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**WHAT MAKES ADOPTIVE FAMILY LIFE  
WORK? ADOPTIVE PARENTS' NARRATIVES  
OF THE MAKING AND REMAKING OF  
ADOPTIVE KINSHIP**

**Christine A. Jones**

**PhD**

**This Thesis is submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy,  
School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University  
May 2009**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Adoption theory, policy and practice have undergone considerable change in the period between the introduction of the Adoption Act (1976) and the Adoption and Children Act (2002). In this period, in particular, adoption has increasingly come to be understood within the context of an ethic of 'openness'. This has had implications for the day to day lives of members of the adoption triad, that is, adoptive parents, adoptees and birth family members, and their attempts to 'make adoption work' across their lifecourse. The thesis draws on theories of family and kinship in order to develop understandings of day to day family practices that emerge in adoptive families and the way these shape and are shaped by adoption discourse. The thesis provides an analysis of local and national statistical data and the biographical accounts of twenty two adoptive parents who had children placed with them between 1977 and 2001. These were all domestic 'stranger' adoptions. From the adopters' narratives it was apparent that the core and ongoing challenge facing adoptive parents was to find a unique way of 'doing' adoptive family life which acknowledged the importance both of biological ties and legal kinship. This was the case regardless of the year of the adoption and continues to challenge these families today. The thesis explores the tasks which flow from this core challenge, that is, developing and maintaining family relationships between adopters and adoptees where none previously existed, finding a place for birth relatives within the adoptive kinship model and developing a positive identity as a non conventional family. The thesis challenges the conceptualisation of adoptive relations as 'fictive kinship' and biological connectedness as 'real' kinship and presents evidence of the fragility of both the biological family and the adoptive family where there has been a legal adoption of a child. At the same time the thesis reveals the ability of both biological and adoptive family ties to endure over time despite cultural barriers. The study also reveals that existing typologies of adoption as 'confidential', 'mediated' and 'fully disclosed' fail to capture the complexity of adoptive family life. A new definition of both adoptive kinship and 'openness' in adoption are developed and the implications of these redefinitions for adoption policy and practice are explored.



## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to my dear friend Rachel Sherratt who died tragically in January 2008 while taking photographs of the snow in rural Perthshire. Rachel acted as a referee when my husband and I applied to adopt and was a great support in those busy, tiring, early days of family life. She will always be 'Aunty Rachel'.

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# **1 Setting the scene**

## ***1.1 Introduction***

The thesis is entitled ‘What makes adoptive family life work?’ Each year adoption orders are granted in the UK to a range of individuals including stepparents, relatives and non-relatives (also known in the adoption literature as stranger adoptions). Adoptions may also be domestic (within-country) or international. This thesis is concerned specifically with domestic stranger adoptions in the UK. The thesis seeks to increase understandings of the challenges of domestic stranger adoption and the work undertaken within adoptive families to overcome these challenges.

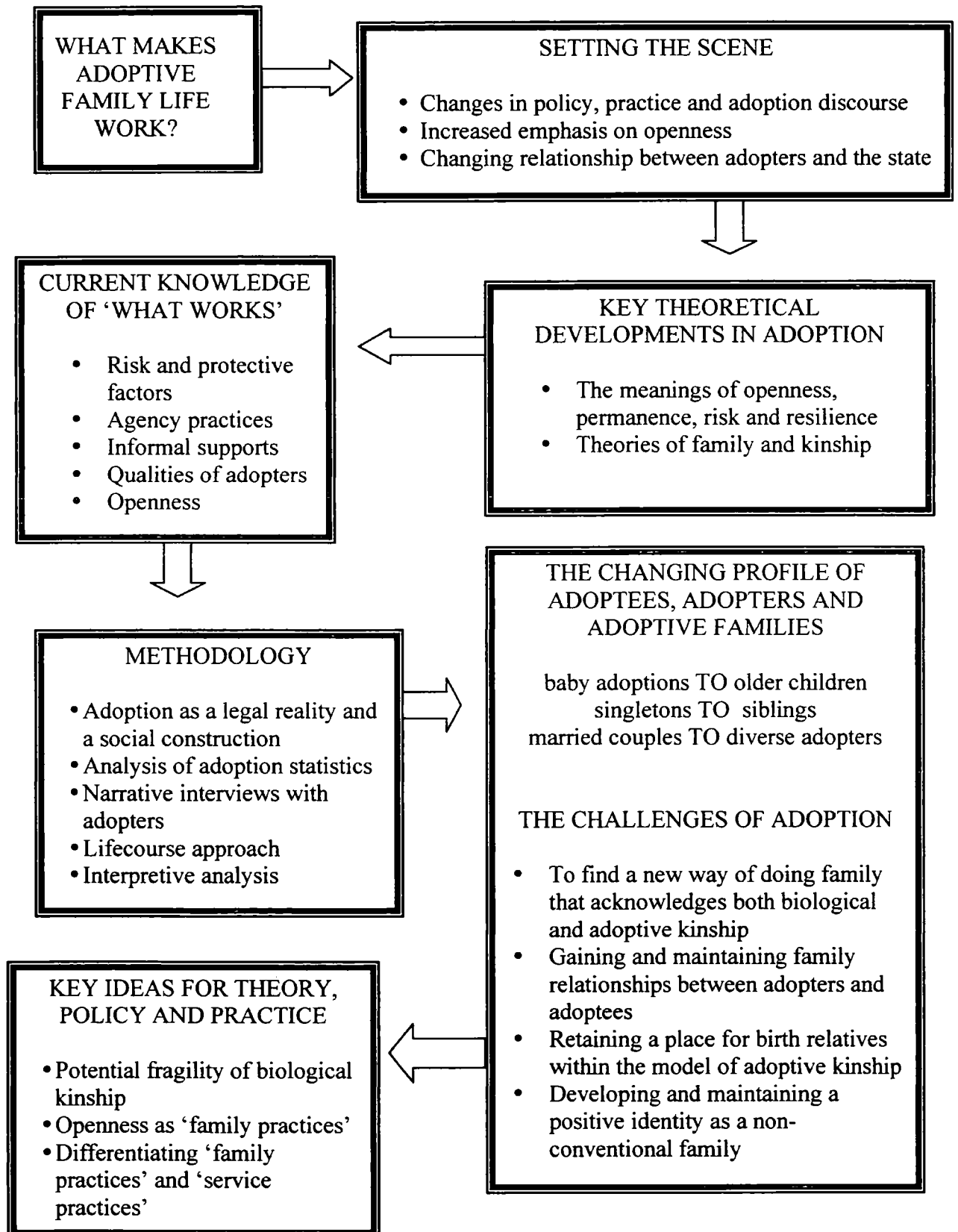
The term ‘adoption’ can be defined in legal terms as the total and permanent legal transfer of parental responsibility from birth parents to adoptive parents. Both the totality and permanence (into adulthood and throughout life) associated with this legal mechanism makes adoption unique from other long term care or parenting arrangements such as fostering, residency orders or guardianship (Lowe, et al. 1999). However, while adoption can be understood simply and precisely as a legal mechanism, the meanings attached to the concept are diverse and highly complex. Luckock and Hart (2005) call for the recognition of adoption as a unique way of ‘doing’ family. However, questions remain about the nature of the uniqueness of adoptive family life, what ‘doing’ adoptive family life involves and what makes it work. The starting point for the thesis is that adoption is both a legal reality and a socially constructed phenomenon which is achieved through co-production or active ‘work’ on the part of social actors. In addition, this work is required far beyond the initial placement of a child or the legal granting of an adoption and is, in fact, a lifelong process. The thesis assumes that the work involved is influenced by the historical, political, cultural and social context within which it takes place.

The thesis focuses on adoptions between 1976 and 2001 a period which separates two major pieces of adoption legislation, namely the Adoption Act (1976) and the Adoption and Children Act (2002). It explores the shifting meanings of adoption and the changing practices associated with adoptive family life from 1976 onwards in

order to draw some lessons for contemporary adoption theory, policy and practice.

Figure 1 below provides an overview of the key areas addressed in the thesis.

**Figure 1 What makes adoptive family life work**



## **1.2 Why study adoption? The personal and the political**

### **1.2.1 The changing nature of adoption**

Child adoption has long been a controversial topic that has captured the social imagination and challenged policy makers, practitioners and those who experience its consequences daily. Historically, adoption involved the placement of healthy white relinquished<sup>a</sup> babies with substitute parents. It was seen, therefore, as a solution to the problems faced by unmarried mothers, illegitimate children and childless couples. More recently the number of infants available for adoption has decreased substantially. Some of the social changes which have led to this reduction include increased availability of contraception; the introduction of the Abortion Act 1967; less stigma being attached to illegitimacy; and the status of 'unmarried mother' becoming subsumed under the more general category of 'single parent family' (Parker 1999). Over the same period, research evidence has become available to show that adoption can be successful for children adopted beyond infancy and those who have experienced abusive or neglectful parenting and have entered the care system (Kadushin 1970; Tizard 1977). In the last forty years, therefore, adoption has become increasingly concerned with the placement of older looked after children and children with special needs into families that can offer a therapeutic or reparative environment. The children being considered for adoption have included those with mental or physical impairments, children of dual heritage and sibling groups (Triseliotis, et al. 1997). At the same time, the range of people considered suitable to adopt has also expanded to include those from different social classes and economic backgrounds, single and divorced adopters, those with established families and older adopters (Triseliotis, et al. 1997). In a significant move, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 further extended the categories of individuals who can apply for an adoption order to include unmarried couples, including gay and lesbian couples.

A further significant change in the nature of adoption concerns the move from an expectation that adoptions would remain confidential or involve secrecy to an expectation of openness. There has been a growing recognition within adoption and child welfare policy and practice of the potentially damaging consequences of secrecy in adoption. The previous secrecy surrounding adoption was partly an

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<sup>a</sup> The term 'relinquished' is commonly used but has been questioned as it implies choice where none may have existed (Harris 2004).



attempt to avoid the stigma of illegitimacy faced by the child and birth parents and the stigma of infertility faced by childless couples or as Brown (1992, cited in Fisher 2003) powerfully puts it “*the unwed mother, the bastard child, and the barren couple*”. However, it became apparent, through research with adopted adults (Triseliotis 1973), and reports of clinical practice (Baran, et al. 1977; Pannor and Baran 1984) as well as personal testimony (Lifton 1975) that adoption rarely represents a ‘clean break and fresh start’ and instead origins, identity and heredity continue to be important (Howe and Feast 2000). As a result greater emphasis was placed on the importance of openness in adoption and prospective adoptive parents are now routinely encouraged to acknowledge and share information about adoption with adopted children (Howe and Feast 2000). In addition, continuing contact between the child and their birth family following adoption has increasingly been encouraged. A national study of agencies’ and adoptive parents’ experiences of the adoption process (Lowe, et al. 1999), found that prospective adopters were not selected if they had a negative attitude to openness. This suggests that openness has become a definite expectation rather than a desirable feature of adoption.

This move towards openness is reflected in a number of pieces of legislation. Section 26 of the Children Act 1975 (later to form part of the Adoption Act 1976, section 51) gave adopted adults the right to access information to enable them to get a copy of their original birth certificate and therefore, search for birth parents. The Act also gave adopted people the right to apply to the court to find out the name of the agency or local authority involved in the adoption. Compulsory counselling was part of the provision of the Act to address concerns expressed about the potential distress for all parties associated with search and reunion. An additional development was introduced with the Children Act (England and Wales) 1989 which amended the Adoption Act 1976 requiring the Registrar General to establish an Adoption Contact Register to enable adopted adults and birth parents to register their willingness for contact (Howe and Feast 2000). The Children Act 1989 replaced the concept of ‘access’ with that of ‘contact’ and placed emphasis on the importance of continuing contact between looked after children and their families. It required local authorities to promote contact between a child and significant family members as long as this was in the child’s best interest. The National Adoption Standards (DOH 2001) also place emphasis on considering arrangements for contact between a child and significant others. While adoption and child welfare policy has gradually

acknowledged the potentially damaging consequences of secrecy and the value of openness, it has still somewhat lagged behind practice (Fratter 1996).

### **1.2.2 Introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002**

Child adoption was recently placed higher up the political agenda when in February 2000, the Prime Minister commissioned a review of adoption by the Performance and Innovation Unit of the Cabinet Office. The review report was published on 7 July 2000 as a Consultation Document (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000) and in December 2000 a White Paper was produced. It heralded the introduction of the Adoption and Permanence Taskforce to support Local Authorities to improve their practice in relation to Looked After Children, adoption and permanence, and the setting of a target by government to increase adoptions by forty percent, and if possible fifty percent, by 2004/5 (Department of Health 2000b). The Adoption and Children Act 2002, which applies to both local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies, received Royal Assent on 7 November 2002 and was fully implemented in December 2005. It introduced the following provisions:

- a duty on local authorities to maintain adoption services including arrangements for the provision of adoption support services;
- the right of adoptive families and others to an assessment of needs for adoption support services;
- a new regulatory structure for adoption support agencies;
- an independent review mechanism in relation to qualifying determinations made by an adoption agency;
- the extension of adoption orders to unmarried couples as well as single people and married couples;
- a new regulatory framework to enable intermediary agencies to help adopted adults obtain information about their adoption and facilitate contact between them and their adult birth relatives, where the person was adopted before the 2002 act came into force;
- the right of adult birth relatives to request an intermediary service to find out information and/or make approaches to adopted adults who were adopted before 30 December 2005; and
- a new special guardianship order, intended to provide permanence for children for whom adoption is not appropriate.

Importantly, the Act acknowledges adoptive families' need for ongoing access to support and defines the role of the state in either providing this or arranging for its provision. It, therefore, provides an opportunity for a re-examination of questions about 'what makes adoptive family life work?' and how this can best be facilitated by the state. However, child adoption and state intervention in family life have proved over the years to be highly contentious issues. The introduction of the Act has been accompanied by vigorous and ongoing debates about the state's role in regulating and mediating the transfer of children from one family to another, as well as about the nature of the 'family' itself.

### **1.2.3 The role of the state in the lives of vulnerable families**

There appears to have been great uncertainty throughout the latter half of the twentieth century about the appropriate role of the state when intervening in the lives of vulnerable families and this uncertainty continues today. In the 1960s and early 1970s 'prevention' and 'rehabilitation' with birth families were the dominant models of child welfare. The welfare goals of this period were to provide family support and keep families together wherever possible. However, this approach was later perceived to be ineffective and the 'removal and rescue' of children at risk became the dominant model (Lowe, et al. 1999). The Children Act 1975 gave social workers more powers and encouraged the adoption of older children and children with special needs. The Children Act 1989 shifted the emphasis back from child rescue and adoption to birth family support and preservation and child protection. The Act placed emphasis on working in partnership with parents. One particular concept which is reported by Lowe et al. (1999) to have heavily influenced child care policy in the early 1970s, was 'permanency planning' This originated in the USA where the term 'permanency' was originally conceived to include long term fostering, residential care and adoption as well as return to the birth family. Despite this broad definition, it is widely acknowledged that, in the UK, adoption was often favoured by practitioners as a way of achieving permanence (Lewis 2004; Lowe, et al. 1999; Parker 1999). The legacy of 'permanency planning' can still be felt today.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 has once again placed adoption at centre stage of child welfare policy. As a result concerns have been expressed that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on legal adoption as the route for Looked After Children seeking permanent substitute families. Warman and Roberts (2001) and

Rushton (2003a) have summarised the criticisms of current policy in terms of their potential to lead to:

- a shift away from supporting families towards finding substitute adoptive families too quickly;
- adoption being inappropriately promoted as the only or best solution for some children although it is not in their best interests;
- long term foster care and residential care being seen as second best options when these may best serve the needs of the child;
- too little emphasis on permanency within the extended family as opposed to 'stranger' adoption;

Warman and Roberts (2001) questioned the current emphasis on 'legal permanency' as opposed to long-term 'stability' and 'security' as it is experienced by the child.

When examining the implications of adoption and other forms of permanency, comparisons are often drawn between the current UK adoption policy agenda and approaches taken in other countries. For example, Rushton (2003a) and Warman and Roberts (2001) highlighted differing practices in countries other than the UK such as favouring family preservation, promoting the placement of children with relatives and not permitting adoption of children from care without the prior consent of birth parents. However, Rushton (2003a) has argued that whilst these differences are illuminating, the evidence base for a comparative analysis of outcomes of various permanency options is under-developed making it difficult to draw any conclusions about the appropriate place of adoption within such options. These comparisons do, however, remind us of the potential influence of the cultural context in which adoption decisions are made.

The influence of culturally specific definitions of kinship and parenting on adoption practice has been highlighted by several writers (Baran, et al. 1976; Leon 2002). Baran et al. (1976) have made comparisons between adoption practices in the USA and in other cultures, such as Eskimo communities and the traditional Hawaiian culture. Within these cultures an important aspect of adoption was the maintenance of the child's dual connection to two families. They have drawn on such comparisons in order to question taken for granted assumptions about adoption and kinship in the USA. Differing adoption practices in the UK and other European countries suggest a

need to pay attention to taken for granted assumptions about permanency and the best interests of the child within UK policy and practice also.

#### **1.2.4 The interests served by changing adoption discourses**

Much of the analysis of policy and practice developments within the adoption field is concerned with the weight given at various points in time to the needs and rights of members of the 'adoption triad', that is, the birth family, the adoptive family and the adoptee. For example, the Children Act 1975 and Adoption Act 1976 have been perceived as taking away powers from birth parents and promoting the adoption route (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000), whereas the Children Act 1989 was seen as giving more rights to birth families by promoting 'partnership' between them and local authorities (Fratter 1996). In addition, while much of the practice literature refers to a child-centred approach to adoption being introduced from the 1970s onwards, in legal terms the welfare of the child was not made paramount (as opposed to being seen as important but balanced alongside the needs of birth or social parents) until the introduction of the Children Act 1989 (Lewis 2004).

While shifts have been identified in the interests served at various points in time in relation to children, birth parents and adopters, Lewis (2004) taking a more critical approach, identified a fourth set of potential interests served by changing adoption discourses, that is, the interests of the state. She charted the move from adoption as a way of dealing with illegitimate babies in the mid twentieth century to a political solution to problems in the child welfare system in the late twentieth and early twenty first century. Lewis (2004) suggested that the Children Act 1975 marked a fundamental shift in adoption towards increased state control and professionalisation and adoption being viewed as part of the state child care system. She gave a number of examples of political interests served by this increased state control and professionalisation including the need to address financial concerns in a climate of soaring child welfare costs, scandals of mistreatment within residential care and low educational attainment by looked after children. Other commentators have also expressed fears that child welfare decisions have been based on the need to avoid the soaring costs of the public care system (Warman and Roberts 2001). Lewis (2004) went on to suggest that the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 positions adoption not only as part of the child care system but as the solution to problems within this system.

### **1.2.5 Consequences of the changing nature of adoption for adoptive family life**

The nature of adoption has changed significantly over the last forty years. It is perhaps inevitable that this has resulted in profound changes to adoptive family life and the expectations of the role of adoptive parents. Adoption is no longer assumed by practitioners to involve a 'clean break' (Howe and Feast 2000) and the task of the adoptive family can no longer be viewed as adjusting to 'normative' family life (Luckock and Hart 2005). Instead adoption has become significantly more complex and is increasingly being recognised as a lifelong process rather than a one-off event (Howe and Feast 2000). In addition, adoptive family life is more likely to involve an ongoing relationship with the state and its agents beyond the adoption order (Luckock and Hart 2005).

Children adopted from the public care system are more likely to have experienced poor parenting, neglect or maltreatment and may have experienced frequent moves (Triseliotis, et al. 1997). As a result of these experiences, adopted children may experience a range of psychological difficulties. The problem of inadequate or disrupted attachment has received particular attention in the literature and understandings of the concept and intervention strategies have moved on considerably since the early work of Bowlby (Bowlby 1965; Howe 1995; Lacher, et al. 2005). In addition, some children adopted from the public care system may have acquired disabilities or health problems as a result of abuse, neglect or in-utero exposure to drugs or alcohol. Each of these difficulties, therefore, brings challenges to the parenting role when adopting such a child.

Openness also has distinct implications for adoptive families, requiring them to develop skills and resources that were previously not considered necessary. For example, openness may require adoptive parents to communicate difficult information to children about their early experiences within the birth family or handle bullying from other children as a result of perceived differences. A decision to maintain contact with members of a birth family, whether direct or indirect, requires adoptive parents to deal with the practical and emotional consequences of this decision for both them and their adopted children.

The need for adoption support, pre and post placement and after the granting of the adoption order has long been recognised and a number of innovative services have developed<sup>b</sup>. However, the latest survey of adoption support services confirms that while voluntary and local authority support services are developing, access to specialist services and health and education services is still patchy across the UK (Rushton 2003b). The government has also been criticised for providing, through the 2002 Act, a right to assessment of need but no right to receive support (Warman and Roberts 2001). While the lifespan approach to adoption and post adoption issues have been given recognition by government in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and recently produced practice guidance on assessing the support needs of adoptive families (Department for Children Schools and Families 2008), there is still great uncertainty about the impact that these will have on local practice.

### **1.2.6 My personal interest in adoption**

My own interest in child adoption stems from my personal experience as an adoptive parent. In 2002, two boys, full siblings aged one and three, were placed with me and my husband with a view to us becoming their adoptive parents. In 2003 an adoption order was granted. The boys were unrelated to us and had been living with two separate foster families under the care of the local authority. We maintain contact with various members of the boys' birth family through a 'letterbox' arrangement. Although we had been through preparation classes, assessment, home studies and had been deemed 'fit to parent' by a panel of experts, we had little idea of the way adoption would change our lives, not just as parents but also as the parents of children connected by birth to another family. In 2005, somewhat serendipitously, a PhD studentship was advertised nationally by Durham University. The study was entitled 'What makes adoption work?'. The PhD was funded through an ESRC CASE studentship awarded to one of my academic supervisors in partnership with a leading voluntary adoption agency operating in the north east of England, DFW Adoption. I applied for the studentship and was successful.

This thesis, therefore, is informed by my own attempts to understand my situation as an adoptive parent, the viewpoint of my adopted children and that of my adopted children's birth family. Throughout the thesis I refer to my experience as well as the

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<sup>b</sup>For example, Adoption UK, the only national self help group run by and for adoptive parents, was established in 1971 and the Post Adoption Centre as founded in 1986.

experiences of the adoptive mothers and fathers who participated in the research that I conducted. These narrative extracts have an important role to play in moving the thesis beyond an abstract academic argument. As Plummer has suggested such personal accounts “*give flesh and blood*” (Plummer 1995, p.175) to the challenges faced by those who experience adoption.

### **1.3 A note on terminology**

Throughout the thesis I use the phrases ‘birth family’, ‘adoptive family’ and ‘adoptive kinship network’. It is difficult to come to any conclusive definitions of these terms as the analysis that is developed later in the thesis shows that these are contested concepts. However, the following provisional definitions are offered.

By ‘birth family’ I mean those who are related to the adoptee by consanguinity or through marriage. References to the ‘adoptive family’ refer mainly to the members of the household where the adoptee is placed and include adoptive parent(s) and siblings within the household (these siblings may also be birth relatives). The term is also used to refer to extended members of the adoptive family such as adoptive grandparents, aunts and uncles. The term ‘adoptive kinship network’ is reserved for use when a point is being discussed in relation to the adoptee, his or her birth family and adoptive family members. I also use the terms ‘adoption triangle’ and ‘adoption triad’ to refer collectively to the adoptee, his or her birth family and the adoptive family.

### **1.4 Summary and structure of the thesis**

Adoption discourse has been shaped, over the past four decades, by developments in policy and practice as well as by social change. This chapter has described the most significant of these trends over a forty-year period. There have been significant changes in the expectations of who is considered adoptable and who can adopt. The adoptive family has been recast as a reparative environment rather than a substitute family. There has been a move away from confidential adoptions towards more openness. Together these changes have produced considerable challenges for adoptive families. Throughout these changes, however, practice has remained ahead of policy developments and there remains considerable controversy about the appropriate role of the state in mediating the transfer of children from one family to another and meeting the ongoing support needs of adoptive families.



In chapter two some of the core theoretical concepts that have become an integral part of adoption policy and practice such as ‘openness’, ‘permanence’ and ‘risk’ are explored and the empirical evidence relating to these concepts is analysed. A critique of ‘evidence based practice’ or the ‘what works’ agenda is offered and from this critique a rationale for the research undertaken here is developed. Chapter three describes the methodology adopted for the research and provides a reflexive account of the research process. In chapter four both statistical data and qualitative data relating to the changing profile of adopters, adoptees and the families created through adoption are presented and discussed. In chapter five an analysis is offered of the narratives of adoptive parents which suggests that the core and ongoing challenge facing adoptive parents is to find a unique way of ‘doing adoptive family life’ which acknowledges the importance both of biological ties and legal kinship. Data is presented to describe the tasks which flow from this core challenge include developing and maintaining family relationships between adopters and adoptees where none previously existed, finding a place for birth relatives within the adoptive kinship model and developing a positive identity as a non conventional family. In chapter six the data is discussed in relation to current adoption theory and a new definition of both ‘adoptive kinship’ and ‘openness’ in adoption are developed. The implications of these redefinitions for adoption policy and practice are then examined. In particular a distinction is made between practices of openness as either ‘service practices’ or ‘family practices’ and the potential impact of each on adoptive family life is explored. Finally, chapter seven summarises the key findings of the research and identifies the new knowledge generated within the thesis. Some personal reflections on the process of developing the thesis are also offered. The chapter ends with suggestions for a future research agenda.

## **2 Review of literature**

In order to provide a context for the thesis that I develop here, it is important to provide the reader with an understanding of the theories that are influential within adoption research, policy and practice as well as outlining current knowledge of ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ In this chapter, therefore, I summarise the theories and concepts that have been most influential within adoption research to date, I provide an historical account of their development and critique the ways in which these have been interpreted. I also outline some key concepts from the sociology of the family and anthropological studies of kinship that offer the potential of new insights into adoptive family life. Having outlined the key concepts within current adoption research and family and kinship studies, I then provide a rationale for the particular approach that I use in order to address the question ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ I offer a critique of the approaches to ‘what works’ or evidence based practice that have emerged and suggest an alternative model for ‘what works’ research which I have incorporated into this study. Having articulated the approach to evidence based practice that I adopt here, I then critically review the empirical evidence relating to ‘what makes adoptive family life work’ using this new framework. Finally, I consider the gaps in current knowledge and provide a rationale for the empirical research that I have conducted.

