searching and reunion were mainly those of aspirations unmet, although there were those whose reunions led to feelings of having 'lost out' in terms of a life with their birth family. Two interviewees referred to the loss of fantasy:

There's nothing further than that to sort of whimsically think about – this is it, this is the family and that's the other family. (Rachel)

The relative thwarting of aspirations in respect of ethnic identity has been noted earlier, but there was sometimes a wider yearning to belong which was not satisfied:

Maybe I thought that I would belong, but actually it's probably increased my sense of isolation. (Sarah)

This led on to experiences of rejection, which could occur either through refusal of contact, or as an element within the relationship following reunion. The former was especially painful. Laura received a letter from her birth mother 'saying I wasn't her daughter as far as she was concerned'.

Reactions to such rejection varied from stoicism to extreme anger, with two interviewees telling of their desire to 'stalk' a parent as revenge. Helen recounted phoning up her mother on birthdays and putting the phone down several times, 'just to wind her up and think "You won't bloody forget today."'

Acknowledging that this was 'pathetic', she also recognised the anger which prompted it. Mention should also be made of how several adopted people felt that the rejections experienced in their lives had left a legacy of mistrust which influenced their own relationships, most frequently by making them hang on to relationships, come what may:

I can't have anybody walking away from me, can't hack it. I'll stay in it however shitty it is. (Helen)

When considering the gains and losses of reunion, it must of course be remembered that interviewees were speaking at varying stages of journeys which are, almost certainly, unfinished for all of them.

Reflections on transracial adoption

The following comments did not arise from any direct question about transracial adoption but in response to whether interviewees had 'anything to add' to their testimony. In all, seven interviewees chose to comment on transracial adoption more generally. One was strongly in favour.

Helen complained that too much attention was focused on those transracial adoptions which had worked out poorly, and insufficient on those which were successful:

Why does everyone make this big fuss about black children or mixed ancestry children in white families? So we'll just leave them in a home instead.

The remaining six all expressed serious reservations, and in some cases, clear opposition to transracial adoption. Some emphasised psychological problems surrounding identity:

It's the way it makes you totally confused, really. It's got good and bad points but I just think overall it's just a mess. (Clare)

It's a great idea isn't it? I mean to place a child in a loving family environment, oh yes, very nice, but it's given us so many hang-ups that are unbelievable and we wouldn't even disclose to our mother. (Teresa)

Others noted the limits of 'success' and even the efforts of loving parents:

People say 'Yes, but you're OK, you've got a degree, you've done this . . .' They all look for socio-economic reasons and go 'Well, you've come out OK.' I'm alive and yes, I've done some things for myself but there's a lot . . . in terms of emotions I have lost a lot which I cannot get back. (Rachel)

Love is great but it's not everything. It really isn't everything – because I had all the love I could possibly ask for but I'm not alright. (Donna)

Joyce talked of 'race', culture and the limits of empathy, saying that while she loved her adoptive mother deeply:

. . . there are things I can't talk to her about because she doesn't have that understanding of it. I suppose what I'm saying, it's not just about having the colour, it's living it and you can live with it as my mum has done but it's different to living it. It's about living black.

Such comments should perhaps be set in the context of what seemed to be the overwhelmingly 'colour-blind' approach of the adoptive families. It is telling that throughout all the interviews, there was virtually no mention of anything done by adoptive parents to positively promote a sense of racial or cultural identity for their children. The latter's responses, meanwhile, fell into two categories. On the one hand, there were those where 'race' simply seemed not to figure as an issue, suggesting that the colour-blind approach had been internalised. On the other, when 'race' was discussed extensively, it was clear that the approach had been perceived, not only as failing to address the problems experienced by transracially adopted people, but as exacerbating them. While the latter grouping shows the more obvious risks associated with transracial adoption, the former raises the awkward implication that feelings of integration within the adoptive family may frequently come at the price of denying racial or ethnic identity.

Implications for policy and practice

Findings from this study offer potentially valuable insights into the experiences of transracially adopted people and especially those of their searching for and reunion with birth family members. The study adds to a growing body of evidence (Department of Health, 1999, pp 155–9; Kirton and Woodger, 1999) which shows that while transracial adoption has many successful elements, usually including strong, loving relationships with adoptive parents, it also frequently gives rise to feelings of difference or even alienation from the family. It is clear that transracially adopted people face additional tasks in their search for identity, and the difficulties described underline the importance of securing ethnically matched placements whenever possible. When transracial adoptions do occur, either domestically or intercountry, the study shows the importance of adopters being able to help their child(ren) effectively meet the challenges arising from issues of ethnic identity and experiences of racism. This entails the acknow-

ledgement and valuing of difference, and actively embracing the child's 'race' and culture of origin by building and maintaining strong links with multiracial networks. Adoptive parents must be able to recognise both the gains and losses of transracial adoption and to understand the vital nature of empathy, yet also its limits in areas such as experiences of racism. The task for adoption agencies is partly one of gauging the readiness and potential of prospective adopters to fulfil these criteria, partly one of offering preparation and ongoing support to help them do so effectively.

The study also indicates that while identity issues often figure prominently within their motivation to search, reunion with birth relatives may on balance be less satisfying for transracially adopted people in terms of meeting their identity needs. For practitioners who provide a birth record, counselling, information and intermediary service, this has important implications. Preparation should include an exploration of issues related to cultural differences, and their possible impact on the gains and losses which may ensue from searching and reunion.

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