### ***2.1 Key theoretical developments in the field of adoption***

In this section I review the development of the concepts of openness, permanence, risk to wellbeing and resilience within the field of adoption studies.

#### **2.1.1 Openness**

Arguably, the most significant concept to have emerged in the field of adoption in the late twentieth century, and certainly the most debated in the literature, is ‘openness’. The concept stands in direct opposition to the now outmoded practice of secrecy in adoption that dominated in the UK for much of the twentieth century. Changing social attitudes towards sex outside of marriage, research evidence of the potential harm of secrecy, pressure from interest groups of adoptees and birth parents and market forces of supply and demand within the American independent adoption system have all combined to drive forward the development of openness both

theoretically and practically (Grotevant and McRoy 1998). Openness has been promoted as an issue of human rights and individual wellbeing (Carp 2002).

Recognition of the academic value of the concept of openness owes much to the work of David Kirk (1964). Kirk was interested in the relationship between professionals' prescription to tell adopted children that they are adopted and adoptive parent's coping strategies. He conceptualised these coping strategies as 'rejection of difference' or 'acknowledgement of difference'. He highlighted the importance of open communication about adoption within the adoptive family and hypothesised that in order for this to be effective, adoptive parents must come to terms with their childlessness and the emotional pain associated with this, acknowledge the differences between theirs and other family forms, and in so doing develop empathy with the adopted child and a sense of 'shared fate'.

In order to encourage open communication and deal with confusion about belonging and identity, Kirk recommended that adoptive parents directly address adopted children's misunderstandings about their adoptive status; ensure adopted children feel able to deal with questions about adoption; and create rituals such as adoption anniversary celebrations to confirm membership of the adoptive family. In order to promote empathy with birth parents Kirk also promoted the value of practices such as adopters meeting the child's birth mother, a letter from the birth mother to the adopted child explaining the circumstances of the adoption and annual updates on the child being provided to the adoption agency by the adopters so that these could be accessed by the birth mother.

While the openness practices suggested by Kirk were, at the time, radical, the relevance of some aspects of his theories to contemporary adoption is questionable. The theory of 'shared fate' and concept of 'acknowledgement of difference' were developed within a particular historical context in which functionalist models of the family were prevalent and adoption practice and social mores differed from today's. However, Kirk's legacy to adoptive family life is his exposure of the crucial task within an adoptive family of creating a shared meaning of adoptive relationships.

As the concept of openness and the professional practices related to it have developed it has taken on increasingly diffuse meanings. Modell (1994), in her study

of adoptive kinship, draws on a variety of interpretations of openness such as loss of confidentiality, a one-off exchange of information between birth and adoptive parents, an ongoing relationship between birth and adoptive parents and the adoptee, shared parenting, blended families, the voluntary transfer of a child from birth to adoptive parents (the gift model) and self determination in the process of an exchange of a child. These different possibilities within the concept of openness potentially have very different impacts on adoptive family life, how it is conceptualised and lived. The distinction between different forms of openness, however, is not always clearly articulated when evidence of the benefits and risks of openness are reviewed.

In an attempt to operationalise openness for the purposes of empirical research, Grotevant and McRoy (1998) 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. Grotevant and McRoy (1998) have described openness in terms of a continuum and there has been a recognition that patterns of contact and information exchange between adoptive and birth families may change over time (Grotevant, et al. 2005; Triseliotis, et al. 1997). 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 a child develops cognitively and socially and as life events unfold (Brodzinsky, et al. 1984; Hajal and Rosenberg 1991).

Brodzinsky (2005), in an attempt to distinguish the diffuse practices associated with openness has differentiated between structural openness and communicative openness. Structural openness refers to the configuration of the adoptive kinship network and the patterns of contact between members of this network. By contrast, communicative openness is concerned with the process of exploring over time 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; willingness to communicate with the birth family; and empathy for the birth family.

As can be seen from Neil's (2007) definition, the concept of parental empathy which Kirk (1964) first highlighted continues to be closely linked with the concept of openness in the literature either in relation to adopters' empathy for birth parents (Neil 2002; Raynor 1980) or adopters' empathy for their adopted children (Neil 2002). Brodzinsky (2005) has also referred to the importance of emotional attunement between the adoptive parent and adopted child in order to achieve communicative openness. Neil (2002), in her work on the relationship between empathy and direct contact identified four key aspects of empathy shown by adoptive parents towards birth parents:

1. The recognition by adopters of issues of loss for birth relatives and an appreciation of birth relatives' need for information about child.
2. Adopters' understanding of the current and past difficulties and disadvantages faced by birth relatives.
3. An awareness of the contribution that these difficulties and disadvantages may have made to inadequate care of the child and/or decision to relinquish the child.
4. A realistic but not overly sympathetic understanding of the past, current and potential future difficulties of the birth relative.

Neil (2002) also made a distinction between comprehensive and moderate empathy, the former describing adopters' awareness of adopted children's need for both information about their birth family and to understand the reasons why they were adopted. The latter was applied to adopters who showed empathy in one of these areas, but not both.

Although theories of openness in adoption began to emerge in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is still much scope for these to be developed further. There is little reference made in the literature to the possibility of empathy as a reciprocal phenomenon between birth parent and adoptive parent or adoptee and adoptive parent. Yet it has been suggested that such reciprocity is characteristic of contemporary intimate relationships (Giddens 1992). Instead the emphasis is placed

on the need for the adopter to demonstrate empathy towards the two other members of the adoption triad. In addition, there is a lack of attention to the deeper subjective meanings of openness for members of the adoption triad.

### **2.1.2 Permanence**

The concept of permanence is central to the practice of adoption both within the UK and the USA. ‘Permanency planning’ (Maluccio, et al. 1986) which emerged in the USA heavily influenced UK child care policy in the early 1970s (Lowe, et al. 1999). Permanency planning offered a remedy to the problems described by Rowe and Lambert (1973) in their publication ‘Children Who Wait’ which demonstrated that ineffective planning was leading to children remaining unnecessarily in care for long periods. Despite its centrality to child welfare practice, there is little consensus on the meaning of ‘permanence’. The term is sometimes used to include a range of placement options such as long term fostering, residential care and adoption as well as return to the birth family. On other occasions ‘adoption’ and ‘permanence’ have been treated as synonymous (Lowe, et al. 1999; Parker 1999).

Within the practice literature the goal of ‘permanency’ has been closely linked to the achievement of a “*stable, enduring and guaranteed placement*” (Gilligan 1998, p.80). Maluccio and Fein’s (1983) definition of permanence focussed not only on longevity but also on quality, stressing the importance of family and relationships. The placing of these at the heart of their definition of permanence reflected a dominant view in child welfare of the primacy of the family setting in childrearing and the importance of primary attachments to a child’s development (Maluccio, et al. 1986). They defined the goal of permanence as:

“to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationship with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish life-time relationships.” (Maluccio and Fein 1983, p.197)

Triseliotis (1998) has stressed, in addition, the importance of subjective measures of permanence such as a ‘sense of belonging’. He defined the goal of permanence in the following way:

“to provide each child with a base in life or a family they can call their own, and more hopefully a family for life.” (Triseliotis 1998, p.13)

These more complex definitions are more in line with earlier conceptualisations of permanence such as that of Emlen and colleagues’ who described the essential features or qualities of permanence as:

1. *Intent* – the home is intended to last indefinitely (as opposed to drifting into a long term arrangement), although it is not guaranteed to last forever.
2. *Commitment and continuity* – the family is committed to the child (this involves the assumption of a common future) and provides continuity in the child’s relationships with caretakers and other family members.
3. *Legal status* – the family offers the child a ‘definitive legal status’ that protects his rights and interests and promotes a sense of belonging.
4. *Social status* – the family provides the child with a respected social status, in contrast to the second-class status typical of prolonged foster care.

(Emlen et al. 1977, p.10-11, cited in Maluccio, et al. 1986)

The centrality of the concept of ‘permanence’ within adoption is evident in its frequent use as an outcome measure in adoption research. However, to date, adoption outcomes studies have overwhelmingly relied on simplistic conceptualisations of permanence as the absence of disruption. Parker (1999) has pointed out that this way of measuring outcome says little about the quality of the pre-disruption experience. It has been suggested that breakdown is not always a negative experience for the children and families as it may lead to more appropriate placements next time around. Evidence also exists that the adoptive family being intact does not necessarily mean that things are going well (Dance and Rushton 2005b; Thoburn, et al. 2000).

A recent study of foster care by Sinclair and colleagues (2005), however, has attempted to develop a more complex conceptualisation of permanence suggesting four types: objective, subjective, enacted, and uncontested. Objective permanence is achieved when a child has a stable placement throughout childhood and support and accommodation post eighteen if necessary. Subjective permanence relates to a child’s feeling of belonging with the family. Enacted permanence refers to the way behaviours reinforce a sense of being a family. Finally, uncontested permanence is

achieved when birth and substitute families are able to work together in the child's best interests.

In the adoption literature permanence is discussed mainly as a goal in relation to the child and the meaning of permanence for adoptive parents receives little attention. This contrasts with the kinship literature in which permanence is defined as a shared experience, albeit mainly in relation to adult to adult relationships (Weston 1991). The conceptualisation of permanence as a shared experience appears to be closer to Emlen et al.'s idea of a "shared future" (Emlen et al. 1977, p.10-11, cited in Maluccio, et al. 1986). There is a need, therefore, to further develop the concept of permanence from the perspective of all members of the adoption triad and to ensure that the qualitative elements of permanence are captured within the definition.

### **2.1.3 Psychosocial wellbeing, risk and resilience**

The potential for adoptees to experience developmental 'risk' came to the attention of professionals with the publication of research reporting the negative consequences on child development of institutionalisation and separation from attachment figures (Bowlby 1953). This was followed by a series of studies which suggested that the take up of mental health services by adopted individuals was disproportionately high (Jaffee and Fanshel 1970; Raynor 1980). This has led to a long term preoccupation within adoption research with the psychosocial wellbeing of the adoptee and much attention has been given to the adoptive family as an important site for the study of environmental versus biological influences on human behaviour (Rutter 2005). The concept of psychosocial wellbeing subsumes other important concepts such as self esteem, identity development and secure attachment. In order to achieve wellbeing it is believed that the child must deal with the loss of previously important attachment figures and achieve reattachment to new carers. They must also develop a positive sense of self despite difficult past events and occupying a minority status. The tasks of identity development and (re)attachment are discussed below.

#### **Identity development and self esteem**

Identity theory and self esteem are often seen as inextricably linked (Erikson 1959). These two dimensions of psychological wellbeing are discussed within the arena of child development and adolescence is seen as a particular time when 'identity work' is undertaken with questions arising such as "*Who am I?*", "*Where have I been?*",



and 'Where am I going?'" (Hoopes 1990). Erikson (1959) termed the failure to develop a mature identity as 'identity diffusion' and described this state as characterised by self doubt, indecision and a lack of sense of continuity of the self over time. Marcia (1966 cited in Hoopes 1990) and colleagues have further developed Eriksson's work describing four ego-identity statuses, namely role diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium and identity achieved. These statuses are differentiated by the degree of independent commitment to values and beliefs demonstrated by the individual. The process of achieving independent values and beliefs is often related to crisis resolution. Erikson also stresses the importance of "*an unbroken genetic and historical attachment to the past, present and future in the process of identity consolidation*" (Hoopes 1990, p.152). There is an assumption that while all children and young people engage in 'identity work', for the adopted individual this process is extended and complex (Grotevant 1997).

### **Secure attachment**

Attachment theory has its roots in the work of John Bowlby who highlighted the importance of "*a warm, intimate and continuous relationship*" (Bowlby 1953, p.13) with a primary caregiver and the negative consequences for a child's mental health and quality of relationships where this does not exist. Attachment theory has come to have an important place in adoption practice in relation to the placement of infants and re-parenting of older children. Attachment is frequently used as an outcome measure in adoption being equated with wellbeing.

In order to explain attachment, Fahlberg (1994) has described a cycle of arousal and relaxation within a secure relationship between the child and primary caregiver. The child signals his or her arousal or anxiety through various attachment behaviours such as crying, reaching out or approaching the caregiver and the caregiver provides comfort. Through the successful completion of the cycle the child learns to trust that the caregiver will be available at times of distress and is able to confidently explore his or her environment becoming increasingly independent of the caregiver. The child then experiences wellbeing and develops new skills. Children whose need for comfort is not recognised and met and who, therefore, do not have a secure and trusting relationship with their caregiver feel unable to explore their world fully and their ability to regulate emotion or behaviour are affected as well as broader aspects of child development. Consistent caring allows children to develop coherent 'internal

working models' of self and others (Bowlby 1969) and to have predictable expectations of relationships. Where this consistency is not present, as in the case of abusive or neglectful parenting, children can experience confusion. A key task of adoptive parenting, therefore, is to provide consistent and reliable caregiving. Confidential adoptions were believed to provide optimal conditions for strong attachments to develop between adopters and adopted children (Baran and Pannor 2000).

There is a growing literature on the therapeutic application of attachment theory (Archer and Burnell 2003; Bowlby 1988; Hughes 2003; Schofield and Beek 2006) and various tools have been developed to identify attachment problems such as the story stem completion test (Bretherton, et al. 1990; Oppenheim, et al. 1997) and the adult attachment interview (Hesse 1999). The therapeutic literature has differentiated secure and insecure patterns of attachment and categorised insecure attachment styles as avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised (Ainsworth, et al. 1978). A more extreme expression of attachment difficulties, Reactive Attachment Disorder, has also been described (Greenberg 1999). Various interventions to treat attachment disorders have been suggested, the most controversial and contested being holding therapy (Dozier 2003). Within this literature is an assumption that early attachment difficulties lead to long term psychopathology. As special needs adoptions have grown in number, there is an increasing expectation that adoptive families will provide a therapeutic environment for older children with attachment difficulties or disorders, helping them to develop effective internal working models and self worth as well as dealing with emotions related to traumatic past events. However, studies have shown no clear linear relationship between early experiences or attachment difficulties and later pathology (Sroufe, et al. 1999). There is little consensus about best practice in relation to the assessment and treatment of attachment disorders (O'Connor and Zeanah 2003; Steele 2003) and the empirical basis for such treatments has also been shown to be limited (Barth, et al. 2005).

### **A shift from risk to resilience**

More recent research on risk to psychosocial wellbeing in adoption has revealed that the long term outcomes for adopted infants are generally good (Bohman and Sigvardsson 1990; Collishaw, et al. 1998; Maughan and Pickles 1990). This suggests a need to move away from the heavy emphasis that has been placed on defining and

assessing risk for adopted children. In addition, theories of biology versus environment have been revealed to be overly simplistic and more complex conceptualisations of the reciprocal relationship between biology, behaviour and culture have emerged (Gottlieb 1996; Rutter 1999). Interest has grown in factors which mediate environmental risk and the relative effects of early and late experiences (Rutter 2005). From this work, the concept of ‘resilience’ has emerged, that is, an individual’s capacity to weather adversity or to achieve a good outcome in terms of psychosocial functioning despite being exposed to risk environments (Rutter 1999). While risk has been studied extensively in empirical studies of adoption, there is still much scope to extend the study of the concept of resilience.

### **Identity, biography and society**

Within the adoption literature the concept of identity is largely discussed as an individual psychological process against which adoptees’ developmental progress is measured. While there is some recognition that adopted children may feel stigmatised because of their adoptive status or because of the circumstances of their adoption (Grotevant, et al. 2000) and that identity formation may be a particular issue for black and minority ethnic children, particularly those in transracial adoptions (Thoburn, et al. 2000), there is little exploration of sociological concepts relating to identity construction. Identity issues for adopters and birth family members are unexplored and an auto/biographical or narrative interest in identity is also largely absent.

## ***2.2 Theories of ‘family’ and ‘kinship’***

The disciplines of anthropology and sociology have both engaged in the study of ‘kinship’ and ‘family’ and developed theories to explain these phenomena. While the two disciplines have taken somewhat different roads of discovery, and the concepts are not wholly synonymous, the cumulative knowledge developed offers many potential insights when studying adoptive family life. This potential, however, has remained largely untapped. While there are a small number of anthropological studies (Carsten 2000; Modell 1994) that apply anthropological theories of kinship to adoptive situations, the sociological study of adoption is a neglected area (Fisher 2003). Below, I summarise the major developments that have taken place within the anthropological study of kinship and the sociological study of the family in order to explore this potential further.

Family and kinship have been defined in various ways, often in relation to other organising social concepts such as community or friendship. Klein and White (1996, p. 38) have suggested that the distinguishing features of a family as opposed to other social groups are:

1. Families last for considerably longer periods of time than do most social groups.
2. Families are intergenerational.
3. Families contain both biological and affinal (e.g. legal, common law) relationships between members.
4. The biological (and affinal) aspects of families link them to a larger kinship organisation.

Classic anthropological studies also defined kinship in terms of descent and alliance, that is biological connectedness and marriage, and assumed a connection between these and stability, permanence or longevity (Parkin and Stone 2004).

More recent approaches to the analysis of kinship and family have called into question some of the assumptions on which previous theories have relied (see Table 1). From the 1970s onwards there was a shift within the sociology of the family and the anthropological study of kinship from an emphasis on structure to social process, from function to meaning and discourse, from public aspects of kinship to the private world of the family and increased attention towards previously untapped 'emic' or insider understandings of kinship and family as opposed to 'etic' or observer interpretations which had previously been afforded a privileged position. 'The family' as an institution was no longer seen as an appropriate unit of analysis and instead emphasis was placed on the study of actors' everyday understandings of 'family' matters (Morgan 1996). These shifts led to new insights and perspectives on family. In particular, the voices of women, children and minority families were increasingly heard (Carsten 1997; Neale and Smart 2001) and a critical analysis of family emerged (Weston 1991). This resulted in the displacement of the sharp line that had been drawn between biological and social kinship, greater attention to performance and daily practices in the construction of family and an emphasis on human agency in the making and remaking of kinship.

**Table 1: A comparison of traditional and contemporary approaches to the study of family and kinship**

<b>Traditional approaches to the study of family and kinship</b>	<b>Contemporary approaches to the study of family and kinship</b>
Structural analyses	Process oriented
Functional analyses	Concerned with meaning and discourse
Study of descent and alliance	Focus on practices and performance
Primacy of biological connectedness	Emphasis on human agency
Study of public aspects of society	Study of the private domain
Etic approach	Emic approach

Within anthropology, the writings of Schneider (1980; 1984) have been particularly influential in changing the focus of kinship studies. Schneider challenged previous studies of kinship suggesting that much of the earlier theorising was based on a particularly western premise of the primacy of ties derived from sexual procreation and biological relatedness. He demonstrated that the primacy given to biological ties did not necessarily apply cross culturally and, therefore, this western bias rendered comparative analysis redundant. While Schneider's work suggested the futility of the study of kinship as a concept, in the longer term it produced a re-energising of the topic.

In addition, feminist thinking was highly influential within both kinship studies and the sociology of the family. Feminist writers drew attention to traditional family and kinship theories' use of highly normative values and assumptions and their concern with public aspects of family and kinship resulting in the dominance of a male perspective. Feminism has refocused attention towards issues such as the domestic division of labour, unequal power relationships, caring activities and emotional labour (Dalley 1988; Finch and Mason 1993; Oakley 1974).

The move away from descent and alliance theories and functional explanations of kinship towards cultural meanings allowed an opening up of the language of kinship, and concepts which previously had inextricably linked kinship and biology were reformulated with the result that kinship and genealogy were decoupled. For example, Bauman's (1995) study in the ethnically rich London suburb of Southall

exposed the use of kinship language by local young people who referred to close friends of the same culture as ‘cousins’ even where no genealogical ties existed.

The emergence of the role of agency within the kinship literature led to the development of the concept of ‘chosen’ family as distinct from the ‘given’ family. Stone (2004), in an analysis of American soap operas, emphasised the role of choice in validating kinship arrangements. Critiquing Schneider’s assertion that the strongest kinship relationships exist where there is the presence of both the ‘order of nature’ (biological connection) and ‘order of law’ (marriage connection), she has asserted that while each of these is insufficient alone to create kinship they are not strengthened by each other but instead when accompanied by choice. She uses examples from these soap operas to demonstrate the fragility of kinship arrangements that rely solely on biological connection or legal sanctioning and the ability of agents to choose to break kinship ties. However, she also asserts that choice without the ‘order of nature’ and ‘order of law’ does not constitute ‘real’ kinship.

A more radical departure, however, is suggested by Weston (1991) whose study of gay men and lesbians in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s gives primacy to the act of ‘choice’ within kinship. Weston describes the historical context for the emergence of gay families or ‘families we choose’ and the reclaiming by gay men and lesbians of the language of kinship. She demonstrates the tenuous nature of the link between biology and kinship and birth and permanence. Through the stories of gay men and lesbians coming out to biological relatives she demonstrates the ways in which kinship can be lost as well as reinforced at testing times. While the fact of shared biogenetic substance cannot be changed, Weston’s analysis challenges Schneider’s claim that biological relationships cannot be severed, suggesting instead that the loss of lived relationship between gay men or lesbians and their parents as a result of coming out also signals a severance of kinship.

Weston questions the inevitability and permanence of kinship based on biology and demonstrates how kinship is ‘selectively perpetuated’, that is, represents a choice made by gay men and lesbians and their relatives. Her analysis also highlights the role of mutual practices in the perpetuation of kinship. Weston’s informants define kinship in terms of practical and material support, shared understanding and persistence even when in conflict and “*enduring solidarity arising from shared*

*experience*” (Weston 1991, p36). She suggests that kinship has to be confirmed through the actions of both parties and can be lost as well as created.

“In the specific context of coming out, blood ties may be reduced conceptually to mere material substance with little bearing on future kinship, making the enduring quality of kin ties something to be established in practice through verbal affirmations and signs of love.” (Weston 1991, p78)

Weston’s reference to the making of kinship through mutual practices has resonance with the concept of ‘family practices’ developed by Morgan (1996). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1990), he conceptualises family as a set of practices which require active participation in regular and repeated day to day actions or ‘doing family’. He emphasises the importance of both personal biography and historical context in both shaping and constraining these practices (Mills 1959). Following on from Morgan’s work, Finch (2007) has emphasised the importance of the visibility and explicit acknowledgement of family practices and has advocated the use of the concept ‘displaying family’ to capture the elements of ‘doing and being seen to do’ in order to convey meaning. Carsten’s (2004) work has also focussed on the production of kinship through daily and bodily practices. Her work has emphasised the importance of the house as a site for these practices and its role in providing anchors of stability.

What relevance do these theories have for adoptive kinship or adoptive family life? Within anthropological studies adoption has traditionally been categorised as ‘fictive’ kinship, that is, a relationship modelled on culturally defined kinship (Parkin and Stone 2004). The term ‘fictive’ can convey a sense of ‘crafted’ or ‘made’, however, within the discipline it is more often defined as ‘fictitious’ or ‘pretend’. Therefore, while the term ‘fictive’ recognises the possibility of social kinship, it also suggests that such kinship is inferior to biological relatedness (Carsten 2004).

While critiques of previous theories and approaches have transformed the study of family and kinship it appears that, to date, they have had little impact on theorising adoptive family life or adoptive kinship. Within sociology, adoption has received little attention and within textbooks on the family, adoption is mentioned briefly and only in relation to risks and pathology (Fisher 2003). Instead adoption research has

remained firmly in the realm of psychology and child development. Its relative absence within sociology as well as anthropology may be a reflection of the assumption that the adoptive family mirrors the traditional family and is, therefore, of little interest. Weston (1991) reflected this assumption when she dismissed suggestions that adoption occupies a borderland between biology and choice saying:

“adoptive relations - unlike gay families- pose no fundamental challenge to either procreative interpretations of kinship or the culturally standardized image of a family assembled around a core of parent(s) plus children.”

(Weston 1991, p. 38)

Modell (1994), however, questioned the assumption that adoptive families are ‘as if’ traditional families, particularly in an era of increased openness in adoption. It is possible that the contemporary theoretical developments in both anthropology and sociology described above, including gay kinship theories, have the potential not only to challenge traditional notions of ‘the family’ but also the fictive nature of adoption.

As can be seen, both sociology and anthropology have developed new and challenging critiques of kinship and family and have, therefore, opened up new lines of questioning for the study of adoptive family life. Later in the thesis I explore the potential of these theories to further develop the conceptualisation of adoptive kinship and openness in adoption.

### ***2.3 Reinterpreting the ‘what works’ agenda***

So far in this chapter, I have outlined some of the main constructs that have dominated adoption research, that is, the concepts of openness, permanence, risk and resilience. I have also suggested that theories of kinship and sociological theories of the family have something to offer adoption research. The thesis that I develop builds on and extends previous research that has attempted to answer the question ‘what works in adoption?’. I explain now, therefore, what I mean by the term ‘what works’.

The concern with ‘what works’ in adoption and child welfare more generally has developed from a growing interest in ‘evidence based policy and practice’ (EBP) in public services. However, the approach to ‘what works’ that I adopt here is



substantially different from the approach that has come to dominate the public service agenda. I begin this section, therefore, by describing the range of approaches taken to investigate ‘what works’. I then offer a critique of the direction that the ‘what works’ agenda has taken and describe the potential advantages of a broader interpretation of ‘what works’ for end users of adoption research. Finally, I describe the approach to EBP that I adopt for this doctoral study.

### **2.3.1 The growth of the ‘what works’ agenda**

In recent years there has been an explosion of activity in the quest to find out ‘what works’ in a variety of public policy and practice contexts and to systematically review and disseminate available evidence. This flurry of activity has been encouraged and supported by government through the development of such initiatives as the National Institute for Excellence and the Centre for Evidence-based Social Services.

Child welfare services have also taken on board the ‘what works’ agenda and within adoption and permanency research, there have been several useful summative publications which have helped to shape our understanding of ‘what works in adoption’. These include the Knowledge Review undertaken by Rushton (2003a) on behalf of the Social Care Institute for Excellence and the revised edition of the Barnardos publication ‘What works in adoption and foster care?’ (Sellick, et al. 2004).

Davies et al. (2000) have described a range of methodological approaches to establishing ‘what works’ and categorised these broadly as primary research using qualitative, quantitative and pluralistic approaches and secondary research including systematic review and meta-analysis. However, it is evident from the ‘what works’ literature that EBP has not favoured methodological diversity but instead has been closely aligned with experimental designs and outcomes research. In addition, the formal engines for dissemination which have been created such as the UK Cochrane Centre and the NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination have adopted an approach to the systematic review of evidence which favour randomised control trials (RCTs) over other forms of research. This narrow approach to EBP has proved to be controversial with some commentators suggesting caution and others rejecting the approach outright (Webb 2001).

### **2.3.2 Critiques of Evidence Based Practice**

The main objections raised to EBP can be summarised as epistemological and ontological concerns, methodological concerns, utilitarian concerns and ethical and ideological concerns. Although these are presented here as single categories in order to explore the substance of the objections raised, they are often interrelated.

#### **Epistemological and ontological concerns**

Concerns have been raised about what has been seen as a privileging of objectivity, sense-based data and rationalism within EBP at the expense of subjectivity and an acknowledgement of multiple perspectives (Glasby and Beresford 2006; Webb 2001). Several commentators have highlighted the need to give consideration to the question 'what counts as evidence'. Although some proponents of RCTs and systematic reviews such as McNeish et al. (2002) have suggested that user preferences, professional judgement, availability of skills and resource considerations should be considered essential sources of evidence when making intervention decisions, Davies (2000) has noted that, within EPB as it is currently conceptualised, a notion of a hierarchy of evidence exists which puts RCTs and meta-analysis of RCTs at the top and subjective accounts such as user experience and professional opinion at the bottom. Glasby and Beresford (2006) make a case for a flattening of this hierarchy and suggest that 'evidence based practice' should become 'knowledge based practice' conferring equal status on RCTs, 'practice wisdom' and 'personal testimony'. They do, however, acknowledge that such an approach raises questions about the assessment of the accuracy or quality of such knowledge, an issue which is just beginning to be addressed (Taylor, et al. 2007).

#### **Methodological concerns**

Another objection raised to the current interpretation of EBP is the methodological partiality that exists which favours quantitative methodologies over qualitative methodologies (Davies 2000). While RCTs and quantitative research can answer important questions relating to mechanisms and their link to certain outcomes, it has been suggested that EBP needs to address broader questions relating to good practice than effectiveness alone. It has also been suggested that this narrow approach to EBP pays too little attention to the importance of the historical, political and cultural context of policy and practice (Webb 2001). Glasby and Beresford (2006) have

pointed out that it is unlikely that one course of action will emerge as preferential when asking what works in social care and instead have called for a widening of the net beyond outcomes when building a case for practice interventions and increased methodological diversity to ensure that research methods fit the questions asked. Davies (2000) has suggested that qualitative research's contribution to evidence based policy and practice includes determining evaluative questions, contributing to external validity and determining appropriate outcome measures that are meaningful to the people affected by an intervention. Staller (2006) has called for a more naturalistic approach to data collection and suggests a shift towards 'practice based evidence'.

### **Utilitarian concerns**

Implicit within the 'what works' agenda is a commitment to action and, where necessary, changes in policy, practice and resource allocation. However, a further concern has been raised by Whiting Blome and Steib (2004) in relation to the utility or application of outcome research findings. They have pointed out that while evidence based practice as it is currently interpreted may provide signposts about what programmes are most effective, it does little to inform the process of changing from an agency that provides programme 'x' to one that uses the more effective programme 'y' and sustaining this change over time. Nor does it address the structural barriers faced by an agency in doing so. They have suggested that lessons should be learned from the fields of medicine and organisational change which have found that dissemination of research findings is an important step but does not guarantee change. These concerns suggest a co-dependence between outcome research and process research in order to ensure evidence can be used to promote innovation.

### **Ethical and ideological concerns**

A further difficulty raised with EBP as it is currently interpreted is its lack of acknowledgement of the political nature of research and the potential for conflicts of interests among policy makers, practitioners, service users and academics. Glasby and Beresford (2006) argue that current conceptualisations of EBP are incompatible with the research agendas of disabled people and psychiatric survivors to achieve social and political change. They suggest that the privileging of 'formal research' and 'evidence' over 'knowledge' drawn from user experience is an issue of human

and civil rights. These concerns suggest a need for a more critical and pluralistic approach to evidence production than is currently evident within EBP in order to address potentially competing interests in the policy and practice arena.

### **2.3.3 Bringing together the qualitative and quantitative traditions**

The debates within evidence based policy and practice generally, and within social work more specifically, about what counts as evidence reflect wider debates within social science research about the relative merits of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. These two approaches have frequently been characterised as irreconcilable. However, it is increasingly the case that this view is being challenged and emphasis is being placed on the ways in which quantitative and qualitative research can be complementary within single studies and in building an evidence base around a topic. This has also been recognised by funding councils with the introduction of interdisciplinary funding streams by multiple funding councils.

Even within health care research, a field dominated by clinical trials, there has been a recognition of the role that qualitative research can play in improving practice, particularly in relation to ‘complex interventions’. Campbell et al. (2000) have suggested that the evaluation of ‘complex interventions’ requires a phased approach using both qualitative and quantitative evidence to build towards the use of an RCT. They have suggested that there are particular difficulties in defining, developing and reproducing complex interventions making it difficult to replicate the intervention for the purposes of experimentation and implementation. They give examples such as evaluating the benefits of a specialist multidisciplinary stroke unit or community development approaches to health improvement. They suggest that a number of iterative pre-experimental phases are required including a theoretical phase, modelling phase and exploratory trial phase in order to ensure that experimental research is robust. For example, in the modelling phase they suggest that qualitative work could be undertaken to define the relevant components of the intervention to be tested or to determine barriers to positive change perceived by patients when applying the intervention. In the exploratory trial phase patients may be involved in identifying the key outcomes of relevance to them. It is likely that many social care interventions are similarly complex and therefore require a similar phased approach.

### **2.3.4 A way forward for evidence-based adoption policy and practice**

It could be argued that some of those who advocate the use of qualitative methods in the development of evidence based policy and practice have a tendency to cast qualitative research in an auxiliary role to the ultimate goal of designing and carrying out RCTs and therefore maintain the hierarchy of evidence. The construction of a hierarchy of evidence with RCTs at the pinnacle is particularly unhelpful as it has implied that RCTs have fewer limitations than other forms of research in pointing the way for policy and practice. In fact, it is the case that all form of research have both strengths and limitations which researchers have an ethical obligation to make explicit.

With consideration of the objections that have been raised to the current narrow interpretation of the evidence based policy and practice agenda, the thesis that I develop here rejects the notion of a hierarchy of research methodologies and methods. In addition, it rejects the positioning of qualitative research as the servant of quantitative research. Instead it stresses the interdependence of the two approaches if we are to understand the social phenomenon which we have termed ‘adoptive family life’ and make decisions about the future direction of adoption policy and practice. I argue for an approach to EBP characterised by:

- Research efforts directed towards the creation of ‘*cases for change*’ not a ‘*case for change*’ (Glasby and Beresford 2006, p 282).
- Methodological diversity in adoption research practice.
- Engagement with a range of ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about adoption which are pursued through appropriate methods.
- An iterative approach to the development of an evidence base rather than a progression from qualitative to quantitative research.
- An appreciation of the historical, political and cultural context in which EBP operates and the potential for competing interests amongst the producers and users of research.
- Above all, a commitment to action-oriented research, that is, an imperative to spell out the practical implications of research (not just develop knowledge or build theory) and to focus on barriers to change.

Like Glasby and Beresford (2006), I suggest that multiple sources of evidence have an equal but different contribution to make to the building of an evidence base around social issues such as adoption. I do not, however, support their proposal to move from 'evidence based practice' to 'knowledge based practice'. Glasby and Beresford (2006) make a distinction between 'evidence' and 'knowledge' and between 'formal research' and 'lived experience' suggesting that each is as valid as the other and challenging the categorisation of personal knowledge as anecdotalism. I assert, however, that lived experience and practice wisdom are not equal forms of knowledge but become equally valid when transformed from individual accounts or anecdotes into research evidence through the process in which the researcher engages of interpretation, contextualisation within current theories and evidence and representation. I, therefore, support the retention of the term 'evidence' in relation to 'evidence based policy and practice'

Crucial to the process of acknowledging the equal but different contribution of multiple sources of evidence, however, is the need to clearly articulate the limits of the claims that are possible to be made from these different sources of evidence. RCTs have great strengths in answering precisely defined questions relating to the effectiveness of policy and practice interventions within the field of adoption. However, they do not tell us whether the intervention works as such but rather whether it works for this population in this particular set of circumstances. The ethical issues associated with randomisation also mean that RCTS are an inappropriate research method to use to examine adoption placement outcomes. Other quantitative approaches, particularly longitudinal prospective studies can provide useful data in relation to the outcomes of adoption and can identify factors which present a risk to adoptive placements or have a protective effect. However, they do little to explain positive outcomes in negative circumstances and vice versa or the processes operating within adoptive families. Qualitative descriptive data can increase the visibility of the experiences of adoption 'stakeholders', particularly those considered less powerful than policy makers and commissioners of services such as adoptive parents, adoptees, birth families and service providers in order to allow prioritisation of the research agenda. They can provide evidence of adoption triad members' perspectives on and evaluations of adoption practice and policy implementation in order to ensure that interventions are acceptable and a good fit with their needs and expectations. They can also challenge policy and practice

orthodoxies. However, these subjective accounts cannot be generalised across populations without further statistical testing. Qualitative studies can also uncover social processes which operate within adoptive family life providing evidence of ‘how’ adoption works and ‘why’ it operates in this way. They also enable the inductive development of concepts, theories and models which can be tested in further research and can identify barriers to change and innovation. Interpretive studies can problematise taken for granted concepts such as adoption, adoptive family life and success, access the meanings that individuals attach to these concepts and explore the way these understandings influence their day to day actions. They cannot claim to reveal universal truths but can contribute to an inductive process of theory development in order to avoid what Jamieson (2007) has called ‘unfitting talk’. I would argue, though that in order to fit the ‘what works’ agenda interpretive studies must go further than theory development and make some comment on the potential applications of the theory within day to day family life and adoption policy and practice.

In the next section, the empirical evidence relating to the question ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ is reviewed. Following on from the case made above to broaden the interpretation of EBP, the review includes outcome studies, quantitative and qualitative descriptive studies and interpretive studies in order to ensure that adoption practice is influenced by multiple sources of evidence derived from research which asks a range of questions and uses a range of methodologies.

## ***2.4 Review of empirical evidence relating to ‘what makes adoptive family life work’***

### **2.4.1 The scope of the review of empirical evidence**

This section of the literature review provides an overview of empirical evidence relating to ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ It focuses on domestic adoptions of both ‘relinquished’ infants and children adopted from public care, many of whom are older and are described as having ‘special needs’. It focuses primarily on US and UK literature because of the similarities between these two adoption systems although, where relevant, other European and Australian research is included. The majority of UK studies are concerned with special needs adoptions. This reflects the greater concern for these placements and, therefore, the greater research effort that

has been directed towards such placements. Having given an overview of the available evidence, a summary and discussion of the studies is presented with reference to the methodologies used, the focus of the studies and gaps in current knowledge relating to ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’

#### **2.4.2 Does adoption work?**

As stated earlier, much research attention has been focused on determining whether or not adoption is successful as an option for children in need of a new permanent family. The overwhelming conclusion to be drawn from this empirical research is that adoption is ‘successful’ for the majority of children and adoptive parents across a number of measures, including stability and levels of satisfaction, and that this form of permanency compares favorably to other placement options.

Disruption rates have been reported to be as low as 0% (Rushton, et al. 1993) and reaching between 17 to 23% (Selwyn, et al. 2006; Tizard and Hodges 1990) for adopted children in the UK who are described as ‘older’, ‘looked after’, ‘hard to place’ or having ‘special needs’<sup>c</sup>. Taking account of both UK and US research and studies relating to either adoption or adoptive and permanent foster placements it appears, overall, that adoptive family life is sustained for five in six children placed for adoption (see details of major outcomes studies in 8.1 Appendix A - Table summarising outcome studies). For those adopted as healthy infants, the outcomes are even more positive with disruptions reported to average less than 2% (Kadushin 1980). Reported levels of satisfaction with adoption have been high in both infant adoptions and special needs adoptions from the perspective of adopters (Castle, et al. 2000; Kadushin 1970; Nelson 1985; Thoburn, et al. 2000) and adopted adults (Triseliotis and Russell 1984). Adoption outcomes for children with special needs have also been compared favourably with the outcomes of long term fostering, residential care, placement with relatives and return to birth families (Barth and Berry 1988; Selwyn, et al. 2006; Sinclair, et al. 2005; Tizard 1977; Tizard and Hodges 1990).

While, evidence of the success of adoption is reassuring, it does not suggest that adoptive family life is without challenges. Several studies have been conducted

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<sup>c</sup> Studies which examined the experiences of children in both adoptive and foster placements are not reported here.



which attempt to identify both risk and protective factors which influence outcomes within adoptive families. These are summarised below.

### **2.4.3 Risk and protective factors associated with adoption outcomes**

A range of variables have been the focus of adoption outcome research including those related to the characteristics of the child, the characteristics of the placement, the characteristics of the adoptive parents, service variables and the pattern of informal supports. The findings relating to these are described below.

#### **Characteristics of the child**

##### ***Age of the child***

There is strong consensus in the literature that age is associated with outcome with the rate of disruption rising with the age of the child (Barth and Berry 1988; Dance and Rushton 2005b; Holloway 1997b; Rushton, et al. 2001; Smith and Howard 1991). Both age at placement and age at point of disruption have been found to be significant variables (Smith and Howard 1991). However, some studies have reported a more complex relationship between age and outcome for older children. For example, Fratter et al. (1991) found a sharp rise in the probability of breakdown in the 9-11 age category but reported a slight fall for children aged 12 and over. Borland et al. (1991) found high rates of disruption amongst 11-14 year olds but no disruptions in the 15+ age category, although the numbers were smaller in this age band. Thoburn et al. (2000) report the highest breakdown rates among 10-12 year olds in their study of children from minority ethnic communities. As well as statistical data, the study collected qualitative data from practitioners and so were able to seek possible explanations for this anomaly. One possible explanation suggested by practitioners was that more careful planning may be undertaken with teenage children who are considered to be at higher risk of disruption and this leads to less difficulties. Other possible explanations offered were that there may be less time for the placement to disrupt before the young person grows up and leaves home or the young person may be more accepting of the need for the placement. This latter explanation was supported by Borland et al.'s study (1991) which found that where children had mixed feelings about a placement, these were more disruption prone. New parents' evaluations of the success of the placement were also found to be more negative as age at placement increased (Holloway 1997a). In contrast, Quinton et al.

(1998) in a study of 61 older children found no correlation between stability and age at current or first placement. Triseliotis and Russell (1984) however, found that satisfaction expressed by adult adoptees was not affected by age at placement or age at which the child entered care and Tizard (1977) reported that age was not a significant factor affecting placement outcome. The latter two studies, however, did not report details of the statistical tests applied.

### ***Difficulties experienced by the child pre and post placement***

There is a considerable body of findings relating to the associations between various difficulties experienced by a child before or during placement and placement outcome. A large number of variables have been identified which can put placements at risk of poor outcomes. These are described below.

Pre-placement experiences which have been found to present risks include a history of serious physical abuse (Kagan and Reid 1986 cited in Barth, et al. 1988), a history of sexual abuse (Smith and Howard 1991), a history of deprivation or abuse (Fratter, et al. 1991) and the experience of preferential rejection by birth parents (Dance and Rushton 2005a; Quinton, et al. 1998). This term refers to the singling out of the child for unfavourable treatment by birth parents and rejection of the child. Selwyn et al. (2006) found that the extent of abusive experiences was one of the strongest predictors of difficulties in adoptive placements. In contrast Quinton et al. (1998) found no correlation between stability and physical or sexual abuse.

Difficulties present during placement which have been found to present a risk to stability include sexual acting out (Smith and Howard 1991), lying and vandalism (Smith and Howard 1991), the presence of conduct problems at the time of placement (Selwyn, et al. 2006) and over-activity at the time of placement (Selwyn, et al. 2006). There are multiple sources of evidence that the presence of behavioural difficulties or emotional problems (Barth and Berry 1988; Dance and Rushton 2005b; Fratter, et al. 1991; Thoburn, et al. 2000) or over-activity and restlessness (Dance and Rushton 2005b; Quinton, et al. 1998; Selwyn, et al. 2006) present a significant risk.

While an association between emotional and behavioural difficulties and risk of placement disruption has been reported in several studies, there is also evidence that

some placements survive despite these difficulties. For example, Quinton et al. (1998) in a study of 61 children aged between 5 and 9 found a relationship between low stability and a low recovery score but not a consistent one and reported that some parents remained positive even when children were very challenging. A significant intervening variable appears to be the presence of attachment between the child and adoptive parents. Tizard (1977) reported that adoptive parents were sometimes tolerating very difficult behaviour while still maintaining a close bond with the child. This was also maintained over time despite the persistence of some problems. When followed up at age 16, it was found that a range of difficulties such as attention seeking, approval seeking, distractibility and restlessness in school, irritability and difficulty with peer relationships persisted for some children adopted from institutional care yet the family was intact and close attachments between parents and adoptees were reported by both parties. Thoburn (2000) found that a wide range of difficult behaviours were tolerated when there was emotional closeness between child and parents and vice versa.

### *Less influential child variables*

While there is a strong consensus that age of the child and difficulties experienced pre and post placement are associated with adoption outcome, there is either mixed evidence or no evidence to support other associations. For example, there are more mixed findings relating to the likely influence of the child's placement history on outcome whether this be in relation to the number of moves experienced by a child (Fratter, et al. 1991; Nelson 1985; Quinton, et al. 1998; Rushton, et al. 2001; Thoburn, et al. 2000), previous adoptions/disruptions (Barth and Berry 1988; Kadushin and Seidl 1971) or the impact of living in an institution (Fratter, et al. 1991; Nelson 1985; Thoburn, et al. 2000). There is more certainty in some areas with it being consistently reported that there is no association between the sex of the child and disruption of the placement (Barth, et al. 1988; Quinton, et al. 1998; Thoburn, et al. 2000). It also appears that the presence of health problems and physical disabilities do not present a risk to placements (Barth and Berry 1988; Fratter, et al. 1991). The findings relating to the presence of learning disability are more mixed. Tizard (1977) concluded that a below average IQ did not prevent parent satisfaction while Barth and Berry (1988) did find an association between disruption and 'mental retardation'.

## **Characteristics of placements**

### ***Sibling placements***

There is evidence to suggest that placing siblings together has a protective effect on placements (Barth and Berry 1988; Fratter, et al. 1991; Rushton, et al. 2001). Reviewing the literature on sibling placements, Rushton et al. (2001) reported a tendency for sibling placements to have better outcomes, that is, less disruptions, greater expressed satisfaction of parents or fewer child problems. However they also pointed out that the findings are often complex and it is difficult to discern whether other factors such as age at placement, level of agency support, past histories or behavioural difficulties influence outcomes. Rushton et al.'s own study of 133 children placed for adoption or permanent fostering found that sibling placements appear to be more stable than single placements with the most stable placements being sibling placements in child-free families. Conversely, they found that families who had a single child placed with them were more likely to report a difficult first year (Rushton, et al. 2001). This accords with the findings of Barth and Berry (1988) who also found sibling placements more stable than single placements (although they were also generally younger) unless placed in homes with existing children.

### ***Transracial placements***

There has been much controversy about the practice of placing children from minority ethnic communities in transracial placements, that is, with adoptive parents who are from a different racial background to their own. The objections that have been raised to such placements are that adoptees lose their cultural identity and become alienated from both the majority society that they occupy and the minority community from which they are estranged (Feigelman 2000). The studies that have focused on this issue have found that racial matching does not have a significant impact on disruption rates (Thoburn, et al. 2000). In addition, no difference has been demonstrated between outcomes of psychosocial adjustment for adoptees placed transracially and those experiencing inracial placements (Bagley 1993; Feigelman 2000; Gill and Jackson 1983; Grow and Shapiro 1974; Simon and Altstein 1981). Despite these optimistic findings, qualitative studies which have focused on the experiences of the adoptee have described some difficulties faced by black and minority ethnic children placed within White families. Adoptees have reported feelings of difference and isolation when living in a predominantly White community (Kirton, et al. 2000) and have described their adoptive parents' inability

to help them deal with experiences of racism (Kirton, et al. 2000; Thoburn, et al. 2000; Tizard 1977). An association has also been shown between an adoptive family's lack of multicultural integration and adjustment difficulties experienced by the child in the case of transracial adoptions (Feigelman 2000). Therefore, the importance has been stressed of adoption agencies assessing the ability of adoptive parents to support children with issues of ethnic identity, to embrace race and cultural origins and to build links with multiracial networks (Kirton, et al. 2000).

### ***Family composition***

Several studies have found evidence of poorer outcomes when a child is placed with a family with existing children (Barth and Berry 1988; Borland, et al. 1991; Dance and Rushton 2005b; Quinton, et al. 1998; Sinclair, et al. 2005). In addition, these placements are, unfortunately, likely to receive less support (Sinclair, et al. 2005). The evidence relating to family composition and placement outcomes, however, is mixed (Nelson 1985; Triseliotis and Russell 1984) and suggests that moderating variables may be influential such as the age of the child (Borland, et al. 1991), low responsiveness or lack of warmth of adopters and overactive or restless behaviour (Quinton, et al. 1998).

### ***Foster carer adoptions***

Some studies have found foster carer adoptions to be either as stable or more stable than stranger adoptions (Barth and Berry 1988; Smith and Howard 1991). However, it has been suggested that methodological weaknesses in the study of foster carers adoptions have masked the scale of foster carer disruptions and there is some empirical support for this claim (Barth and Berry 1988; Selwyn, et al. 2006).

### ***Single and couple adoptions***

No difference has been found between the stability of placements provided by couples or single parents. In addition, Barth and Berry (1988) have reported that this is the case even when single adopters had older children placed with them. It is not evident from the literature why this counterintuitive finding should be the case.

### **Characteristics of adoptive parents**

There is little evidence that adopter characteristics are influential in determining the outcome of adoption. The rather limited evidence is presented below.

### ***Level of education of the adoptive parents***

There has been some association made between the level of education of the adoptive parent(s) and adoption outcomes although the evidence is far from conclusive. Barth and Berry (1988) found a higher disruption rate for college educated parents and Boyne et al. (1984 cited in Barth, et al. 1988) suggested that lower education is associated with less disruption for older children. However, it appears that the same is not true for young children placed with college educated parents (Smith and Howard 1991). Barth and Berry (1988) attributed higher disruption rates among college educated parents to the fact that college educated mothers were more likely to take on higher risk children and less likely to get subsidies. Quinton et al. (1998) found that educational status of mothers adopting older children did not predict disruption. Nor did Nelson (1985) when studying parental satisfaction with the placement of special needs children.

### ***Age of adopters***

Age of adopters has not been found to be significant although a study of adult adoptees by Triseliotis and Russell (1984) suggested that there is a risk that adopters will express less satisfaction if placed with parents beyond their mid-forties. However, it should be noted that this finding relates to adoptions which took place in the 1950s.

### ***Gay and lesbian adoptive parenting***

There has been limited attention paid to outcomes for children adopted by gay men and lesbians. A recent review revealed that much of the available evidence pertains to gay and lesbian parenting more generally and is predominately concerned with two groups, namely, women who gave birth in a heterosexual relationship and subsequently entered a lesbian relationship and women who conceived using artificial insemination (Selman and Mason 2004). There does not appear to be any evidence that children raised by gay or lesbian parents are at risk of poorer outcomes than those raised by heterosexual couples (Nickman, et al. 2005; Patterson and Chan 1999).

### *Socioeconomic status or occupational status of adopters*

Relatively few systematic attempts have been made to establish the relationship between the socioeconomic status or occupational status of adopters and adoption outcomes. Quinton et al. (1998) reported that occupational status of mothers adopting older children did not predict disruption. Nelson (1985) found no association between income, occupation or maternal employment and parental satisfaction with special needs placements. Triseliotis and Russell's small scale study (1984) suggested that adoptees were less likely to express satisfaction where the adoptive parents were 'financially very comfortable'.

### **Conclusions**

There is broad agreement in the literature that both the age of child and any difficulties experienced by the child pre and post placement are significant risk factors in adoption. There is also agreement that the placement of siblings together can have a protective effect as can the presence of strong attachments between the child and the adopter.

There is much less certainty about variables such as the child's placement history, IQ, the adoptive family composition, foster carer adoptions or the adopter's level of education. There appears to be no evidence to support the hypothesis that the sex of the child, the child's health, or the presence of a physical disability presents a risk. There is also no evidence to suggest that single parent placements are less stable and it may be the case that they are more secure. There is no evidence that the age, sexuality or socioeconomic status of the adopter is relevant to outcome and transracial placements have been shown to be as stable as placements with parents of the same race.

#### **2.4.4 The contribution of informal supports to making adoption work**

The importance of informal supports has been highlighted in several research studies (see review undertaken by Parker 1999). A longitudinal study of a range of placement options for 187 children confirmed the importance of this variable across placement types, reporting that disruptions were increased by stress and inadequate support and breakdown was low in adoptive families who used significantly more personal supports and experienced fewer stressful life events than biological families

(Fein, et al. 1983). A recent study by Sinclair et al. (2005) has confirmed the importance of informal supports to making adoption work.

A lack of support and understanding of problems from family and friends have been identified by adopters as contributing to disruptions (Quinton, et al. 1997). Barth and Berry (1988) found that how comfortable the adopters' family were with the adoption to be a significant variable. In addition, having fewer relatives within travelling distance had a negative impact on outcome and higher frequency of church attendance had a positive impact. Smith and Howard (1991) and Nelson (1985) also found regular church attendance or church membership were associated with stability and greater parent satisfaction. The three studies which refer to church attendance were American studies reflecting a particular cultural context for adoption in the US.

The value of membership of parents groups has also been highlighted. One study of adoption of children with special needs reported that adopters value having access to real examples of parenting these children (Nelson 1985), however, only 43% of adopters either were put in touch with a parents' organisations or got in touch themselves. Nelson (1985) also found that currently belong to a parent group had a protective effect on parent satisfaction.

#### **2.4.5 Desirable skills, attitudes and qualities of an adoptive parent**

A number of outcomes studies have found parenting style, skills, attitude and experience to be of significance in special needs adoptions. Previous parenting experience has been shown to be moderately associated with success as well as having adopted previously (Smith and Howard 1991). Borland et al. (1991) found that experienced parents fared better with older children and childless parents with younger children. Smith and Howard (1991) also found that a highly significant factor influencing outcome was parents' ability to deal with behavioural difficulties presented by the child. They reported that this was a factor in 38 of 74 disruptions. Quinton et al. (1998) reported that parental management and control difficulties were strongly associated with instability at the end of the first year of placements of older children. They also reported that logistical regression showed that low parental responsiveness was a highly significant factor in predicting instability in placements. Where parental responsiveness was high, the placement remained stable despite



behaviour deteriorating over the year in 46% of cases and parents reported increased attachment of the child to the adoptive parents.

In Triseliotis and Russell's (1984) study of adult adoptees, the qualities of adoptive parents perceived by adoptees to contribute to success were love, closeness, warmth, stability, confidence in parenting, openness and honesty about adoption and encouragement and support. Triseliotis and Russell (1984) also reported that predictors of success perceived by practitioners included acceptance of the adoptive role; accepting attitudes towards the family of origin; and a willingness to help the child to understand two sets of parents, that is, psychological and biological parents. Practitioners have also stressed the importance of adopters having realistic expectations of adoption and the child placed (Quinton, et al. 1997).

Borland et al. (1991) found that qualities within the new parents such as motivation, attitude, quality of parenting, tolerance of difference, acceptance of the child, expecting and accepting emotional and behavioural problems, being receptive to help and support from outside the family, accepting child's background and family of origin and ability to have flexible rules and roles were more important than demographic characteristics.

The parenting of children from minority ethnic communities has also been shown to demand particular skills and sensitivity. Thoburn et al. (2000) found that the young people they interviewed from minority ethnic communities valued parenting which helped them address racism and issues of identity, that is, being black and an adopted person.

#### **2.4.6 The contribution of agency practices to making adoption work**

Although multivariate analysis has shown service variables to have less predictive power of outcome than characteristics such as children's characteristics, family characteristics and informal supports (Barth and Berry 1988), there are nonetheless a number of recurring issues in the literature relating to agencies' contributions to the success of adoption. These include the quality and quantity of information provided about a child, the adequacy of the matching process, the adequacy of preparation for and support of a placement and the knowledge and skills of workers. This section of

the literature review draws mainly on descriptive studies that have used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the quality of service practices.

### ***Quality and quantity of information provided about a child***

Dissatisfaction with the accuracy and adequacy of information provided about a child before and after placement is frequently reported as an issue in the literature (Barth and Berry 1988; Lowe, et al. 1999; Nelson 1985; Quinton, et al. 1997; Sinclair, et al. 2005). In Barth and Berry's (1988) study both intact and disrupted families expressed concerns about the quantity and quality of information received about the child pre-placement. Their analysis showed an association between information about the child being overly positive and risk of disruption. Nelson (1985) reported that 51% of her sample of adopters felt that the information given about the child was either inaccurate or insufficient or both. She concluded that preparation and information are important as they allow parents to participate in decision making leading to more satisfaction. She also showed an association between information provided and parental satisfaction. Quinton et al. (1997) reported that families felt that information not being disclosed, incomplete disclosure and records not being up to date had contributed to adoption disruptions. Sinclair et al. (2005) found an association between receiving misleading information and the child feeling unsettled or excluded.

### ***Adequacy of the matching process***

Some concerns have been raised in the literature about the possible negative consequences of poor matching of adopters and children (Quinton, et al. 1997) and the phenomenon known as 'stretching'<sup>d</sup> (Barth and Berry 1988; Nelson 1985). Barth and Berry (1988) found that 18% of adopters reported that the child placed with them was very different from the child they had in mind when undergoing preparation and that 'stretching' of the types of children adopters were willing to consider was associated with risk of disruption. Nelson (1985) also found 'stretching' of adopters' preferences in 57% of cases. Particular concerns have been expressed by adopters about being persuaded to take older children and those with behaviour problems (Barth and Berry 1988). It appears that this practice is less problematic if adequate information is provided about the child (Barth and Berry 1988). Nelson (1985)

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<sup>d</sup> 'Stretching' refers to the practice of encouraging adopters to extend the range of children whom they would consider themselves able to parent.

concluded that stretching does not lead to poor outcomes if parents are given good information and preparation and agree to consider a wider range of children. Practitioners have attributed some disruptions to rushed matching and adoptive parents concerns being overlooked (Quinton, et al. 1997).

### ***Adequacy of preparation and support***

The importance of adequate preparation for adopters has been highlighted in the literature (Nelson 1985) and it has been suggested that more preparation is needed (Barth and Berry 1988). Practitioners have also reported a view that inadequate preparation for existing children within a family can contribute to adoption disruption (Quinton, et al. 1997). Practitioners have suggested that it is difficult to prepare adopters fully before placement (Quinton, et al. 1997). This points towards the need for ongoing training and support.

Post placement support has also been perceived as having an important influence on placement success by both adopters and practitioners (Quinton, et al. 1997). Nelson (1985) found that the main support offered to families post placement was arranging subsidies. However, parents wanted agencies to be more accessible, more active in arranging professional services, express more personal interests in the child and family and become more knowledgeable about special needs adoptions. Away-from-home care was also seen as important. Rushton et al. (1993) found that adopters were seeking more help with school and the school system. Nelson (1985) found that the number of professional services received and the number of services needed but gone without were all associated with parental satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the placement. She also reported that receipt of an adoption subsidy was not predictive of satisfaction.

Barth and Berry (1988) reported that adopters felt that having experienced workers made a difference and that continuity of worker was important. They found that a high number of workers made placements more difficult for parents as did a change in pre and post placement worker. Rushton et al. (1993) reported that at 5 years post adoption, adopters tended to turn down support even though still working through issues. They suggest that agencies need to have knowledge of adopters' past experience of professional help in order to engage adopters in ongoing specialist service support.

### ***Knowledge and skill of workers***

Typically, adopters express high levels of satisfaction with social work input (Parker 1999; Sinclair, et al. 2005). Thoburn et al. (2000) reported that the personal characteristics of workers such as warmth, reliability, availability and honesty were more commented on than methods used when adopters were asked to comment on the services they received. That said, adopters expect the rationale for social work activities to be clear (Sinclair, et al. 2005). Some adopters are seeking specific guidance and advice, particularly about handling behavioural difficulties (Lowe, et al. 1999; Quinton, et al. 1997; Rushton, et al. 1993; Sinclair, et al. 2005). This has also been raised by practitioners (Quinton, et al. 1997). Adopters reported that social workers' knowledge of children and their past was useful as this could throw light on behaviour but that workers were often not able to offer practical management advice. Rushton et al. (1993) also found that parents wanted practical advice about issues such as soiling, enuresis, non-compliance and sibling conflict. Sinclair et al. (2005) concluded that social services personnel may not be best placed to deal with children's psychological and emotional issues and that more research evidence is needed to develop a range of professional interventions for such issues. Families stated that they would value training in relation to behavioural issues but this should be tailored to a specific child's needs (Quinton, et al. 1997). Adopters are also seeking less reactive services in order to deal with problems.

### **2.4.7 The contribution of openness to making adoption work**

Given the importance given to the topic, it is perhaps not surprising to find a range of evidence relating to the practices of secrecy and openness in adoption. While much of the research that has been discussed so far has been largely descriptive and outcome focussed, understandings of the contribution of openness to adoption have also benefited from a more interpretive approach. That said, the empirical evidence relating to outcomes of openness is still somewhat limited, but there is a growing body of findings which offer insights into adoptee, adopter and birth families' experiences of openness. Much of the research that has been undertaken in the US has focussed on the adoption of healthy white infants. In contrast, much of the British research on openness has focussed on special needs adoptions. The evidence is discussed below. I begin with a brief review of the evidence relating to the practice

of secrecy in adoption. I then present the evidence relating to structural and communicative openness (Brodzinsky 2005), two very different, although not mutually exclusive, solutions to the problems associated with confidential adoptions. I then present evidence of the challenges that openness in adoption presents to adoptive families before moving on to look at the experience of reunions between adult adoptees and birth families who were involved in confidential adoptions. Finally, I review the empirical research relating to openness and kinship.

### **Evidence relating to secrecy in adoption**

Although the laudable intention of confidential adoptions was to protect members of the adoption triad from the public shame of illegitimacy, childbirth outside of marriage and infertility, there is evidence of the damaging consequences of confidentiality. Secrecy and discomfort in discussing adoption have been associated with reductions in wellbeing, adjustment and identity formation for the adopted child (Haimes and Timms 1985; Raynor 1980; Rosenberg and Groze 1997; Triseliotis 1973) and poorer relationships between the adoptee and adoptive parents. Confidential adoptions have also resulted in an extended grief process and long term psychological distress for birth mothers (Logan 1996; Winkler and Van Keppel 1984) and birth fathers (Clapton 2000). Evidence such as this led supporters of open adoption such as Pannor and Baran (1984) to conclude that fully open adoptions were desirable. However, even today the topic of openness provokes passionate debate, particularly the issue of direct contact between adoptees and birth family members.

### **Evidence relating to structural openness - direct and mediated contact**

It is generally considered to be a reliable estimate that 70% of adopted children in the UK today are likely to have some form of contact with their birth family, whether direct or indirect (Neil 2003) although there has been little research into the extent or quality of such contact (Performance and Innovation Unit 2000).

Contact could be with a range of birth relatives including birth mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings and others and may be frequent or as little as annual contact. Studies of older 'looked after' children who have had a previous relationship with their birth family have shown that these children often express a wish to retain some

contact with those who are significant to them (Macaskill 2002; Thomas, et al. 1999). While the importance for children adopted from care of maintaining contact with birth parents and siblings is well recognised, this may not always be achieved (Neil 1999). Sinclair et al. (2005) have highlighted the much lower levels of contact of children with birth fathers and extended family members when compared to contacts with birth mothers, siblings and grandparents and they suggest this may be a lost opportunity. The importance of ongoing contact with former foster carers is rarely addressed in research, however, Thomas and colleagues (1999) found that many children wanted to maintain some contact with former foster carers. Sinclair et al.'s (2005) study concluded that as children had often spent as long if not longer with foster carers than with birth families that contact was at least as important with foster carers as birth family members. It is important, therefore to gain an understanding of the child's perception of who is and is not significant as one of the criteria for making decisions about contact.

There is evidence that adoption can be successful where direct contact is maintained (Grotevant and McRoy 1998; Logan and Smith 2005) although it may be challenging (Macaskill 2002) and it appears that prescriptions about desirable levels of contact are inappropriate (Berge, et al. 2006).

The functions of contact have been suggested as:

- enabling a child to develop a realistic understanding of the circumstances leading to adoption;
  - enabling the child to grieve his or her loss of birth family;
  - enabling a child to move on to his or her new placement with the blessing of birth parents;
  - reassuring a child that birth relatives continue to care for him or her;
  - promoting stability through the continuation of connections;
  - reassuring the child about the wellbeing of birth relatives;
  - providing an opportunity for a child to understand their family history and cultural background; and
  - maintaining communication which could facilitate future direct contact.
- (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 1999)

There remains some controversy about the benefits and risks of structural openness.

The empirical evidence relating to the impact of structural openness on outcomes for children is not conclusive (Berry, et al. 1998; Brodzinsky 2006; Grotevant and McRoy 1998) showing for example, neither lowered self esteem in children in confidential adoptions nor higher self esteem in children in more open arrangements such as mediated or fully disclosed adoptions (Grotevant and McRoy 1998). The design of such outcome studies is methodologically challenging (Neil 2007). That said research has demonstrated several benefits of structural openness in terms of family process including improved communication and relationships between adoptive parents and adopted children (Berge, et al. 2006; Grotevant and McRoy 1998) and increased understanding and empathy between adoptive parents and birth families (Grotevant and McRoy 1998; Neil 2002; Silverstein and Demick 1994b). One-off meetings between adopters and birth relatives, have been shown to assist adoptive parents in coming to a more positive view of the birth family even if no further face-to-face contact occurs (Baumann 1999; Silverstein and Demick 1994b).

There also appears to be a lack of empirical support for the concerns expressed by critics of fully disclosed adoptions such as potential confusion about the rights, responsibilities and roles of adoptive and birth parents and the lack of entitlement to parent felt by adopters in the case of infant adoptions (Berry, et al. 1998; Gross 1993; Grotevant and McRoy 1998). Claims that open adoption aids grief resolution for birth mothers has been shown by larger studies to be likely but not guaranteed (Grotevant and McRoy 1998). Although some controversy persists, academic and professional opinion is largely supportive of structural openness. However, the support for structural openness does not amount to a call for the practice to be universal. There is evidence that contact is not advisable in some contexts and individual circumstances must be taken into account (Macaskill 2002; Sinclair, et al. 2005). Many of the US studies which are supportive of structural openness are concerned with infant adoptions. It appears that direct contact in adoptions of younger children is less problematic than in the case of older adoptions as there are no strong attachments to the birth relatives and, therefore, attachment to the new adoptive parent is not compromised (Neil 2003). In relation to contact in special needs adoptions in the UK, there is both evidence that contact can be a positive experience (Fratter 1996) and can present risks (Macaskill 2002). Grotevant and McRoy (1998) have stressed the need for a range of practices that meet individual needs. This conclusion is perhaps unsurprising given the diverse practices and

relationships that are encompassed by the term 'contact'.

### **Evidence relating to communicative openness**

In contrast to the caution voiced about structural openness, there is broad consensus in the academic and practice literature that communicative openness is desirable, if not essential. However, there has also been relatively little empirical research in this area. The research that has been undertaken has shown an association between communicative openness and the wellbeing or adjustment of the child (Brodzinsky 2006), the development of a positive identity as an adopted person (Howe and Feast 2003) and higher levels of satisfaction with the adoption expressed by the adoptee in adulthood (Howe and Feast 2003; Raynor 1980). Qualitative research has also suggested that open communication between adoptee and adopter in the earlier stages of adoptive family becomes a resource to draw upon when adopted adults seek reunions with birth families (Petta and Steed 2005).

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 1987; Brodzinsky, et al. 1984). It is not until the adolescent years that adopted children begin to understand the complex motivations for adoption (Brodzinsky 1987) and questions about adoption are most frequent (Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval 2005). Howe and Feast (2003) found differences between early and late placed children with older placed children finding communicative openness more difficult. Research has also demonstrated that there is no simple linear relationship between 'acknowledgement of difference' (Kirk 1964) that is open communication, and psychological wellbeing. Brodzinsky (1990) has concluded from empirical work that different coping strategies may be needed at different points in the lifecycle and that 'rejection of difference' can be a beneficial coping pattern in the early stages of family formation. However, 'acceptance of difference' is likely to be more appropriate as children develop and seek more information about the circumstances of their adoption. Brodzinsky's (1987) research also revealed a further unhelpful coping strategy, that of 'insistence of difference' which leads to family disharmony and over-reliance on genetic explanations of children's behavioural and emotional problems.



### **Evidence relating to the challenges of openness**

While there is general support for structural and communicative openness and evidence that members of the adoption triad usually manage to make contact work (Logan and Smith 2005; Sinclair, et al. 2005), there is also data to suggest that openness is a challenge for all concerned. These challenges are not presented here as an argument against openness but rather as evidence of the likely support needs of all those involved in contact arrangements. In the case of direct contact, there is evidence that children who have experienced extreme neglect or abusive relationships may desire contact with birth parents even though such contact can result in negative feelings such as sadness, disillusionment, divided loyalties and difficult memories (Macaskill 2002). Macaskill (2002) recommends that, where contact is maintained in such cases, safeguards are put in place to protect children from further risk and suggests the need for sufficient 'recovery time' between contact for both the adopted child and the adoptive family.

Empirical evidence also exists that some adoptive parents and their adopted children struggle to achieve the level of communicative openness to which they and professionals aspire (Howe and Feast 2003; Palacios and Sanchez-Sandoval 2005; Raynor 1980). 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 they were satisfied with the level of information given about their adoption. The former figure relates to adoptees placed before their third birthday and the latter to adoptees placed after their third birthday. Raynor (1980) found that it was common for some aspects of the adoption story to be withheld. In a more recent study Palacios and 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 family processes that contribute to and help to overcome these difficulties are under-researched. There is some evidence from anthropological studies of adoptive kinship which throw light on this issue. This is described later in this section.

### **Evidence relating to reunions between adult adoptees and birth families who experienced confidential adoptions**

A number of studies have examined experiences of information seeking and reunions between adults adopted and birth family. The importance of access to information and ability to search out birth relatives was first highlighted in Triseliotis' (1973) groundbreaking study which examined search and reunion experiences of adoptees in Scotland. The experiences of adoptees who have searched for birth family members and those adoptees classified as 'non-searchers' have been studied. Some limited research has been undertaken which looked at the experience of birth family members and adoptive parents of reunion. Most of the evidence relates to people adopted as infants and involved in confidential adoptions. I am not aware of any studies that have yet been undertaken to specifically examine reunions between birth families and children considered at risk who were adopted through the public care system as the bulk of the children adopted under these circumstances are only just approaching early adulthood.

The motivations of adoptees to search for birth families have been shown to be unrelated to dissatisfaction with their experience in their adoptive family (Howe and Feast 2003; Pacheco and Eme 1993), as was once believed (Triseliotis 1973). Instead it appears that search and reunion is motivated primarily by the need to work through identity issues or as Howe and Feast (2003) put it the need to discover 'roots' and 'reasons' for adoption, and the majority of adoptees who search have been shown to have positive relationships with adoptive parents (Pacheco and Eme 1993). The benefits of reunions have been described by adoptees as dealing with the trauma of rejection and loss, filling autobiographical gaps and feeling in control of one's past (Lifton 1983). The motivations of birth mothers to search have been identified as seeking reassurance about a child's wellbeing, explaining the circumstances of the relinquishment, letting the child know he or she was loved and wanting to establish a relationship with the child (Silverman et al. 1988, cited in Petta and Steed 2005).

Little is known about the experience of adoptive parents of search and reunion except in a supporting role for their adopted children (Petta and Steed 2005). Having the support of adoptive parents with search and reunion has been shown to be of importance to adoptees. Where this was not available it has led some adoptees to use

unsatisfactory strategies such as concealing or abandoning reunion, ignoring adoptive parents' concerns or excluding adopters from the process (Affleck and Steed 2001). Several studies have revealed that adoptees' loyalty to adoptive parents, fear of hurting them and fear of losing them are the main reason for not searching (Howe and Feast 2003; Pacheco and Eme 1993; Roche and Perlesz 2000; Sobol and Cardiff 1983). While the majority of adopters are supportive of adopted sons or daughters need to search, it is a challenging aspect of adoptive family life. Adopters fear that search and reunion will have a negative affect on the adoptee, it will negatively affect the relationship between adopter and adoptee and the birth family may threaten the adoptive family (Pacheco and Eme 1993). In Petta and Steed's (2005) study of adoptive parents' experiences of reunions, they found that adopters feared being judged harshly as a parent in the course of the search and reunion process, worried about potentially losing their child and some adopters found that they revisited their feelings about their own infertility. In order to cope with these concerns and feelings of helplessness, some adoptive parents provided practical help to their adopted children with searching. This activity also provided a context for discussions with their adopted children.

It appears from the evidence that many of the fears expressed by adopters' are unfounded. A number of studies have shown that search and reunion does not necessarily threaten adoptive family relationships and most often has a positive outcome for all parties (Howe and Feast 2001; Howe and Feast 2003; Triseliotis, et al. 2005). Reunions were described as positive both by adoptees who had continued contact and by those for whom contact had ceased (Howe and Feast 2001) and success was not judged by whether or not contact was maintained but whether expectations of the relationship were met, and, if not, whether the parties were able to negotiate a way of relating to each other (Affleck and Steed 2001) That said, the majority of those reunited had maintained long term contact. Typically, initial contact between adoptees and birth families was frequent but in most cases then settled to monthly, bimonthly or contact at holiday times (Pacheco and Eme 1993). In Howe and Feast's (2003) study approximately half of those reunited were still in touch after five years. In Triseliotis and colleague's (2005) study the average length of contact was eight years. Petta and Stead's (2005) study showed that where relationships were sustained between adoptees and birth relatives, adoptive parents faced the dual task of making 'cognitive space' for the birth relative and also

negotiating the practicalities of how to include the birth relative in family events such as graduations or wedding parties and day to day roles such as grandparenting.

### **Evidence relating to openness and kinship**

A rather different approach to the study of openness has been taken within the discipline of anthropology. Two anthropologists have been at the forefront of developing a cultural analysis of adoptive kinship within the context of increased openness and reunions, Judith Modell and Janet Carsten.

Modell (1994) undertook extensive fieldwork interviewing adult adoptees, adoptive parents and birth family members and participating in support group meetings and group conferences in the 1980s and 1990s. Some of the interviewees were recruited through these support groups. Most of the adopters participating in the study adopted in the 1980s at a time of reduced numbers of babies available for adoption and rising numbers of special needs adoptions. Developing Schneider's observation that adoption mirrors biological kinship, Modell examined the operation of what she calls the 'as if' principle within an historical model of confidential adoption. This refers to the requirement that adoptees act 'as if begotten', that adoptive parents act 'as if genealogical', and that birth parents act 'as if childless'. She then exposed the contradictions between the aspirations of the 'as if' principle and the reality of the life experiences of adoptees, birth parents and adopters.

Birth mothers described the contradictions of being a childless parent, of pregnancy being concealed or made invisible, the experience of labour and birth not being recognised or discussed and feeling infantilised by parents and professionals. Adopters highlighted the difficulties of the application process as an alternative transition into parenthood. Relationships with professionals were often described as a source of conflict. Finally adoptees spoke about the contradictions within the commonly told 'chosen child' story which routinely excluded birth parents in an effort to avoid the painful contradiction of having to be given up to be chosen. Some adoptees experienced chosen child status as a burden and something to live up to and some rejected the idea of choice as "*being chosen... made a tenuous bond, a frail basis for what was supposed to be a non-conditional, enduring relationship*" (Modell 1994, p132). For these adoptees, belonging took on the meaning of being owned rather than finding your place. Modell's analysis, therefore, uncovered some

significant challenges faced by members of the adoption triad who experienced confidential adoptions.

Modell then examined the possible consequences of increasing practices of openness for adoptive kinship drawing on interviewees' experiences of reunion. Both adoptees and birth parents characterised reunions as a 'quest for self' and most reported a sense of wholeness following reunions, often regardless of the outcome of the reunion. However, while the term reunion implies a meeting of estranged familiars, Modell described the ambiguity that these events create in terms of kinship. She suggested that reunions challenge both the 'as if' principle within adoption which renders birth family as strangers and the assumption of the primacy of biological ties. She reported adoptees' and birth parents' confusion about the status they should have and the role they should play in each other's lives following a reunion and the need to negotiate these. Should they be friends, part of the extended family, social or biological parents and whichever role they took on, how should they then act? Adoptees accounts suggested that relationships that were based on biology alone were flimsy and terms such as 'mom' and 'dad' became problematic. Modell's data suggested that blended birth and adoptive families were appealing but day to day interactions were difficult. For birth parents, reunions exposed the importance of doing family together 'over the years' in order to achieve a sense of kinship.

She concluded that as long as blood is the model for American interpretations of kinship and adoptive families are modelled on biological families through the 'as if' principle then comparisons will always be made between birth and adoptive families or 'real' and 'fictive' families and the 'fictive' family will always be judged inferior, or as Fisher (2003) put it "*not quite as good as having your own*". Writing at a time when the concept and practice of openness in adoption was still emerging, Modell (1994) suggested optimistically that open adoption has the potential to subvert and offer resistance to current ideologies of family, parenthood and gender and can contribute to a reordering of cultural notions of kinship. However, she herself questioned whether radical models of openness such as shared parenting are either possible or desirable.

Carsten's research focused on the experiences of adults adopted in infancy and reunited with birth family members (Carsten 2000). Her analysis suggested that,

while seeking out family resemblances and information about genetic inheritance was a motivating factor at the start of the search process, one of the main motivations for seeking reunions was to achieve ‘biographical completion’, that is a sense of one’s own past, present and future, and with it, to reclaim a sense of agency over one’s past (Carsten 2000). She drew on Antze and Lembek’s (1996) work on memory and identity to demonstrate the importance of narratives of the past for adoptees in order to “*bridge dislocations*” and “*build a continuous identity*” (Carsten 2000, p697). She also highlighted the importance of historical objects such as documents and keepsakes such as items of baby clothing in shaping biography and the “*transmission of kinship*” (Carsten 2000, p696). She describes kinship as “*a prospective process of co-production of memory*” (Carsten 2000, p697).

The narratives of adoptees both confirmed and challenged Schneider’s (1980) assertion that biological connectedness is given primacy within American and European cultures, at least within the specific context of adoption. Carsten (2000) observed that adoptees had gone to considerable lengths to trace birth relatives. However, the relationships rekindled as a result of adoption reunions often lacked emotional depth, meetings between adoptees and birth relatives tending to be infrequent and somewhat formal. This appeared to confirm the inadequacy of a biological connection alone as a basis for kinship. Birth, the traditional symbol of kinship, had become disconnected from its usual cultural meaning of longevity, certainty, obligation and ‘enduring solidarity’ as a result of the adoption process. Adoptees’ narratives distinguished the ‘right to parent’ that is somehow earned through sustained nurturing over time and the lack of ‘right to parent’ of estranged and then reunited birth parents, For example, one adoptee complained that her birth mother had felt it appropriate to intervene in her birth daughter’s life by giving advice. However, the adoptee felt this was a right she had not earned.

Carsten concluded that the concept of ‘kinship time’ is central to understanding both the dislocations between adoptees and birth relatives and the enduring links between the majority of adoptees and adopters. She suggested that everyday practices and ritual events performed over time express kinship and the importance of these two aspects of kinship is thrown into sharp focus by the experience of adoption reunions. Carsten observed that where rituals were reintroduced following reunions but in the absence of a shared history kinship was disrupted. Longevity, therefore, was the core

of kinship relationships with both adoptive family members and birth family members with whom adoptees were reunited.

Carsten and Modell's analyses problematise 'kinship' and 'openness' and as a result suggest new ways of conceptualising adoptive family life.

#### **2.4.8 Summary of empirical evidence and conclusions**

The literature review reveals that there is evidence that adoption is successful for the majority of children placed with a permanent substitute family. The research which has been undertaken to date has also added to our knowledge of the factors which appear to present the greatest risk to placements or have a protective effect. The risk factors associated with adoptive placement that have been consistently identified include the age of the child and the difficulties experienced by the child pre and post placement. Turning to the protective factors, there is a growing body of evidence that sibling placements are more stable than single placements and that good attachment has a protective effect. There is also some evidence to suggest that placements supported by single adopters do as well as those supported by couple adopters despite the higher age of the children placed. However, the explanations for this are poorly understood. Adoptive parents' skills and attitudes, and ability to deal with behavioural challenges have been found to be important, as well as the availability of informal support networks. The evidence relating to placement history, family composition, foster carer adoptions, parenting experience, adoptive parents' educational and socioeconomic status, contact arrangements and agency practices is still emerging.

Descriptive accounts of adoption have provided insights into adopters', adoptees and practitioners' experiences of adoption and their evaluations of these experiences. While no clear association has been made between agency practices and placement disruption, the quality of services have an important role to play in shaping adopters' experiences. Practice issues which have emerged as important include providing adequate and accurate information about a child to adopters, careful matching of child and adopters, adequate preparation and post adoption support and knowledgeable, skilled and consistent workers. These studies also indicate that adoptees perceive qualities such as warmth, honesty and encouragement and support as important aspects of adoptive parenting.

There is broad consensus that openness plays an important part in adoptive family life and it has been associated with a number of potential benefits for members of the adoption triad. However, the broad claim that ‘openness is good’ appears to be too simplistic and instead more acknowledgement is needed of the wide range of circumstances, practices and potential relationships that can be encompassed by the term.

Finally, cultural analyses of adoption have opened up the meanings attached to kinship in the changing world of adoption providing new insights into the experience of adoption and new avenues to explore adoptive family life. They have introduced useful concepts such as the ‘as if’ principle and have questioned the appropriateness of the concept of ‘choice’ within adoptive families (Modell 1994). Their accounts of reunions between adoptees and birth families have exposed the tenuous nature of biological kinship when families are separated over an extended period of time (Carsten 2000) and have highlighted the identity work in which adoptees engage through the reunion process using terms such as ‘a quest for self’ (Modell 1994) the need to ‘build a continuous identity’ (Carsten 2000).

#### **2.4.9 Discussion of gaps in the evidence base**

While these studies have added to knowledge about ‘what makes adoptive family life work’, they provide only a partial evidence base for practitioners, policy makers and adoptive parents. The final section of this chapter identifies limitations in the current evidence base.

##### **Assessing risk and responding to need**

There is some strong and emerging evidence relating to the factors which can present a risk to adoptive placements. However, Barth and Berry (1988) and Rushton (2003a) have highlighted the fact that longitudinal evidence of outcomes for children is scarce. In order to rectify this, more large-scale long-term prospective studies are needed (Rushton 2003a).

The focus on risk provides useful evidence to raise awareness of placements which are potentially most vulnerable and therefore requiring greater care. However, it tells



us little about the most effective interventions in particular situations. As Barth and Berry(1988) put it:

“The current quest is not to decide whether older children and special-needs adoptions are disruption prone, but rather, recognizing their central place in permanency planning to determine what adoption practices reduce this tendency.” (Barth and Berry 1988, p.77).

The use of RCTs is underdeveloped in adoption research. These could provide useful evidence of practice efficacy for both high and lower risk placements.

### **The need for a range of outcome measures and more complex models of success**

Concerns have been expressed that it can be difficult to interpret the findings of studies which use measures other than disruption, such as developmental progress or recovery, attachment to the new parent(s) or wellbeing where these rely on the subjective reports of adoptive parents, social workers or teachers rather than objective observation. However, Kadushin (1970) made a case for primacy being given to subjective measures when assessing outcomes. He found that many families remained intact despite adopted children presenting severe challenges to adoptive parents and concluded:

“For adoptive placement to be successful- that is, provide satisfaction to all parties in the relationship – it is not necessary that the child be ‘well adjusted’ or ‘psychologically healthy’. The child may not compare favourably with ‘normal’ peers. Yet whatever the child is, if the parents perceive him as acceptable to them, as being a satisfaction to them, the relationship has many strengths and is likely to endure.” (Kadushin 1970).

It is unlikely that a single measure of outcome could adequately reflect the adoptive family’s experience. Multiple measures including objective criteria and subjective evaluations all have a contribution to make. While multiple measures are likely to reveal an inconsistent picture with high levels of success being evident in some domains and lower levels in others (Bullock 2004; Fratter, et al. 1991) they are likely to provide a more nuanced account of the complex and dynamic nature of adoptive family life.

Much of the current evidence is derived from bivariate analysis and the examination of uni-directional relationships with little attention being given to more complex and bi-directional associations. More complex understandings gained through qualitative research of processes and context and quantitative research using cluster analysis to look at interrelated variables is needed.

### **Learning from families who stay together despite challenges**

The focus of much research has been on risk, particularly the risk of disruption, Parker et al. (1999) argued that using disruption as a measure of outcome says little about the quality of the pre-disruption experience, while Dance and Rushton (2005b) suggest that the adoptive family being intact does not necessarily mean that things are going well. These families may be in difficulty, potentially unstable or at risk of disruption (Dance and Rushton 2005b; Quinton, et al. 1998). In addition, there has been little attention paid to placements which endure and are successful against the odds. Barth and Berry (1988) examined cases categorised as likely to be stable or disrupt and found 18% of those predicted to disrupt did not and 16% disrupted despite the prediction of stability. Quinton et al. (1998) stress the importance of moving away from risk factors being seen as having some invariant influence on outcome (such as age at placement) and instead being considered together and within context to understand when they may be particularly problematic or able to be tolerated. Parker (1998) also reminds us that outcomes do not explain why something is the case or how it comes about. Much can be gained from undertaking research which examines the processes which appear to contribute to successful and enduring placements and further research to identify likely protective factors in high risk placements.

### **The need for an ecological approach to the study of adoptive family life**

There has been a disproportionate emphasis on researching the relationship between outcomes and variables relating to the child's characteristics or characteristics of the adoptive family and its members rather than characteristics of supports, services and informal networks and their role in maintaining stability in adoptive families. The implication of this focus on child and adoptive parent is that they hold the key to making adoption successful. Barth and Berry (1988) suggest that this emphasis is in keeping with psychological perspectives on causes of behaviour. The consequence of this, however, is that it is difficult to make a judgement about the relative

explanatory power of individual characteristics as opposed to wider social influences on adoption stability. The multivariate analysis undertaken by Barth and Berry (1988) revealed that variables relating to informal support such as having fewer relatives within travelling distance or less frequent church attendance and family characteristics such as the presence of other adopted children in the home or non-foster parent adoptions were more important risk factors than child characteristics such as external behaviour problems or older age. There would, therefore, be value in looking beyond the child or the adoptive parents and adopting an ecological approach to examine the impact of wider influences in making adoption work (Bronfenbrenner 1992).

### **Shifting the focus from how services work now to how families work over time**

The review reveals a heavy focus on adoption as a policy and practice issue rather than a family issue. This directs attention away from family processes and towards service practices and outcomes. In addition, adoption is typically 'bracketed' as a special case without then being placed back in context of research evidence relating to family and parenting more generally. This puts into question the meaning of some findings. For example, it is difficult to judge the meaning of disruption rates in adoptive families unless these are analysed alongside 'success' or 'failure' rates in non-adoptive families (Kadushin 1980). Perhaps as result of the focus on adoption as a practice issue rather than a family issue, there has been little application of lifecourse or lifespan theory and methodology to adoption despite it being recognised as the only permanency option which has the explicit intention of providing a lifelong relationship.

### **Adoption as pathology or family diversity**

There is a bias in the current research towards the parent/child dynamic and psychological theories as explanations of adoption issues. This has the effect of pathologising adoption. In addition, adoption is viewed increasingly as an intervention rather than meeting the primary need of the child and adopters to belong to a family. There is scope to apply and develop sociological and anthropological theories in relation to adoptive family life. Concepts such as family practices, performative aspects of the family and kinship theories can offer new inroads into understanding adoption.

### **The need to build adoption theory**

While adoption study methodologies have become increasingly sophisticated, there has been slower progress in the development and testing of theory in the field. For example, 'disruption' has been frequently used as an outcome measure of permanency. However, it has been demonstrated that there is a lack of conceptual clarity in outcome studies surrounding the term. Barth and Berry (1988) reported that few studies distinguished disruption pre and post the legal adoption order, the latter being more accurately termed 'dissolution'. Barth and Berry (1988) along with Parker et al. (1999), Rushton and Dance (2004) and Fratter et al. (1991) also highlight some of the issues associated with defining disruption as the child no longer being present in the family home. They give some examples of cases which are difficult to categorise such as a child attending boarding school or a 16 year old who moves to independent living after spending most of his or her childhood with the adoptive family but continues to have contact and support from adoptive family members. Instead it has been suggested that a distinction should be made between the child moving away from the adoptive home and the severing of relationships (Parker 1999; Rushton and Dance 2004). Questions must also be raised about the ability of the term to fully reflect the multiple dimensions of permanence that have emerged (Sinclair, et al. 2005).

Descriptive analyses of adoption also often lack an explicit theoretical perspective and there has also been little theoretical and conceptual development through an inductive research process. Importantly, the meanings of key concepts such as 'permanence' and 'openness' have been inadequately explored from the perspective of adopters, adoptees and birth families. As a result, some of the conceptual groundwork needed to ensure that research is meaningful and applicable has not been undertaken. In contrast, the interpretive work that has been done, while developing understandings of key concepts, makes no attempt to assess the implications of these theoretical developments for adoption policy and practice.

There is a need for a research agenda to be developed around adoption which bridges theory and practice, drawing on both for sources of explanation and understanding and placing findings back within the context of both current theory and good practice.

### **Whose research agenda?**

Adoption research is primarily directed by an academic, policy maker and practitioner led research agenda which has defined and measured success. There appears to be a lack of leadership from adopters, adoptees and birth family members to direct the research agenda despite the growth of user-led organisations and a lack of opportunities to develop capacity to make this possible. In addition, studies typically do not deal with the various interests served by adoption and the different expectations and potential outcomes for various actors. There is a need, therefore, for more critical research methodologies in the study of adoption.

### **2.5 Summary**

The literature review has revealed some strengths and limitations of the current knowledgebase concerning adoption. In terms of strengths, adoption research has identified a number of risk factors and protective factors relating to characteristics of adopted children, adoptive parents and type of placement. It has also described a number of service practices and qualities of adoptive parents which appear to contribute to successful adoption. The issue of adoption openness has been shown to have an important role in adoptive family life and has been associated with a number of benefits for all members of the adoption triad. Finally, cultural analyses of adoption have provided insights into the meanings attached to kinship in the changing world of adoption.

Turning now to limitations of the current knowledge base concerning adoption, the literature review has shown that to date there has been a bias towards the study of adoption from the perspective of agency policies and practices. Perhaps as result of the focus on adoption as a practice issue rather than a family issue, there has been little application of lifecourse or lifespan theory and methodology to the study of adoption despite it being recognised as the only permanency option which has the explicit intention of providing a lifelong relationship. There has also been little emphasis on day to day adoptive family life as opposed to the 'special tasks' of adoption and an ecological approach to studying adoption has been absent. There is a current bias in adoption research towards the parent/child dynamic and psychological theories as explanations of adoption issues which has had the effect of pathologising adoption. While adoption study methodologies have become increasingly sophisticated, there has been slower progress in the development and testing of

theory in the field. In particular, there has been little theoretical and conceptual development through an inductive research process. As a result, some of the conceptual groundwork needed to ensure that research is meaningful and applicable has not been undertaken. In contrast, the interpretive work that has been done, while developing understandings of key concepts, makes no attempt to assess the implications of these theoretical developments for adoption policy and practice. Finally, studies typically do not deal with the various interests served by adoption and the different expectations and potential outcomes for various actors.

## **2.6 Focus of the research**

The title of the thesis is ‘What makes adoptive family life work?’. The title reflects a sympathy with the ‘what works’ agenda, that is, a desire to focus on what action can be taken to ensure that adoption is successful. However, as I argued earlier in the chapter, a broader interpretation of ‘evidence based practice’ is required than a focus on RCTs alone. The analysis of the current evidence of ‘what makes adoptive family life work’ presented above suggests that there has been a bias towards the generation of evidence for the purposes of policy and practice. The emphasis of the thesis on ‘adoptive family life’ is intended to give primacy to the needs and interests of families for research evidence. That said, the needs of policy makers and practitioners are not ignored in the thesis as they also have the ability to positively influence the lives of adoptive families. The element of the question ‘what makes it work?’ attempts to encapsulate three related areas for investigation. First, the question ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ can be interpreted as ‘what is the nature of the work involved in adoptive family life?’. It is apparent from the review of the current knowledge base above that there has been little emphasis on the day to day ‘doing’ of adoptive family life. The thesis, draws on Morgan’s concept of ‘family practices’ and emphasises ‘doing family’ and subjective meaning as key aspects of the social construction of adoptive family life. Without an understanding of the subjective meanings of these family practices, I argue that there is a danger that proposed policy and practice becomes ‘unfitting’ and loses relevance. Second, the question ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ can be interpreted as ‘what are the processes which contribute to or hinder the success of adoptive family life?’. The analysis of current evidence above has highlighted the need for such a shift from outcome to process in order to develop understandings of adoption. Third, the question ‘what makes adoptive family life work?’ contains an implicit interest in

subjective definitions of what ‘working’ means and what counts as success. In addition, the research moves away from the current bias in adoption research towards the parent/child dynamic and psychological theories as explanations of adoption towards a more sociological interest in family diversity, family practices, performative aspects of the family and understanding the family within the wider context of history, culture and society. In order to achieve a broader vision of evidence based policy, practice and parenting, it sets out not only to further develop adoption theory but also to comment on the implications of this for policy, practice and adoptive family life.

### **2.6.1 Aims of the study and research questions**

In light of the strengths and limitations of the current knowledge base and the approach to ‘what works’ that I adopt there, the aims of the research are:

- a) To provide opportunities for the experiences of adults who adopted children between 1976 and 2001 to be heard.
- b) To increase understanding of changes in adoption theory, policy and practice and their the impact on contemporary adoptive family life.
- c) To identify from the accounts of adoptive parents, factors that contribute towards or threaten successful adoption outcomes across the lifecourse of an adoption both within and beyond the family system.
- d) To generate new ways of conceptualising adoptive family life.
- e) To disseminate good practice in relation to adoption.

The research questions addressed are :

1. In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic adoption changed between 1976 and 2001?
2. What personal and social challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
3. How do adoptive parents manage the challenges of adoptive family life across the lifecourse?
4. What implications do the findings of the research have for contemporary adoptive parenting and adoption theory, policy and practice?

In the next chapter of the thesis I outline the methodology for the research undertaken to address these questions.

## **3 Methodology**

### ***3.1 Design of the empirical research***

The study recognises that adoption is both a socially constructed phenomenon and a legal reality. It attends to both the meaning making in which individuals engage and the impact of the broader socio-cultural context on these meanings.

A range of methods were employed to address the research questions. In order to describe changes in the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic stranger adoption over the last 30 years, the study has drawn on local and national quantitative data relating to these changes. While these data give an indication of the broad consequences of changes in adoption policy and practice over the last thirty years they were not treated uncritically as facts and comment is made on changing practices of information gathering and reporting as a result of policy and practice developments. The study also aims to explore adopters' subjective experiences of these changes in adoption policy and practice and to develop an interpretation of adopters' first person accounts of the challenges faced by adoptive families across the lifecourse. A large proportion of the data reported in the thesis were, therefore, generated from a series of narrative interviews with adoptive mothers and fathers. Narrative inquiry relies on an holistic analysis of interview data providing insights into the trajectories of adoptive families. Two extended first person accounts of adoptive couples, one of whom adopted at a time when infant adoption was the norm and another who more recently adopted older children from the public care system are presented alongside the statistical data in order to contrast general trends with the complexity of the individual case. The process of the making and remaking adoptive kinship are then explored in greater depth.

Below I describe in more detail the quantitative and qualitative methods used. I begin by describing the methods used for synthesising local and national statistics relating to adoption. I then describe in more detail the specific epistemological and methodological approach to narrative inquiry adopted. Finally, I address specific issues relating to the robustness of the research paying particular attention to the



validity and trustworthiness of data, generalisability of data, reflexivity and ethical considerations. The results of the analysis are presented in the next chapters.

### **3.1.1 Analysis of local and national statistical data**

#### **Analysis of records held by DFW Adoption**

As stated earlier, DFW Adoption is a voluntary adoption agency operating in the North East of England. Its current role is to provide preparation, training and support to adoptive parents and their children at every stage of the adoption process, to facilitate matching between approved adopters and children in need of adoptive families, to provide specialist services to adopted people who wish to find information about their original family, to provide advice and support to birth relatives of adopted people and to help adopted people and their birth relatives get in touch with each other. An analysis of records held by DFW Adoption was undertaken in order to examine the changing nature of adoption between 1976 and 2001. The purpose of the analysis of DFW Adoption records was:

- a) to provide a description of the users of DFW Adoption's service between 1976 and 2001 in order to provide contextual information for the study and sensitisation to important concepts;
- b) to identify trends and changes in patterns of adoption over the time period in question; and
- c) to assist with the development of a sampling frame for narrative interviews.

Data used for this analysis were taken from two main sources, namely, a cardex filing system which records all those applying to adopt and the children placed with families between the early 1970s and mid 1999, and a register of adopters and the children placed with them between late 1999 and the present day. The register did not include data relating to adopters' date of birth and therefore a search of case files was undertaken for adopters in 2000, 2001 and some in 1999 in order to fill this gap. SPSS software was used to analyse the data (version 11 for Mac OS X).

#### **Analysis of published statistics**

A review was undertaken of available published statistics relating to adopters and adoptees from the 1970s onwards in order to provide a comparison between the activities of DFW Adoption and national adoption activity. Sources of statistics were identified through searching government websites such as that of the Office for

National Statistics, the General Register Office for England and Wales and for Scotland, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department of Health and expert sources such as the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. Some of the publications reported national statistics while others reported data based on local or national samples.

### **3.1.2 Interviews with adoptive parents**

Narrative inquiry was used to gain insights into adoptive parents' experiences and perceptions of adoptive family life. This section provides an overview of narrative research and then outlines the specific approach used in this thesis and its value to this study of adoptive family life.

#### **What is narrative inquiry?**

Narrative inquiry recognises the importance of stories in our lives. Polkinghorne (1988) describes narratives as ubiquitous. He says:

“Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with stories that we tell and hear told, with the stories that we dream or imagine or would like to tell. All these stories are reworked in that story of our own lives which we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed.” (Polkinghorne 1988p. 160)

Narrative inquiry has received increased interest by social sciences researchers in recent years and has developed as an approach with the establishment of the *Journal of Narrative and Life History* in 1990 which became *Narrative Inquiry* in 1998. However, Chase describes it as “*a field in the making*” (Chase 2005, p.669), as it continues to emerge in diverse forms influenced by a variety of epistemological positions taken by researchers adopting the approach. Some narratologists approach stories as representing reality, others consider narratives to construct reality and yet others are interested in the way ideologies and interests are inscribed into narratives (Riessman 1993).

While narrative inquiry is a diverse field, it differs from other forms of qualitative

research in a number of key ways, such as its focus on stories as data and its particular methods of data analysis. The analysis of qualitative data typically involves fragmenting text in order to identify themes and offer interpretations and generalisations in relation to these themes. However, narrative analysts have described the unsatisfactory results of this endeavour when faced with transcriptions of long narrative responses from research participants. They believe that important elements of the story such as the sequence in which events are told, the significance given to these events and the structure of the narrative are lost when employing thematic analysis. Instead they see potential for deeper understanding through the analysis of the story as a whole (Riessman 1993).

The focus of narrative analysis on stories is far from straightforward and begs the question ‘what counts as a story?’. Riessman and Quinney (2005) make the point that the term narrative has been popularised and as a result the term has lost some specificity. The term is sometimes used loosely by social scientists to mean any extended prose (Elliott 2005). Riessman (1993) suggests that many forms of talk and text such as chronicles, reports, question and answer exchanges and news reports do not qualify as narratives. Riessman and Quinney (2005) differentiate these from narratives, which they suggest relay not only sequence but also consequence. Ricoeur suggests that:

“the activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events.”  
(1981, p 278-9)

At its most basic, a narrative, therefore, typically has a beginning, middle, and an end and, crucially, a point. Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) define narratives as:

“discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experiences of it.” (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997, p. xvi)

Czarniawska (2004), differentiates stories from other forms of talk and text through their use of ‘emplotment’, that is, the imposition of structure, cohesion and explanation of the connectedness between the events described. From these

definitions, it can be seen that narrative inquiry does not treat stories as simple factual accounts but rather seeks to understand the way narrators construct their stories with characters, plot and sequence and the purpose this serves (Elliott 2005; Riessman 1993).

Riessman and Quinney (2005) have identified some key features of good narrative inquiry which they suggest include developing detailed transcripts; focussing on language, structure and discourse; paying attention to the micro and macro context of story production; a comparative approach to identifying similarities and differences between stories; and acknowledgement of the co-construction of stories.

### **The approach to narrative inquiry used in this study**

I will now outline the particular approach to narrative inquiry employed for this study and the rationale for this approach.

#### ***A lifecourse approach***

It is now well recognised that adoption is not simply a one-off event when a child is placed in the care of adoptive parents but is instead a life long journey (Freeark, et al. 2005; Rosenberg 1992). The study sets out to gain insights across the entire lifecourse of the adoptive family through engagement with adoptive parents' autobiographical accounts of family life. The holistic approach to analysis that characterises narrative inquiry fits well with the study's aim of gaining this lifecourse perspective.

The term lifecourse should be distinguished from the term lifecycle. A critique of the term lifecycle has highlighted the highly deterministic nature of the concept and it has been shown to inadequately reflect disruptive life experiences such as divorce, premature death or infertility (Exley and Letherby 2001). Adoption is yet another disruptive life event which fits uneasily within the normative lifecycle. The concept lifecourse, as it is used in this study, rejects the idea of an inevitable, expected or normative progression of life events or transitions. Narrative inquiry is able to accommodate unexpected biographical twists and turns and enables participants to give retrospective accounts spanning a number of years. It allows participants to tell their life stories in ways that are meaningful to them through the lens of their present identities (Riessman 2008). Giele and Elder (1998) also make a useful distinction

between retrospection and introspection when undertaking lifecourse research suggesting that the latter requires participants to do more than recount past events but instead to give their current interpretation of past events based on experience. This emphasis on meaning creation and evaluation of events again fits well with narrative theory and practice and the aims of this research.

### ***Attention to both structure and agency***

The research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter are clearly concerned with individual meaning making and personal biography but within an historical, cultural and social context. The approach to narrative inquiry employed here, therefore, focuses not just on the stories of individuals but also on macro issues that impact on meaning making and family practices. This emphasis on understanding the social institution of stranger adoption through the accounts of adoptive parents is a well-established approach to social investigation. Mills wrote that:

“Narratives are concerned with the intersection of biography, history and society.” (Mills 1959).

Similarly, David Morgan has suggested that:

“Autobiographical accounts ... present some kind of mixture of the immediate and the domestic with the societal or the historical.” (Morgan 1996, p.193)

### ***A participatory approach***

There has been much interest in recent times in the democratic principle of hearing the voices of users of health and social services and acting on these views when developing policies and services (Kenshall and Littlechild 2000; National Institute for Mental Health in England 2003). In line with this, a range of research approaches have been applied to the study of such services including the use of participative techniques and emancipatory models (Evans and Fisher 1999). There are now a number of examples of adoption studies which have sought the views of adoption service users (Harris 2004; Lowe, et al. 1999) although there is little evidence of a user led research agenda in the field of adoption. This study aims to adopt an approach to narrative inquiry that is both participatory and anti-oppressive. The use

of narrative interviewing ensures that the method of data collection allows the research to be directed by the participants' agenda as well as that of the researcher.

### **The approach to narrative analysis adopted in the study**

This study uses an interpretive approach, attempting to move beyond descriptions of people's experiences and towards a deeper understanding of the meanings adoptive parents attach to adoptive family life and the ways in which these meanings influence actions. Not only is the content of the story of interest, therefore, but attention is directed towards how the story is constructed, the discourses evident within the stories and the consequences of these constructions. These provide insights into the social function of the narratives and allow connections between individual lives and the wider context to be explored. As the thesis was investigating a relatively unexplored area of social life it was necessary to use an inductive, exploratory research strategy and narrative inquiry allowed this.

While there is some debate about the appropriateness of treating the terms 'narrative' and 'story' as synonymous (Czarniawska 2004), there is widespread agreement that it is acceptable to do so (Polkinghorne 1988) particularly when your interest is in the analysis of the socio-cultural aspects of narrative rather than the socio-linguistic aspects of narrative (Riessman 2008). I use the terms 'narrative' and 'story' interchangeably and in two particular ways. First I use the terms to refer to the extended biographical account told by adoptive parents about their experiences of adoption from the period leading up to the placement of a child to the point at which the interview takes place. Second, I use the terms to refer to shorter story segments about significant events across the lifecourse of the adoptive family. These events are sometimes connected and sometimes unconnected to each other.

### **Sampling of interviewees**

A total of twenty two interviews were conducted with adoptive parents. This section outlines the considerations taken into account when sampling these twenty two individuals.

This study used a purposive sampling strategy to select interviewees. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to fully explore the complex, nuanced and situated nature of the phenomena under investigation and to allow comparison as part of the

analytic process. In order to achieve this it requires the researcher to sample a range of experiences, processes, characteristics or contexts (Mason 2002). This typically involves the in-depth study of a small number of cases allowing a deeper and more situated understanding than is typically possible when using representational sampling. Mason (2002) states that strategic sampling does not aim to statistically represent a population but instead aims to include contexts or phenomena which throw light on particular aspects of the research questions and that these may commonly occur in the wider universe or may be unusual or infrequently occurring. Purposive sampling is also thought to be more appropriate than representational sampling when studying the lives of hidden or hard-to-reach populations (Guest, et al. 2006). The approach to sampling used here is outlined in more detail below.

The sample was drawn from a cohort of adoptive parents adopting through DFW Adoption over a twenty five year period. As is common practice in qualitative studies, a provisional sampling strategy and an approximate number of potential interviewees was set at the start of the study but a decision about the final sample of interviewees was taken as the study progressed, a process Miles and Huberman call 'conceptually driven sequential sampling' (Miles and Huberman 1994). The initial criteria for inclusion in the study derived from a number of key concepts within the literature and trends in policy and practice. First, adoption policy and practice has changed significantly in the period being studied, that is between the introduction of the Adoption Act 1976 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The study, therefore, aimed to sample adopters who had adopted at different points between 1976 and 2001 in order to capture the experiences of those who adopted in an era of relinquished baby adoption and those who adopted in an era of adoption of children beyond infancy from the public care system. This approach also allowed sampling of families who had adopted children at a time when the practice ideology promoted secrecy and when more open adoption practices became part of the orthodoxy. In the course of the research it became apparent that there were small but significant numbers of families who had adopted relinquished infants in recent years and some who had adopted significantly older children from the public care system and so the range of adopters sampled was broadened to include these families' experiences. Second, there has been an increasing recognition of the lifelong commitment made when an adoptive family is created and research has revealed different challenges faced by adoptive parents across the life span of adoption (Brodzinsky, et al. 1984;

Rosenberg 1992). The study therefore, sampled adoptive families at different stages of development and with children of different ages. Third, gender issues within adoptive parenting have been relatively neglected. Many of the previous qualitative studies of adoption which have sought the views of 'adoptive parents' have either interviewed couples jointly or, where one parent could not participate, interviewed mothers assuming these can act as proxies for fathers. Little attention has been given to the methodological and analytical issues that this raises and the resultant lack of understanding of any differences between the experiences of adoptive fathers and mothers. Recently evidence has emerged that adoptive fathers' experiences may be qualitatively different from those of adoptive mothers (Selwyn, et al. 2006), however, there has been little systematic investigation of these differences. While this small-scale study was not able to examine in detail gender differences between the experiences of adoptive mothers and fathers it did acknowledge that differences are likely. Therefore, both adoptive fathers and adoptive mothers were sampled in equal numbers.

The sample included adopters who had adopted at various points between 1976 and 2001, the earliest placement of a child being made in 1977 and the latest being made in 2001. Eleven interviews were conducted with adoptive fathers and eleven with adoptive mothers. These twenty two adopters were married couples and all couples were white and all had adopted through the voluntary adoption agency. All of the families, with the exception of one, sought to create a family through adoption because they had experienced infertility. One couple chose adoption as an alternative to having birth children for ideological reasons. Two families who had experienced infertility and adopted children went on to have a birth child.

The sample of adopters were all within intact adoptive families, that is, none of the adoptive families had, at the point of interview, experienced a disruption. However, this did not mean that adopters' narratives reflected a narrow and wholly positive experience of adoption. Instead a range of possible trajectories were evident. For example, some families had recently experienced a sense of disequilibrium following the reunification of an adult adoptee with birth family members. Other families had ongoing struggles with the consequences of their adopted children's difficult histories, such as behavioural problems and developmental delay. Sadly, one family experienced a disruption some months after the research interview.



A total of twenty three children were adopted domestically by these eleven couples. Six couples taking part in interviews adopted babies and five adopted older children. Four of the six couples who adopted babies experienced an adoption that would be described as 'confidential'. 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 as children were growing up. These adoptions took place in the late 1970s in the 1980s. Two couples adopting babies had some limited indirect contact with the children's birth family. One of the families who adopted a baby in the mid 1980s received birthday and Christmas cards from birth parents but did not correspond with the birth family. The last family to adopt infants adopted two babies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This family had had a one-off meeting with one of their children's birth mothers and had ongoing indirect contact with both birth mothers. The five couples who adopted older children had them placed with them between 1992 and 2001. The children had been looked after by the state for a range of reasons including abuse, neglect and death of a single parent. Two of these families had direct contact with birth relatives at the time of the interviews. 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. Within one family arrangements were particularly diverse. The couple had adopted four children from three birth families. Two of their adopted children had indirect contact with their birth family, one had direct contact with a sibling and the other had no contact. The children's age at the time of the interviews ranged from 7 to 31 years old.

There is little consensus or specific guidance in the research literature about the optimum number of cases to be sampled in qualitative studies. While it is usual for sample sizes in qualitative studies to be small, Mason (2002) suggests that there is no inherent reason why this should be the case but recommends against large data sets which make a detailed and focussed analysis difficult. A review of the literature by Guest et al (2006) revealed a range of opinion on sample size within the academic community depending on the qualitative approach adopted and the homogeneity within the sample. The minimum number of cases recommended in phenomenological studies ranged from 5 to 6 and in qualitative research more

generally the minimum recommendation was 15 cases. The range of suggested cases in ethnographic and grounded theory studies was between 33 and 36. Finally a minimum of 6 to 8 cases were recommended where the sample was homogeneous and a maximum of between 12 and 20 where the sample was more diverse. The number of cases sampled in narrative studies is also typically low in order to allow in-depth analysis (Chase 2005). It is likely, therefore, that sample size will be dependent on a range of factors including the research question, methodological approach and diversity within the contexts or populations being studied.

The most frequently cited criterion for justifying adequate sample size is 'saturation'. The term has its roots in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) where the more specific term 'theoretical saturation' is used. However, Guest et al. (2006) suggest that the ubiquity of concepts such as 'theoretical saturation' and 'data saturation' has resulted in a lack of clarity and poor operationalisation of the term in the research literature. Strauss and Corbin (1998) described 'theoretical saturation' in the following way:

“a category is considered saturated when no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is, when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data.”  
(Strauss and Corbin 1998, p.136).

Guest et al. (2006) operationalised 'data saturation' as the point at which no new codes or categories emerge from data collected and analysed and revisions of codes and code definitions are complete.

The decision to sample twenty two individuals in this study was based on three criteria. First, sampling ceased when it was felt that the breadth of the sample adequately reflected the changing experiences of adopters and changing adoption practices between 1976 and 2001. Second, although this study did not use grounded theory as such, sampling ceased when a richness of data was achieved which adequately captured the major properties of themes developed in the analysis. Third, the data collected allowed sufficiently detailed narrative analysis within the time and resource limitations of PhD research but without compromising the quality of the research.

### **Recruitment of participants**

Interviewees were recruited in two main ways. A press release was sent to local radio stations and newspapers describing the study and seeking volunteers. This was printed in three local newspapers and a short piece was broadcast on one local radio station. This method of recruitment led to four interviewees contacting me about the study and later agreeing to take part. The remaining interviewees were identified by agency workers within DFW Adoption. The agency approached potential participants first of all, provided them with some written and verbal information about the study and asked permission for their contact details to be passed on to me. Only one couple approached felt unable to be involved.

As all participants were married couples, each couple was provided with a letter of invitation to take part in the study (see Appendix B – Letter of invitation to participate in the study) and an information sheet describing the study, what their input would be and explaining the study's commitment to anonymity of interviewees and confidentiality (see Appendix C – Study information Leaflet). This was followed up with a telephone call in order to answer any questions that the couples may have had. A period was then left after the telephone call in order for potential participants to consider their involvement. A week or so later a further telephone call was made and a decision about participation was made. Appointments were then made for interviews either by telephone or by email. On the day of the interview a consent form was completed with the interviewee (see Appendix D – Information and consent forms for interviewees). The ethical issues related to the study are discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

### **Method of generating stories**

The study used the research interview to enable participants to tell stories of adoptive family life. This was considered more preferable to methods such as participant observation or eliciting written stories or diaries from adoptive parents as it allowed some interaction and face to face contact between myself and participants without this being overly burdensome or unduly intrusive. All but two of the interviews were conducted in the adoptive parents' homes. The contrast was striking between these and the remaining two interviews that were conducted within the university. The interviews conducted at interviewees' houses allowed me to observe adopters' within the family home and I often witnessed interactions between adopters and their

adopted children. It was not uncommon for me to be introduced to adopted children or adults before the interview began or for telephone calls to be received by adoptive parents from adult adoptees during interviews. This underlined the need for the adopters' stories to be seen within this wider context.

Much has been written about the human drive to tell stories (Polkinghorne 1988). Riessman (1993) has suggested that the impulse to narrate is so strong that even apparently closed questions can elicit stories where these questions refer to powerful human experiences. She gives the example of the question 'have you ever experienced racism?' The ubiquity of the interview in daily life has also led Silverman (1993) to refer to the 'interview society'. However, some academics have discussed the problems associated with eliciting stories in interview situations. It has been suggested that there is a tendency amongst researchers using structured interviews to suppress storytelling and instead to seek concise answers to questions that can be easily coded. This tendency to suppress storytelling, however, is not unique to structured interviews and can also be prevalent in qualitative interviewing and analysis (Mischler 1986; Riessman and Quinney 2005). Czarniawska (2004) suggests that interviewees may avoid narrative production perceiving the research interview as valuing logico-scientific knowledge over narrative knowledge. Chase (2005) suggests using simple everyday language not sociological language and Holloway and Jefferson (2000) say this is not enough in itself and the key is to be led by the person's agenda not the researcher's. They argue that the best narrative questions invite people to talk about specific times and situations in their life not their whole life across a long period of time. There is potentially an additional issue for adoptive parents who have experienced interview situations with social work professionals as these may have been perceived as 'testing' or 'assessing' and this expectation may influence their story construction.

Bearing in mind all of these issues, in this study I used a combination of techniques to elicit stories. Firstly, I brought to each interview a set of large cards. These had words or phrases written on them such as 'family' or 'challenges' (see Appendix E- Interview topic guide and stimulation cards). The cards were intended to provide some structure or shape to the interview without being overly prescriptive about what we would or would not discuss or how topics would be discussed. I also came to each interview with a small number of open questions which were designed to help

the participant to tell the story of their family from the point at which they started to consider adoption to the present day with some topographical features along the way (see Appendix E– Interview topic guide and stimulation cards). Importantly, I was careful to set the scene for the interview explaining to participants that although I had a set of topics to cover in the interview, I wanted to hear their story in their words and expected to deviate from my questions.

I also intended to use photographs as a bridge into storytelling in the interviews and asked each participant to choose three or four meaningful family photographs prior to the interview in order to talk about these in the interview. It was not my intention to analyse the subject of these photographs but merely use them as yet another route into storytelling. However, only approximately half of interviewees chose photographs in advance. Where participants did not choose photographs in advance, they often showed me family photograph albums at the end of the interview. I found this helpful in itself as it allowed me to hold real people in mind as I undertook my analysis.

I tried to avoid the perception of the interview as an assessment by providing information prior to the interview about my status as an adoptive parent, my relationship to the adoption agency supporting the research and giving assurances about confidentiality and anonymity. I emphasised in the consent process that I was not a service provider and gave each interviewee written information about sources of support and advice in case they should need it after the interview.

### **Recording and transcription of interviews**

All interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. They were then fully transcribed. Writers have highlighted the complex issue involved in transforming talk into text for the purposes of qualitative analysis (Elliott 2005; Riessman 1993). Riessman's (1993) influential monograph on narrative analysis offers a model for understanding the way that a primary experience can be transformed and represented differently not only through the process of transcription but also through the telling of the story, the analysis of the story and the reading of this analysis. Elliott (2005) suggests three broad approaches to transcription: cleaned up transcription which prioritise accessibility, rhythm and content of speech; detailed transcription which used a precise notation system for the purposes of conversational analysis; and

transcription using units of discourse (Gee 1986) which attempts to maintain the rhythm and structure of speech without the use of complex notations which interrupt the text.

My approach to transcription was closest to the first type described by Elliot (2005) and yet taking on board the issues of representation raised by Riessman (1993). Typical conventions of punctuation were used such as [?] indicating a question, [,] indicating a clausal boundary or short pause and [...] indicating a pause and I also included notations in the text, for example, inserting parentheses to enclose descriptions of behaviours or expressions of emotions which were relevant to the talk but kept these to a minimum. While I recognised that this approach reduces the precision with which the talk is transformed into text and limits the nature of the analysis that can be undertaken I wanted to retain the rhythm of speech and ensure that the speaker's own words were accessible to the reader. I felt this was important as the internal life of adopters is so hidden. That said, I avoided producing a very polished transcript to retain some of the authenticity of the talk, therefore, repetition and non-lexical utterances were included.

The transcription conventions used also acknowledge the importance of the interviewee's role in the co-construction of the interview talk and the interviewer's utterances were considered to be an important element of the analysis. My own questions or interventions, therefore, were transcribed. Again in order to maintain the sense and accessibility of the talk a decision was made to omit from the transcription non lexicals such as yes, aha, mmm and other encouraging noises which were ubiquitous throughout the interviews. These were not included in the transcript unless unusual in some way.

### **Analysis of interview data**

The interviews generated rich dense texts, some of which were in story form and some of which were not and data were analysed both thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006) and narratively (Grbich 2007; Mason 2002; Riessman 1993). 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.

The narrative analysis of the texts, firstly, involved carefully reading through the narratives one by one and considering the content of the transcript as a whole as a life story. From this initial reading I developed an abstract of each life story plotting its major milestones. I then developed a composite map of the lifecourse of adoptive family life for adoptive parents drawing out commonalities and differences. While this gave me an indication of the adoptive family life events that were important to adoptive parents and the way these were sequenced by adoptive parents it did not reveal the actual significance of these. I then began to identify shorter narrative segments relating to specific events or issues that occurred across the lifecourse and considered the meaning conveyed through these and the relationship between them. I examined the language used by adopters and the ways in which this reflected or contradicted western ideologies of family and kinship and also paid particular attention at this stage to the emotional content of narratives. I examined these stories in relation to the historical, cultural and social context of adoption and the circumstances of their production and considered the possible functions these stories could serve. Following a further process of comparison across interviews, I developed an interpretation of the stories. From this process I came to understand these narratives as stories about the making and remaking of a unique version of kinship between adopters, adoptees and birth family members. I re-examined the data, searching for negative cases and continued to refine the interpretive analysis.

Thematic analysis was undertaken assisted by the use of Nvivo software (version 8). The six stage process of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used, that is:

1. Familiarising yourself with your data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that these phases are not followed in a linear manner but instead an iterative approach to analysis is adopted, moving back and forth through the stages as necessary. I began by transcribing some data myself and having some transcribed by someone else. As these transcriptions became available,

I read through the data several times making notes of potential codes, themes and links to the research questions and existing literature. I then developed an initial coding frame in order to begin to interrogate the entire data set cross-sectionally using Nvivo software. Some codes were predetermined by the research questions although most were developed inductively from the data. I developed summaries of codes and organised these schematically in order to transform these into themes. In the early stages of analysis this cross-sectional analysis also helped to sensitize me to what later became narrative threads within adopters' stories. I collated data segments applicable to each theme and moved back and forth between these and the transcripts to ensure that the themes adequately reflected the data and that all relevant data were coded. As the analysis developed, some themes were revised or combined with others, some new ones emerged and more interpretive themes were also developed. A number of thematic maps were developed in order to move between these more abstract constructs and the concrete data. Through the continual process of writing, reading existing literature and reflecting on the data, the final analysis was produced.

### ***3.2 Ethical considerations***

The ethical dimensions of the study were assessed through Durham University's internal system of approval. As the study did not involve patients or staff members of NHS facilities, no external approval procedure was required.

The main ethical considerations which were pertinent to this study included issues of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, avoiding harm to participants, secure storage of data and the requirement to produce some benefit as a result of the research. Copies of the information and consent forms used can be found at Appendix D – Information and consent forms for interviewees.

Where potential interviewees were being invited to take part, as opposed to volunteering as a result of a media advert, they were first approached by a known worker from DFW Adoption. This was done in order to avoid putting undue pressure on adopters to take part in the study. Their permission was sought by the worker to pass their details on to me. I provided all potential interviewees with both written and verbal information about the study. The information given included:

- details of the focus of the study and the research questions being addressed;
- information about the source of funding for the study;



- information about the myself, my status as PhD student and the university to which I was attached;
- information about the academics and practitioner supervising the study;
- an outline to the methods being employed and the contribution being sought from them in terms of telling their story and the time commitment this would require;
- information about what would happen to the information they provide;
- details about procedures for ensuring confidentiality, anonymity and safe storage of data; and
- a statement to ensure that participants were aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Both the written and verbal information given to potential participants before they agreed to take part in the study explained that any information provided in interviews would be treated confidentially and data would only be discussed alongside identifying information with academic supervisors. I felt it was important that confidentiality be maintained when discussing data with my third supervisor, from DFW Adoption, to allow people to talk openly about their experience of using adoption services. An information and consent was provided to each participant before the interview. This again outlined the study's approach to confidentiality and anonymity. It was completed and signed by the interviewee and was then photocopied and the original returned to the interviewee.

As participants were invited to talk about personal issues relating to their family life, I felt it was important to ensure that they had some information about where to seek further advice, support or counselling if the issues raised in interviews merited this. At the end of each interview, therefore, I provided each participant with an information sheet with the names and postal, telephone and email contact details of potential sources of support including DFW Adoption and several national resources such as the British Association of Adoption and Fostering and the parental led organisation, Adoption UK.

### ***3.3 Validity, trustworthiness and generalisability of research***

In this section I address issues relating to an assessment of the quality of the research undertaken. It is now well recognised that it is problematic to apply concepts such as

validity, reliability and generalisability within social research, in the same way that they are used in the natural sciences. Instead social research has developed other, more appropriate procedures for establishing the robustness of a study. These are discussed more below.

Validity refers to the accuracy with which reality is captured through the research. Are you identifying and measuring what you set out to measure? In quantitative research the issue of validity is closely associated with the 'operationalisation' of concepts (Mason 2002). The approach taken to establish validity in narrative research depends to a great extent on the epistemological standpoint taken in the research and the degree to which the researcher identifies with a realist or anti-realist approach. Where historical facts are the focus of the research, then it may be appropriate to check participants' accounts against public accounts or other research in order to establish validity (Plummer 1995). However, this presupposes that there is one external reality that can be accurately measured, a claim that constructionists and post-modernists reject. Mason (2002) has suggested that even where an anti-realist position is taken, it is still necessary to defend the ability of one's chosen data sources and methods to illuminate your concepts. Some have made the case that narrative accounts have more validity than responses gathered through more structured interviews as they allow participants to set the research agenda and control the way they tell their story and avoid experiences becoming fragmented (Cox 2003; Mischler 1986). Plummer (1995) suggests, that validity is judged not by the 'historical truth' of an account but instead through the 'narrative truth' that it reveals through analysis of why this story is told in this way at this time and what historical conditions make this possible. Validity is therefore measured through the research's ability to reveal meaning making (Plummer 1995). This study views adopters' narratives of adoptive family life as socially constitutive and realities as multiple. The validity of the research, therefore relies on facilitating adoptive parents' unhindered story telling, the careful unfolding of the diverse meanings of adoptive family life for the reader, explication of the historical, cultural and social context in which they exist and a transparent method of analysis.

Reliability, traditionally associated with quantitative research, concerns the ability for the same results of an analysis to be obtained using the same methods and tools if the study is repeated, whether by different researchers or with different informants.

The concept of reliability is controversial in the qualitative field where there is much scepticism about the value of the use of standardised research instruments and the ability for these to be neutrally and universally applied (Mason 2002). Within narrative research, the concept of reliability is particularly problematic as it contradicts a basic tenet of narrative research that stories are fluid and socially produced at particular times, in particular contexts for particular audiences. Mason suggests, however, that the difficulties of applying quantitative concepts such as reliability to qualitative research, does not mean that qualitative researchers do not have to pay attention to the accuracy of their methods. Instead it may need to be addressed in distinctly qualitative terms. In order to address issues concerning accuracy of methods, the methods used to elicit adopters' stories and to analyse these are described in detail in this chapter. In addition, the display of data in later chapters of this thesis provides evidence of the source of my interpretation and allows readers to develop complementary or alternative analyses.

Generalisability refers to the extent to which findings can be applied within a wider context. Mason (2002) suggests that all good qualitative research should go beyond anecdotalism and instead develop an argument about 'something in particular'. While the generalisability of quantitative findings relies on the ability to demonstrate the statistical representativeness of the sample, this criterion is less appropriate in a qualitative study. The purpose of such research is not to produce law-like statements but instead to provide new theoretical insights, to unsettle orthodoxies and to develop testable hypotheses. Later in the thesis I describe how the data reveals the inadequacy of current theorising about adoptive family life and challenges policy and practice orthodoxies. I develop a new conceptualisation of adoptive kinship and examine the insights this provides into adoption policy and practice.

One key aspect of qualitative research is the recognition that research can never be completely value free and objective. There is an expectation, therefore, that the researcher will engage in and document a process of self reflection in order to make transparent the relationship between the researcher's own biography and the interpretation of the existing literature, the design of the empirical study, the interview process, co-production of data, the interpretations made and conclusions drawn from these. Some issues relating to reflexivity that were raised for me in undertaking this study are explored below.

### **3.4 The reflexive researcher**

The researcher's impact on the research process and the importance of reflexivity is well established within the qualitative research tradition. However, the approach taken to its exploration and documentation varies from discipline to discipline and from research practitioner to practitioner. The diversity of approaches is reflected in the extensive literature on the subject. There has been some attempt to reduce these diverse approaches to a smaller number of typologies of 'reflexivities' (see for example Finlay 2002; Wilkinson 1988) yet the topic continues to develop and expand leaving the researcher with several potential paths to travel of reflection and self discovery.

Wilkinson (1988) makes a distinction between three factors which influence reflexivity, namely, personal factors, functional factors relating to one's role as researcher, and disciplinary factors. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) in a paper specifically examining data analysis and reflexivity emphasise the personal, interpersonal, social and institutional contexts in which qualitative analysis takes place. I was aware of a number of aspects of my biography which may influence the thesis such as my roles as student, mother, former health care worker and service provider, former user of assisted conception and adoption services and adoptive parent as well as my disciplinary link with the social sciences and more specifically social work. Unravelling the various potential influences of these on the research process is by no means straightforward and is further complicated when attention is paid not only to the self that we bring to the field but also the self that we create in the field (Reinharz 1997). In an effort to provide a 'map' for qualitative researchers Finlay (2002) describes five overlapping aspects of reflexivity for the researcher to consider, namely reflexivity as introspection, intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique and discursive deconstruction. I will draw on Finlay's typology to explore the first three aspects of reflexivity, which are of particular relevance to this thesis.

Finlay's first category, reflexivity as introspection, is concerned with self-dialogue. In order to be productive Finlay suggests that introspection must be neither self indulgent nor provide "*permission to engage in legitimised emoting*" (Finlay 2002, p.215) but instead must be able to transform personal revelation into deeper

interpretation and insight. Finlay's description captures the dilemma of qualitative researchers, to demonstrate rationality and logical argument whilst also acknowledging the role of emotions and creativity. Throughout the period of the research my lived experience of adoptive family life impacted in various ways providing a resource of experiences and emotions to draw upon in my intellectual endeavour. I was careful to ensure that these experiences were not seen as confirmation of tentative interpretations but instead were used to raise new questions which could be interrogated through the data.

The second category of reflexivity described by Finlay, intersubjective reflection, is concerned with the dynamic between the researcher and the researched and its impact on data production and co-construction. Narrative inquiry is particularly sensitive to interview context and stories are seen as a collaborative venture between interviewer and interviewee. Oakley (1981) has questioned the social research paradigm dominant in survey research that prescribes interviews as a one way process of information collection from passive individuals and the 'proper' interview as mechanical, bias free and objective. Instead she explores the ethical, epistemological and methodological necessity of reciprocity in the interview situation. I considered it both ethical and methodologically appropriate to reveal my status as an adoptive parent to interviewees and to share elements of my biography when participants sought this. The written information which participants received before consenting to the interview disclosed my status as an adoptive parent although it did not give details about my family circumstances. Questions about my own adoptive family arose during interviews on a small number of occasions when a participant asked a direct question such as "how many children do you have?" or made a statement which contained a question such as "I don't know how old your children are, but..." In my response to these requests for personal information I attempted to achieve a balance between reciprocity and respectfully maintaining a focus on the telling of their story. Therefore, questions asked during interviews were answered there and then. However, I shared personal information only briefly during the interview and only when asked to do so. I did not see brevity as necessary to reduce bias or data contamination but instead to demonstrate my interest in *their* specific experiences. Most participants asked about my personal circumstances when the interview had concluded and at this point I did share my story briefly and answered participants' questions.

During interviews I was alert to the potential impact of the shared trajectory of childlessness and adoption of myself and interviewees on the co-construction of adoption narratives. This shared experience had some potential advantages within the interview as it meant that I had insider knowledge of the process of assessment that potential adoptive parents undergo and the legal and professional practices that follow on from the placement of a child with an adoptive family. I was also familiar with the legal and professional language to which adoptive parents are exposed in the adoption process. At the same time there were also some potential dangers of this assumed familiarity. I was aware, for example, that shared experience did not necessarily equate with a shared understanding or meaning of adoption. I also recognised that there was potential for stories to go untold or for the meaning of stories to be implied but not elaborated as a result of this assumed shared understanding. I was careful, therefore, to ensure that meaning was not taken for granted but that interviews were seen as an opportunity to explore the diversity of understandings and evaluations of adoptive family life.

Bondi (2005) states that research methods which require interpersonal interaction are inevitably emotionally rich. The value to the intellectual process of paying particular attention to emotions has been highlighted by several academics (Bondi 2005; Young and Lee 1996). The relevance of intersubjective reflexivity was particularly evident at times when strong emotions were elicited in interviews. So for example, when an adoptive father was tearful as he recounted his fear of losing his daughter when she was reunited with her birth family as an adult, a shared humanity but also an ability to project my own thoughts and feelings about a potential future reunion between my sons and their birth parents allowed me to empathise with the adopter, to sensitively encourage and allow him to talk about and reflect on the experience and to then interpret its meaning for him, me and adoptive family life more generally.

Finlay's third category of reflexivity, mutual collaboration, refers to efforts made to enlist research participants as co-researchers and recognises their capacity for reflexivity. Their participation may be limited to a reflexive dialogue at the stage of data analysis or may be more extensive requiring participants to occupy the dual roles of researcher and researched and to engage in mutual reflection at all stages of the research process. Where this approach overlaps with social critique (Finlay's

fourth category of reflexivity) it moves towards a model of emancipatory research. While this research cannot make claims to be emancipatory, the study did seek to be collaborative in attempting to address some of the power issues within the research relationship. For example, the shared status of adoptive parent between researcher and participants and the common experiences which this status brings inevitably culminated in a collaborative effort to better understand the phenomenon of adoptive family life. At the same time I was aware of the power of the researcher to become the authoritative voice in the research. I attempted to minimise the directive power of the researcher in interviews by conducting interviews that were relatively unstructured and inviting participants to tell their stories in their words. I also organised a dissemination event for interview participants in order to allow an exchange of ideas about emerging findings and interpretations of these. The dissemination event was not designed to be a respondent validation exercise but instead an opportunity to build on the analysis further through the personal reflections of participants on the findings and researcher interpretations so far. Therefore, the collaborative element of the study did not attempt to merge the roles of participant and researcher. While I acknowledged the value of participants' contributions to the interpretative and reflective process I did not assign participants any epistemological privilege over and above my own voice.

There was also to some degree a collaborative reflexive process with practitioners through my contact with the voluntary adoption agency which was a CASE partner in the research. This contact was through team meeting discussions, research dissemination events and formal and informal meetings with team members and the agency team leader.

Narrative research places great emphasis on the part played by the researcher in the co-production of data. While this research does not set out to be a piece of autoethnography, I do draw on my own experiences and reflections on these throughout the next chapters when I present the findings of the research and my analysis of the implications of this for policy and practice.

### **3.5 Conclusions**

This chapter has described the methodology adopted for this research and has provided a rationale for the particular approach to narrative research that was

adopted. It has addressed a number of key issues relating to the quality of the research such as the validity, reliability and generalisability of the research. It has also described the influence of my biography on the research process.

In the next two chapters I present my analysis of the published statistical data on adoption and the local adoption data collected from DFW Adoption as well as the narrative data generated in interviews with adoptive parents.



## **4 Findings and discussion: The changing profile of adopters and adoptees and the families created through adoption**

This chapter addresses the first of four research questions, that is:

- In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic stranger adoption changed between 1976 and 2001?

The question is addressed, firstly, through a descriptive analysis of the records of adoptees and adopters who have used the services of DFW Adoption in this period.

The aims of the analysis of agency records were:

- a) to provide a description of the users of DFW Adoption's service between 1976 and 2001 in order to provide contextual information for the study and sensitisation to important concepts;
- b) to identify trends and changes in patterns of adoption over the time period in question; and
- c) to assist with the development of a sampling frame for narrative interviews.

While this analysis provides an overview of the changing profiles of adopters and adoptees using the services of DFW Adoption over the period, it does not tell us to what extent these activities are specific to DFW Adoption or a reflection of wider national trends. In order to place these findings within a wider context, therefore, an analysis of existing statistical data relating to adoptees, adopters and adoptive family types in the UK is presented alongside the analysis of DFW Adoption's records. A further limitation of both the local and national statistical data is that they offer only a partial view of the changing profile of adoptive families over the period. Therefore, the chapter ends with the narratives of two adoptive couples, one of whom adopted children in the early 1980s when infant adoption was common practice and the other who adopted in 2001 when special needs adoption had become the norm. These narratives provide more detailed personal accounts of the changes that have occurred in adoptive family life over the period.

## ***4.1 Results of the analysis of DFW Adoption records and national statistical data***

There has been much attention given in the literature to changing adoption practices such as the perceived broadening of the range of people being accepted as adopters (in terms of age, marital status, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, family composition) and of the range of children considered adoptable (in terms of age, ethnicity, impairments, sibling groups). Therefore, this section of the thesis reports the findings of an analysis of adopter and adoptee records held by DFW Adoption. The analysis of records covers the period 1.1.76 to 2001. Between 1.1.76 and 31.12.01, a total of 1,062 children were placed by DFW Adoption with 772 adoptive families.

In addition, national data relating to the characteristics of adoptive parents and adopted children involved in domestic stranger adoption in the UK are presented. Data are reported from a number of sources including government statistics and cross-sectional surveys of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. Some smaller scale quantitative studies which draw on samples of adopters, adoptees or adoption services are also reported. Where data is more geographically specific or based on slightly more restricted samples it is used to provide additional descriptive data that is not available through national statistics.

The historical dearth of detailed statistical information relating to adoption is well documented (Dance 1997). Although this has improved incrementally since 2002, it has proved difficult to analyse national trends in the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through adoption since 1976. However, national data is available from the 1990s onwards relating to the characteristics of adoptive parents and adopted children. Data relating to the characteristics of adopted children are reported first followed by data relating to adoptive parents.

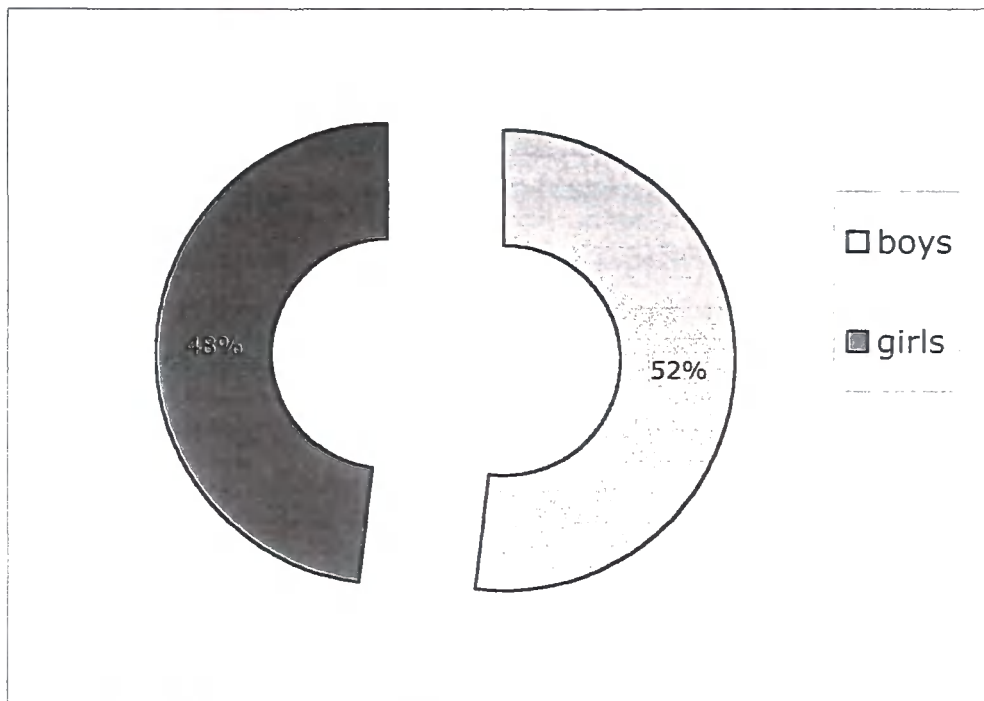
### **4.1.1 Characteristics of adopted children**

This section reports findings relating to the gender and age of children placed with adoptive families by DFW Adoption and nationally. It also reports local and national data relating to the placement of children singly or as part of a sibling group.

### Gender of children placed

Within DFW Adoption roughly equal numbers of boys and girls were adopted each year and this remained stable over time (see Figure 2). The same pattern was evident nationally (Department for Children Schools and Families 2007; Social Services Inspectorate 2000).

**Figure 2 DFW Adoption: Proportions of boys and girls placed for adoption by DFW Adoption between 1976 and 2001**

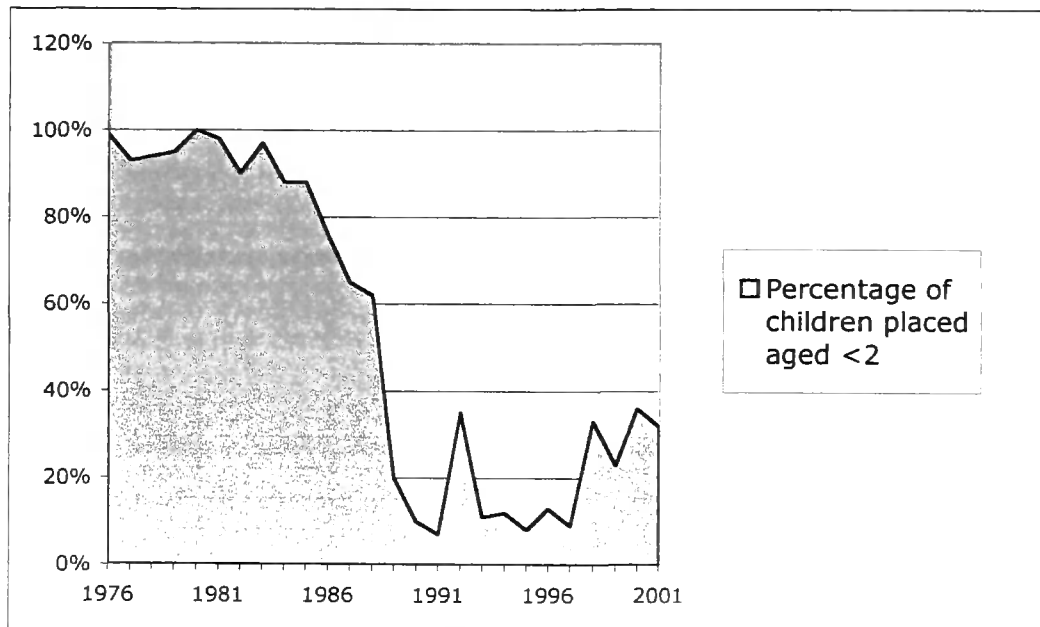


### Age at placement

Trends in age at placement within DFW Adoption were examined. The data are presented below in Figure 3. The data showed that infant adoptions prevailed as the main focus of the agency throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, the proportion of children being adopted aged 2 and above rose steadily throughout the 1980s. Adoption of children aged two and under dropped significantly to 20% in 1989 and remained below 20% for most of the 1990s with the lowest percentage of infant adoptions being recorded at 7% in both 1991 and 1995. These were also years of low total numbers of adoptions. From 1998 onwards placements of children under two years rose slightly again to approximately one third of all placements. Across the

whole period the age at placement ranged from 0 to 13 years and a total of 17 children aged 10 or more were placed with adoptive parents.

**Figure 3 DFW Adoption: Placements per year by DFW Adoption of children aged <2 as a percentage of all placements\***



\*Data relating to 1037 of the 1062 children placed by the agency was available.

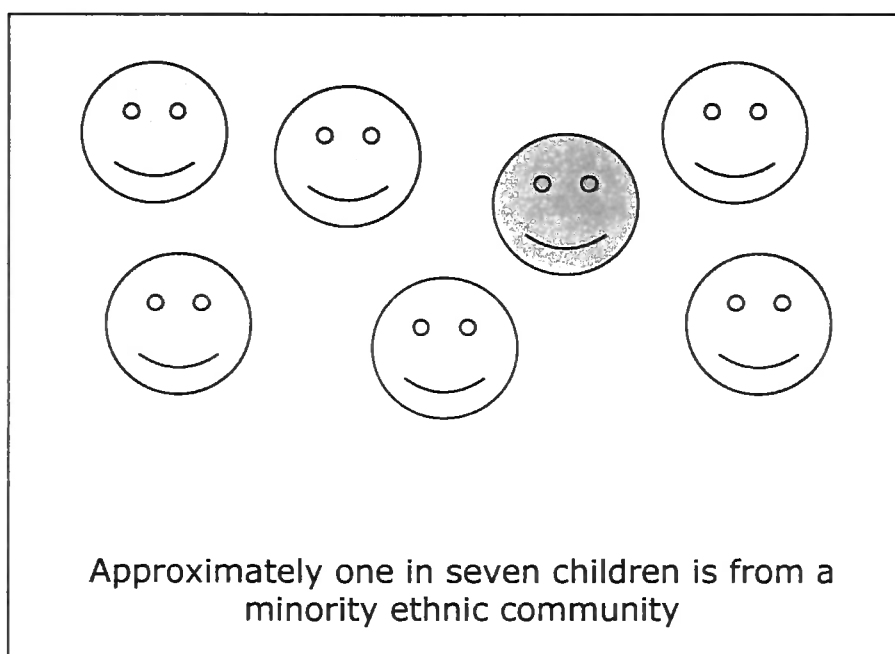
The dramatic fall in the numbers of infants available for adoption nationally is well documented (Office for National Statistics 1997; Office for National Statistics 1999), therefore, DFW Adoption's practices mirror this national trend. That said, some studies, that have reported numbers of children adopted in specific age categories, have shown small but still significant proportions of children under the age of one being placed for adoption (between 9 and 18%) (Dance 1997; Social Services Inspectorate 2000). From this it appears that while infant adoptions have reduced greatly in number they still represent a significant minority of placements and should not be ignored in contemporary adoption research.

### **Ethnicity**

It was not possible to establish the ethnicity of children placed by DFW Adoption between 1976 and 2001 as this information was not recorded on the agency's cardex system and recording practices in client records were not consistent over the period

of time in question. From available national statistics, it appears that from the late 1990s onwards the proportion of adopted children who were from minority ethnic communities has remained fairly constant with approximately one in every seven adopted children being from a minority ethnic community (see Figure 4) (Dance 1997; Department for Children Schools and Families 2007; Social Services Inspectorate 2000).

**Figure 4 National figures: Ethnicity of children placed for adoption in the late 1990s**



The Social Services Inspectorate (2000) reported that 86% of adopted children were white. Dance (1997) reported that 21% of children placed by voluntary adoption agencies and 9% of those placed by Local Authorities were from minority ethnic communities. The largest group of minority ethnic children were of dual herigate (just over half). Just over one in five were African Caribbean, just over one in ten were Asian and 24% of minority ethnic children were adopted transracially. More recent data from the Department of Children, Schools and Families (2007) showed that from 2003 and 2007 between 85 and 87% of adopted children were white.

#### **Children with special needs**

Again, it was not possible to access information about the special needs of children placed for adoption from DFW Adoption's records due to inconsistencies in

terminology and recording throughout the period from 1976. The national data on the special needs of adopted children was also sparse and difficult to analyse due to wide interpretations of 'special needs'. Dance (1997) collected data on rates of disability among adopted children. Local Authorities reported 7% of children adopted were disabled and voluntary agencies 14%. The Social Services Inspectorate (2000) reported that 26% of adopted children had special needs and 74% had no special needs. Statistics were available relating to the activities of the Adoption Register in England and Wales in 2006. Children are referred to the Register three months after a decision to place for adoption, therefore the figures are not comprehensive. It was reported that 157 children from the register were matched with adopters in 2006. Of these 46 had experienced neglect, 33 were described as having developmental delay or developmental uncertainty, 18 had experienced physical abuse, 13 had emotional or behavioural difficulties, ten had experienced sexual abuse, six had attachment difficulties and one had a hearing impairment (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 2006). While these children are likely to be over-represented due to the way the register operates, the additional support needs of these children and their adoptive families cannot be underestimated.

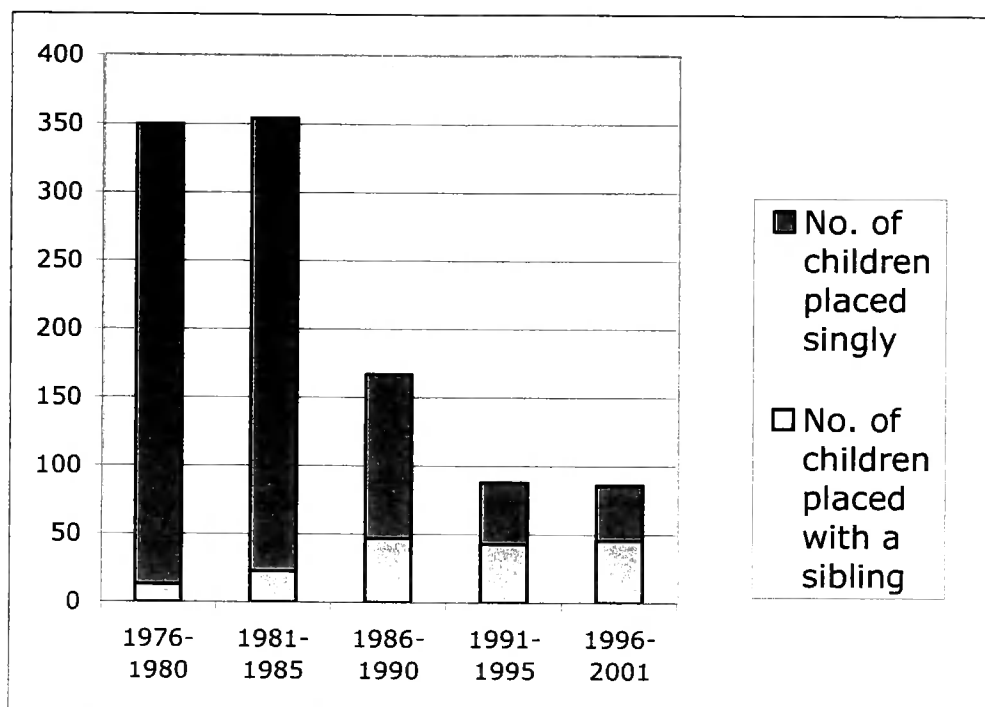
### **Single And Sibling Placements**

An analysis was made of the numbers of single and sibling placements made by DFW Adoption between 1976 and 2001. The data show a steady and substantial increase in sibling placements over the period from 4% in the period of 1976 to 1980 to 53% in the period of 1996 to 2001 (see Figure 5). The placement of sibling groups, therefore forms a large part of the work undertaken by the agency in recent years.

There are no comprehensive national statistics relating to the numbers of single and sibling placements of children for adoption. Some figures were available from the Adoption Register for England and Wales though as stated earlier these are likely to over-represent more difficult to place children, The latest figures from the Register report that between December 2005 and November 2006, of the 157 children matched by the register, 90 were single placements and 67 sibling group placements (57% and 43% respectively). In the same period 1520 children were referred to the register, 730 were single children (48%) and 790 were in sibling groups (52%) (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 2006). It appears from these figures that

the more recent activities of DFW reflect the national picture of approximately half of adoptions being adoptions of sibling groups

**Figure 5 DFW Adoption: Numbers of children placed singly or as part of a sibling group by DFW Adoption between 1976 and 2001**



### Summary

In terms of the characteristics of children being placed for adoption, the analysis of DFW Adoption's records confirms the general picture conveyed within adoption literature that the number of adoptions of babies has reduced substantially over the last 30 years and the majority of children adopted in contemporary times are placed with adoptive parents when they are beyond infancy. In addition, while children were predominantly placed singly in previous years, approximately half of children placed for adoption are now placed with a sibling. The gender of children placed has remained evenly split over the years. In these respects the activities of DFW Adoption appear to mirror national adoption practices. The data also reveal some less frequent adoption activity which is worthy of research attention, such as the continued placement of 'relinquished' infants in contemporary times and the placement of a small number of considerably older children despite age being strongly associated with risk of disruption (Barth and Berry 1988; Dance and Rushton 2005b; Holloway 1997b; Rushton, et al. 2001; Smith and Howard 1991). No statistical data were available in order to describe the ethnicity or special needs of the children placed by DFW Adoption. Given the predominance of white adopters

using DFW Adoption’s service and the relative infrequency of transracial adoption, the numbers of children from minority ethnic communities placed by the agency are likely to be low. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the special needs of children being placed for adoption have increased over the period but it was not possible to quantify this.

#### **4.1.2 Characteristics of adoptive parents**

Data were available relating to the following characteristics of adoptive parents and adoptive families: marital status, sexuality, age and ethnicity of adoptive parents; numbers of foster carer adoptions; and placements of children with families with an existing child. In order to synthesise the available national data a broad definition of the term ‘adoptive parent’ was used which included individuals and couples approved to become adopters and awaiting a placement, those who have a child or children placed with them with a view to adoption, those who have legally adopted a child or children and adoptive applicants described in the literature as still in recruitment or awaiting approval.

##### **Single and couple adopters**

Between 1976 and 2001, the great majority of people having children placed with them by DFW Adoption (99%) were married couples (see Table 2). Only eight adopters were lone applicants, the marital status of six of these applicants being recorded as single (0.7%) and for the remaining 2 lone adopters’ marital status was ‘not stated’ (0.2%). All lone applicants were women.

**Table 2 DFW Adoption: Marital status of adoptive parents**

Marital status	Frequency	Percent
Married	764	99%
Single	6	0.8%
Not stated	2	0.3%
Total	772	100%

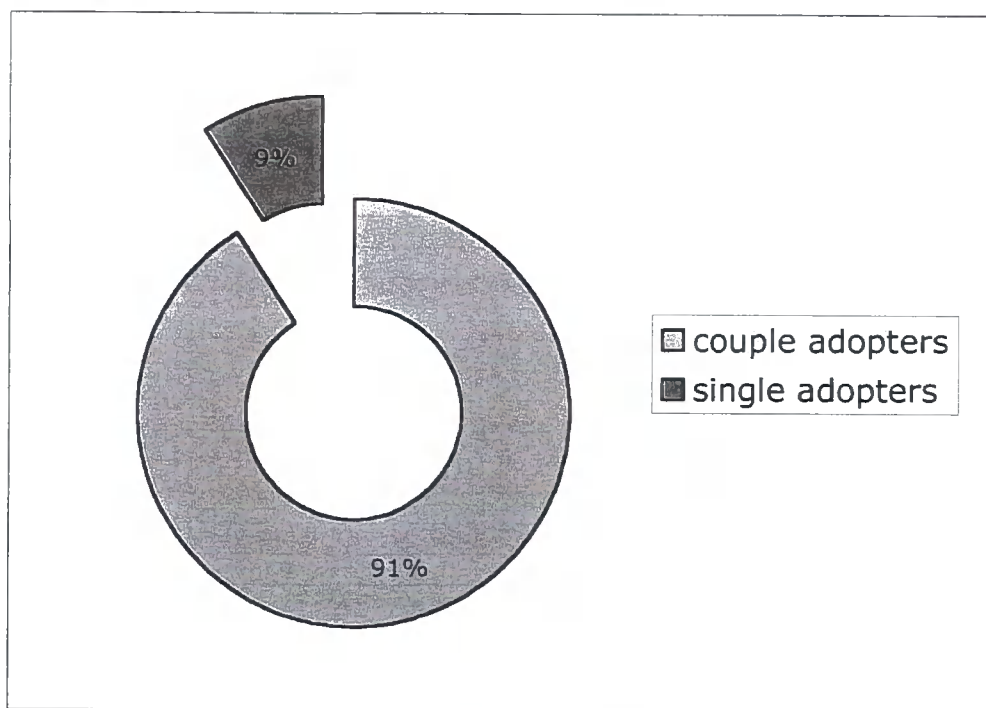
There were no children placed for adoption with anyone other than a married couple until 1984. After 1984 the number of lone applicants continued to be low and were evenly spread throughout the 1980s, 1990s and into 2001. Between 1996 and 2001 a



total of 3 such placements were made. This represents 3.5% of all placements for the period.

While the numbers of single people applying to adopt in the UK has risen in recent decades, the overwhelming majority of adopters are still couples. Ivaldi (2000) found that only 5% of adopters were reported by agency personnel to be single and Dance (1997) reported that 6% of adopters using Local Authorities and 9% of adopters using voluntary agencies were single. Across all agencies the figure was just under 7%. Single adopters were mostly female at 92% (Ivaldi 2000). However, these surveys did not differentiate single parent families and applications made by single applicants who were in gay or lesbian relationships and, therefore, in effect a two-parent family. In order to address this limitation, Lowe et al. (1999) asked adopters 'do you consider yourself to be a) a one parent family or b) a two parent family'. They found that 9% of adopters were single, that is, for every ten couples adopting there was one single adopter (see Figure 6). From this data it appears that the numbers of single people applying to adopt through DFW Adoption in the late 1990s were approximately half that of those reported in national studies.

**Figure 6 National figures: Proportions of adopters in England who were single applicants in the late 1990s**



More recently national statistics have differentiated single applicants, married and unmarried couples, same sex couples or those in civil partnerships. Figures for

England show that just under 9% of all adopters in 2007 were single as opposed to married couples, unmarried couples, same sex couples or those in civil partnerships, (Department for Children Schools and Families 2007).

### **Gay and lesbian adopters**

There were no data on lesbian and gay adoptions through DFW Adoption between 1976 and 2001 as the agency did not start to accept such applications until 2003. While it is known that the numbers of lesbian and gay adoptions have grown steadily since the 1980s (Hicks 2005), comprehensive national figures of such adoptions are unavailable. Figures for England show that during the year ending March 31<sup>st</sup> 2007, just under 3% of adopters were same sex couples although the figures do not reveal what proportion of the 9% of single adopters were gay or lesbian (Department for Children Schools and Families 2007). This issue has received little attention in previous surveys. Lowe et al. (1999) found that only three gay or lesbian adopters (1%) were approved in a sample of 226 adopters, all by statutory agencies.

### **Age of adoptive parents**

Within DFW Adoption, in the period between 1976 and 2001, the mean age of adoptive mothers at the time of the placement of the first child was just over 32 years old (see Table 3) and the age mean of adoptive fathers was slightly higher at just over 34 years old (see Table 4). The trends in age of adoptive mother and adoptive father at the time of their first placement are explored next.

**Table 3 DFW Adoption: Age of adoptive mother at first placement 1976 – 2001\***

Minimum age	Maximum age	Mean age	Std. Deviation
24	50	32.71	4.207

\*Data available for 717 of the 722 first placements

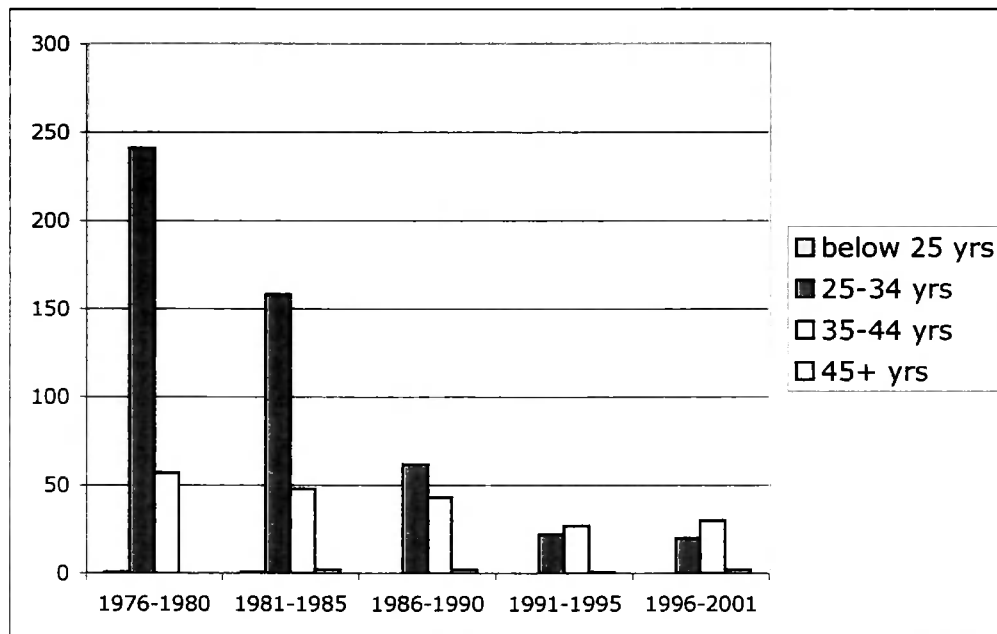
**Table 4 DFW Adoption: Age of adoptive father at first placement 1976 – 2001\***

Minimum age	Maximum age	Mean age	Std. Deviation
23	57	34.44	4.718

\*Data available for 711 of the 716 first placements.

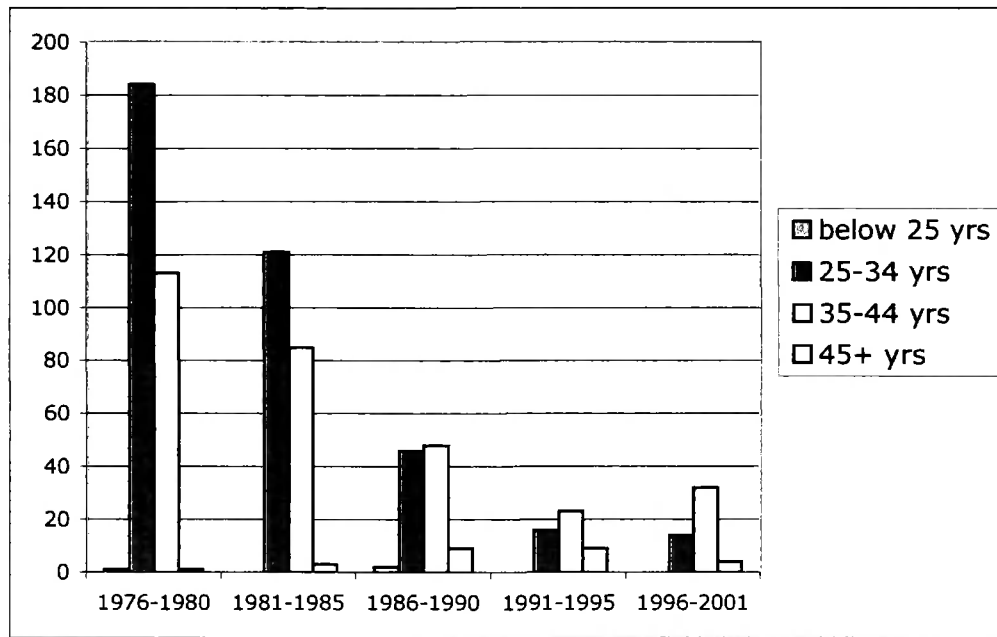
It appears that the age at which both adoptive fathers and adoptive mothers received their first child into their family rose gradually from 1976 (see figure 7 and Figure 8). In the late 1970s the majority of adoptive mothers and fathers were in the age category 25 – 34 (81% and 62% respectively). By the early 1990s for women and the late 1980s for men, the majority were in the age category 35 – 44. By the late 1980s there was a significant minority of men in the age 45+ category at the time of first placement (8%). The number of women in this category grew but remained relatively low at 4%. These changes, to some extent, reflect a general trend in society towards later child-bearing and delaying starting a family (Babb, et al. 2006).

**Figure 7 DFW Adoption: Age group of adoptive mother at time of first placement by era of adoption\***



\*Data available for 717 of the 722 first placements (including 6 lone female applicants)

**Figure 8 DFW Adoption: Age group of adoptive father at time of first placement by era of adoption**



\*Data available for 711 of the 716 first placements.

In terms of age, the adopters' using DFW Adoption's services appear to be similar to adopters included in previous national samples. Ages of adoptive parents have been recoded in a number of ways from study to study. However, most adopters appear to fall within the age range of 30 to 45 years when in the process of adopting. The Department of Health study (2000a) reported that adoptive parents at various stages of the process of adopting were mostly aged between 30 and 50 with 50% falling between age 30 and 40 years. In Dance's (1997) study more than 50% of adoptive parents fell into the age category 36 to 45 years. Ivaldi (2000) showed 59% of couples were aged 35 to 44 years when approved for adoption. The same study reports the minimum, maximum and mean age of single and couple adopters at the point of approval. These are summarised in Table 5 below. From this it appears that the mean age of DFW Adoption's population of adopters was only slightly lower than in Ivaldi's findings in 1998/9 and may be accounted for by the changes over time.

**Table 5 DFW Adoption: Minimum, maximum and mean ages of adoptive parents at point of approval as adopters for 1998/9 (Ivaldi 2000))**

	Minimum age at approval	Maximum age at approval	Mean age at approval
Single adopters	30 years 4 month	55 years 5 months	40 years 4 months
Couple adopters	24 years 1 month	59 years 1 month	37 years 8 months

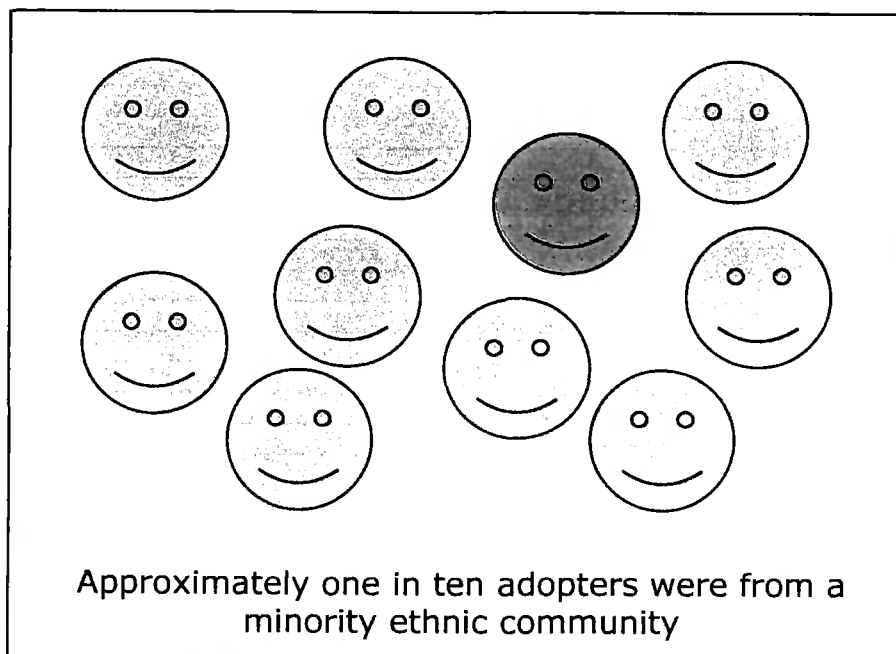
As can be seen there were clear differences between the mean age of single and couple adopters and the ranges of ages for each of these groups with single adopters being on average 2 years 8 months older than married adopters.

### **Ethnicity of adoptive parents**

It was not possible to address trends in ethnicity of adopters using DFW Adoption's service as this data was not recorded consistently throughout the period and was not easily accessible from records. However, anecdotal evidence from agency workers suggests that, historically, very low numbers of people from minority ethnic communities have adopted children through DFW Adoption.

National statistics show that the majority of adopters in the latter period of interest in this study, that is the late 1990s, were white. Ivaldi (2000) and Department of Health (2000a) reported the figure at 89% and 90% respectively (approximately one in ten, see Figure 9). Both of these studies were conducted in English Local Authorities only. Given that national statistics also show that one in seven children placed for adoption in the late 1990s were from minority ethnic communities (see Figure 4) and the importance given to matching children's ethnic and cultural background, this finding is a source of concern. A significant difference between the ethnicity of single and couple adopters has also been shown with 93% of couples being white yet 34% of single adopters being from minority ethnic communities (Ivaldi 2000).

**Figure 9 National figures: Ethnicity of adoptive parents nationally in the late 1990s**



### **Foster carer adoptions**

Historically, foster carer adoptions were rare within DFW Adoption as foster care was largely outside the agency's remit. No trend data is, therefore, available. In the late 1990s and early 2000s between 13 percent and 16 percent (or approximately one in seven) of looked after children who were adopted in England each year were adopted by foster carers and these figures remained relatively stable over time (Department for Education and Skills 2005; Ivaldi 2000). These children tended to be older and to have been looked after longer than children adopted by strangers. Foster carer adoptions, therefore, form an important and significant minority of adoptions. Selwyn et al. (2006) in a prospective study in the west of England reported that a disproportionately high number of single adopters were foster carers (43%) when compared with married adopters (11%).

### **Composition of adoptive families**

Data were not available relating to the composition of adoptive families from DFW Adoption's records, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that over the years children have predominantly been placed with childless couples, although some of these have later gone on to have birth children. Nationally, it appears that just over

one quarter of adopted children join a family with an existing birth child. This is confirmation that adoption across the UK has moved from being a service for childless couples to meeting a broader range of needs. Dance (1997) reported that a total of 26% of children placed for adoption in 1995 were placed with adoptive parents who had at least one birth child. Similarly, Dance and Rushton (2005a) reported that 28% of the older children placed for adoption joined families with at least one birth child. Lowe et al. (1999) reported that 16% of the adoptive parents included in their study of older children had one birth or stepchild living with them as well as the child being adopted and a further 22% had two or more birth or stepchildren. A recent study by Selwyn et al. (2006) reported that about one quarter of stranger adopters already had children and that these families tended to adopt older children with more complex abuse histories than childless stranger adopters.

### **Summary**

The findings show that the age of those adopting children through DFW Adoption has risen over the years. This appears to be in line with a general societal trend towards later child-bearing and delaying starting a family (Babb, et al. 2006). Adopters' using DFW Adoption's services in the late 1990s also appear to be similar in age to adopters included in national surveys.

While the overall profile of adopters using DFW Adoption's services mirrors that of the general population of adopters in the UK, being predominately white heterosexual married couples, some important minority categories of adopter are absent or few in number. These include foster carer adopters, single adopters, gay and lesbian adopters and adopters with existing birth children. There is evidence that these groups can make an important contribution to adoption often offering a family to children who have greater needs such as older children, those who have been in care longer and those with difficult histories (Hicks and McDermott 1999; Ivaldi 2000; Owen 1999; Selwyn, et al. 2006). This will be an important gap to be filled in future research. Issues relating to the minority ethnic status of children and adopters are also unlikely to be adequately addressed through this research and as far as I am aware there are no local or national figures relating to adoption by disabled people.

The low numbers of adopters from minority ethnic communities is a particular concern because of the proportionally higher numbers of children from minority

ethnic communities requiring new families and the preference for matching these children with adopters of the same ethnicity.

#### **4.1.3 Issues arising from the statistical analysis**

While the balance of boys and girls adopted has remained stable over the last thirty years, figures confirm that the age range of children available for adoption has altered significantly. The needs of children, birth families and adopters are, as a consequence, likely to have changed as well as the demands placed on adoption agencies. From the 1990s onwards the numbers of children from minority ethnic communities being placed for adoption has remained relatively high as a proportion of all adoptions at around 15% or one in every seven children. In 1997 Dance (1997) reported that 24% of minority ethnic children were adopted transracially and it appears that the shortfall in suitable families for black and minority ethnic children continues to be a problem (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 2006).

The data also confirms that increasing and substantial numbers of adoptive placements involve sibling groups. Even as early as the second half of the 1980s about one quarter of all children placed by DFW Adoption were placed with a sibling. While there is evidence to suggest that placing siblings together has a protective effect on placements (Barth and Berry 1988; Fratter, et al. 1991; Rushton, et al. 2001) these placements are also likely to be challenging for adopters, the children themselves and adoption services working with them requiring good preparation, matching and support.

In terms of age, over the period between 1976 and 2001, the mean age of adoptive mother at the time of the adopted child's birth has increased gradually over the years. by almost five years. It may be the case that adoptive parents can gain from beginning parenting at a time when they are likely to have more well established careers and to be more financially secure. On the other hand they may be disadvantaged if they continue to have adult children who remain, at least, partially financially dependent when they reach their retirement years. Government statistics (Babb, et al. 2006) show an increase in the number of adult children who continue to live with their parents. Some are thought to remain at home while in further or higher education, some may choose to continue living with parents while others face economic barriers to entering the housing market. In 2005, 57% of men aged 20 to



24 lived with parents and 38% of women of the same age did so. This is an increase of 6% since 1991. In the same year 8% of men aged 30 to 34 continued to live with their parents.

In addition, Selwyn et al. (2006) highlighted the longer term impact of adoption on occupation, hours worked and, therefore, income in adoptive households. She reported that adoptive couples had expected to be able to return to having a second income at the point they were interviewed (on average 7 years after placement) but 33% of mothers and 12% of fathers had either been unable to return or had reduced hours because of the child's needs. Half of the families interviewed described themselves as struggling financially and a fifth stated they had got into debt. Special needs adoption and later parenting may therefore, doubly increase the risk of financial hardship in retirement. It should not be assumed, however, that this trend represents solely a potential burden on parents as adult children may be providing benefits such as care and financial help to older parents.

The national data suggests that a substantial minority of adoptive placements are provided by foster families, families with existing birth children and many of the foster carer adoptions are single parent families. These less conventional family types are providing an important resource to children in need of substitute families. While the data cannot tell us about trends in characteristics of placements, it is evident that contemporary adoptive families are diverse and, therefore, require diverse and sensitive support services to meet their needs. Unfortunately, there is some evidence that placements of children into families with existing birth children are likely to receive less support (Sinclair, et al. 2005). Where diversity has not occurred, this raises questions about the likely cause of this. Do agencies need to be more proactive in recruiting such families or more supportive of such placements, do prospective adopters need to be informed that having birth or step children does not preclude them from becoming adopters and to be reassured that ongoing support will be available?

More research is needed to increase understanding of the child's experience of adoption, particularly by single adopters (both men and women) and gay men or lesbians; the nature of the barriers to these and other minority forms of adoption and more importantly how these can be overcome; and finally, the specific long term

support needs of the families created. An important provision within the Adoption and Children Act 2002 enabled, for the first time, adoption orders to be made in favour of civil partners, same sex couples and unmarried couples. The evidence is not yet available about whether this provision removed a significant barrier to lesbian and gay adoptions.

These statistics provide confirmation that adoptions no longer involve the placement of healthy white infants with childless couples. The children in need of adoptive families and the range of people who are considered suitable to adopt have become more diverse. At the same time these changes have made new demands on agencies supporting such placements. However, the statistics only go some way towards increasing understandings of the impact of these changes within these newly formed adoptive families. They say little of families' experiences of change and say nothing of the role of the birth family within these new adoptive families. With this in mind I now present the stories of two adoptive couples, one of whom adopted in the early 1980s and the other in 2001. These narratives are not intended to be representative of typical adoptive families' experiences but are instead intended to be illustrative, providing real life accounts of confidential adoptions of relinquished infants and the adoption of older children through the public cares system. As far as possible the stories are told in the adopters' own words. All names have been changed in order to protect the families' confidentiality.

## ***4.2 The adopters' stories***

### **Family A:**

**Adoptive father Mick, adoptive mother Pam, adoptee John now age 24, adoptee Sarah now age 22, birth father William and birth mother Hilary**

Pam and Mick are a white married couple. They were married for some time before trying to have a family. When Pam did not become pregnant they went to see their GP and had several medical investigations and were eventually advised to consider adopting children. They were both in their thirties at the time. They approached an adoption agency and were assessed and approved as adopters. Mick described the assessment process:

‘we saw a chap, nice guy. He paid a lot of visits, a lot of interviews, separate, together, here, at their offices, all kinds of stuff like that. They were very thorough as they needed to be... and then they said we would be on the list’.

Approximately three years after beginning the process of applying to adopt, in 1982 their adopted son was placed with them. He was just weeks old. Pam explained the circumstances of their son John joining the family:

‘...we got a letter through the post and ... the social worker ... rang up explaining ...the child they had. The letter also explained it. The letter was a brief background to John, who he was placed with and a little bit background on his parents. I think it was a case of we got the letter and we went next day. It may not have been but it was pretty quick and I remember the day we brought him back we actually had a power cut that night, here, so it was absolute panic and bedlam you know to think you had this baby and what do I do with it (laugh), quite a shock.’

Two years later they approached the agency again and asked if they could be considered for a second child. However, the agency had changed its remit and now just dealt with special needs adoptions. Their social worker put them in touch with another voluntary adoption agency however it proved less than straightforward to apply to adopt again. Mick explained:

‘[It was] very very close work getting Sarah because they said we were too old ... as I say we had a lot of arguments and they refused us and said ‘no you can’t adopt’ and I ended up getting stroppy with people which I don’t normally do, and I just said ‘look here when we took John I was told, I said I wanted a two year gap and you said it wouldn’t be a problem and now here you are saying I’m too old’, you know, and ... I mean children were very hard to get at the time, and I had to have all sorts of medicals again, because it was a different agency.’

Eventually, they were approved as second time adopters and a baby girl, Sarah, was placed with them. Both of these adoptions were confidential adoptions. According to the practices of the time the family received very little information about the children

and the circumstances of the adoption when they were placed and there was no contact between the adopters, adopted children or birth families as the children were growing up.

Pam and Mick described family life from then on as being dominated by what would be considered to be very ordinary family issues such as attending baby clinics, schooling, family holidays etc. That said, the children's adoption was not forgotten and it was discussed openly in the family. Pam and Mick explained that discussing adoption and exploring its meaning was an ongoing process within the family. Mick said:

‘... they’ve both known from being able to understand that they’re adopted, I mean there’s never ever been any time when they were unsure or any doubt in their head they’ve always known it ... we explained it to them depending on how it was asked and the circumstances at the time, and how old they were and how they would take it.’

Pam and Mick described their younger adopted child Sarah as asking lots of questions about her adoption as she grew up whereas their older adopted son John showed very little curiosity. Sarah has recently been reunited with her birth parents and half siblings. Pam explained that Sarah's birth parents had children from previous marriages when they started a relationship. Sarah's birth mother had three sons and her birth father had two sons. When Sarah was conceived they were not married. Their children were almost adults and they were caring for elderly parents and so felt it was best that Sarah was adopted for the sake of their current family. Sarah's birth parents have since married. Pam told the story of her daughter's search for and reunion with her birth family:

‘... she really needed to do this... We had little bits of information a bit of background of the situation of her parents and other children that there are, and as she got older I let her see the letter that we had originally giving the description of the family, and she's always said that she did want to look them up as soon as she was old enough and we felt she was ready.

It happened very quickly, because we approached the society, [the social worker] came out and did a few interviews and then she sent a letter to the

birth parents. Now she'd said the date she was sending the letter and the day after that day she rang up and she'd had a response, I mean it was that quick and I think Sarah just went 'wow' ... we all were ... I mean I didn't ever think it would be difficult, because we had both their names and addresses, you know and DFW had the file, the background and everything, but it was just so quick ... and yes they wanted to have contact and pursue it.

And really Sarah just back-pedaled. She got so... frightened. And we sort of left it a while and [the social worker] would ring up and say "they've been on the phone and [they want to know] what's going to happen." So Sarah wrote a couple of times. She took it so far [but] she was frightened to go any further. Basically I think she was frightened for us. But we were prepared for this, because from day one we've said if they want to look them up we'll help because I think you've more chance of keeping your kids if you help them, than saying "oh you want to forget about them" you know. You've got to put yourself in their position, and I would want to do it.

And ah, the day of the meeting, well the week before actually, Sarah had a boyfriend and they had split up and she was sitting crying about this boyfriend on the Sunday, and saying "I'm ringing [the social worker] on Monday I'm not going to this meeting on Wednesday, I cant do it", I said "you're going, I'll take you there", and actually if she hadn't gone to that meeting on Wednesday it would have all been called off, but luckily she went and its all great. It's something she needed to do.

She's been back a few times, She gets on very very well with the boys, I mean boys, they're all knocking on 40, they're a lot older than Sarah. But they're overjoyed they've met their sister, you know, they take her out and they've shown her around [their home town], and she's met their family ... but its gone very well and I'm pleased she's done it definitely.'

**Mick explained how he felt about his daughter searching for her birth family:**

'I've always thought it was nice that she wanted to, and I mean I've always said I would do anything I could to help her, but at the back of your mind there's always that little thing you know " is she going to go down there and find this big happy family, and relatives who she can relate to instantly and see a resemblance and she'll sort of drift into them and we would slowly

drift away?”. And I thought “what a selfish way to think about it” you know its her life, and I just had to shut that off, and just see how it goes. But I should have had more faith in her really (cries) ... because it just isn't the case it never was the case. I'm not going to lose her, you know... That was my only fear, of losing her and it's obviously not the case.'

Pam explained what it was like for her and Mick on the day that Sarah met her birth family:

'Well I knocked doors out of windows, I couldn't stop, I cleaned the cars and I .. Mick had a day off work, basically we were just sort of here, and dead nervous, but [our social worker] kept ringing up and saying “oh they're getting on and they're chatting” and all of this, so we had a bit of contact, but we were hoping that we were going through and meeting them. I know really it's a bit daft now when I look back, it would have been far too much for Sarah. So we didn't meet them then, but we did a few weeks later.

But that first day it was, it was oh quite nerve wracking, but as soon as Sarah came in I could see her face and she was a different person after that. Just so happy and ....I don't know, just different, she wasn't moody or, I think you could tell she got a lot off her chest, and I think seeing we were ok because she just had this thing “I don't want to hurt you”. I said “you're not, you'll come back to us”. I never had any ... I was going to say I never had any doubts, but the very first contact, and letter she got... I mean Mick's hopeless (laughing), the first sort of contact we had with William and Hilary, Sarah was very uptight about it all, and Mick just burst into tears, and I thought “oh my god we've ... had her on loan”, you know that was the way I felt, and then I thought “no you've got to get out of this”... and really, that was just initial, and certainly once we met them... '

Pam explained her adopted son's reaction to his sister searching for her birth family:

'He was a bit funny about it all at first but I think he's okay ... I could have strangled him actually (laughing), because he was saying to Sarah “oh how can you do this, you know your upsetting mam and dad”, oh I wish he wouldn't say that, “how can you hurt them like this”, and that was making

Sarah worse. Because her main concern was us, and she wasn't hurting us, it would have hurt me more if she hadn't done it and bottled it all up. He doesn't talk a lot about it, but when he knows she's been [to see her birth relatives], he'll say "are you alright, are you happy about it?" ... I think he's just being protective really. I think they both are.'

Unlike Sarah, John had not shown any interest in finding out more about his birth family over the years and still continues to show some ambivalence when the subject is raised. John's birth mother became pregnant when his birth father was engaged to another woman. The family suspect that John's father never knew of his existence. His adoptive parents wonder if he will one day also decide to search for his birth relatives and be reunited with them. Mick explained the difficulties facing him and his wife in supporting their son in adulthood:

'... it will come out whenever he's good and ready... because what we're concerned about, what Pam's worried about, [is if] he would like to find his parents and.. he's going to wait until we aren't here to do it, which would be an absolute tragedy because chances are they'll not be here. I don't know this for sure. I don't know if that's what's in his mind...you don't want to pre-empt it, you know... cause it... by pushing the wrong buttons at the wrong time.'

Pam and Mick talked about how their life has changed since the arrival of their first grandchild, John's son. They offer John and his partner lots of support, looking after their grandson each weekend, and enjoy this new role immensely.

#### **Family B:**

**Adoptive father Stan, adoptive mother Teresa, older adopted child David now age 12, younger adopted child Carla now age 9, birth mother Ann, birth siblings Callum and Lois, Maggie, David's foster mother.**

Stan and Teresa are a white married couple. Having been married for some time and unable to conceive Stan and Teresa sought medical help. They had IVF treatment but when this was unsuccessful after three attempts, the couple decided to try to adopt children. They were both in their early 40s at the time. Teresa explained the preparation and assessment process that they went through:

'We decided we were at that age where we couldn't or we didn't really want a baby. I think that was quite an easy decision to make given our ages ... So then we rang DFW and the lady came out. And we'd read so many things in the papers where if you were overweight or you weren't correct or whatever, our age... so the first question we asked was "are we too old?" And they said "not at all" ... so after that initial interview we decided we would go for it and we attended the preparation classes and... we'd gone through our preparation classes and then we'd had our home study. Where we were allotted a social worker and they came out and talked us through things and talked about who we wouldn't adopt or what we could cope with ... things like a child with visual impairment. Now Stan found this very difficult... it was difficult to think of a child with a short lifespan. I thought "no I want a family that hopefully will last forever". I don't think I could cope with a child that had a limited lifespan and would die after say 10 years or something. I couldn't cope with that... I think you've got to know yourselves, to come to terms with the child you can cope with ... Because they do come I think sometimes with problems, they've had horrible things happen in their lives and you've got to overcome that and make them understand that ... they're alright now.'

Stan also spoke of the difficult information that he had to confront when going through assessment and preparation. He said:

'A lot of times it was difficult going through a process and learning about ...why children are adopted and what certain children have been through. Because you don't ... in a [so called] normal family you don't go through these sort of things.'

Stan and Teresa first identified their adopted children, David and Carla, through 'Be My Parent' a publication that contains photographs and short descriptions of children who are in need of an adoptive family. David was aged six and was living with one foster family with his older brother Callum and Carla was aged four and living with another foster family with her older sister Lois. The children had become looked after by the local authority due to their birth mother Ann's problems with drugs and alcohol and the subsequent neglect that the children experienced.



Stan and Teresa were aware that another couple were considered as a potential match for the children but a decision was made that Stan and Teresa would make more suitable adoptive parents for the children, partly because they lived within short travelling distance of the children and their two siblings with whom the children were to have ongoing direct contact. The children's social worker brought along a video of the children for Stan and Teresa to watch and when everyone was happy to proceed, an official meeting was called to agree the suitability of the match between Stan and Teresa and the children. Once the match was agreed the couple started a planned programme of 'introductions' designed to help the couple and the children get to know each other before the children moved into their new home. Teresa spoke about their experience of introductions with the children:

'It was a roller coaster from then on. It was just so quick. I remember we had meetings in [a local town]. I remember sitting in this room with our social worker and their team and them saying "right you'll pick David up first." Because they were in different foster placements, it was a bit disjointed at times. We had to pick David up I remember at nine o'clock one morning for his first visit. Then we had to go take him back, pick Carla up in the afternoon for her first visit and then we had to do the same the next day and then we had to do telephone contact when they didn't see us the next day. Then we got them for the overnight stay and it just seemed to be ... I was just in awe really. It just happened so quickly and people were saying "you'll do this" or "you'll do that". And I felt like saying (laugh) "just wait a minute 'til I take all this in", you know?'

But I remember the Children were going to Maggie's house which was David's foster mother. And we were going to meet them for the first time... Well I just felt sick... And Stan was saying "you're going to be fine. We'll be fine" ... And I was saying to Stan "What happens if they don't like us. What happens if we don't click or whatever". ... But I remember going up the garden path and David hanging out the window. And all he wanted to do was sit on his new daddy's shoulders. Carla was a bit more reserved. She wouldn't come and sit beside us. And I said "would you like to come and see our house?" and we gave her a book of photographs and she had a look at that and then she took it and went and sat with her foster mother. But the next day, as I say that was the start, we were building sandcastles on the beach at 9 o'clock in the morning, with David, the next day . . . and we took

Carla to the park in the afternoon. And then the next day ... I think we took David out for lunch or something on the train. It just gradually built up from there. Then we had them together. Then they did the overnight stay.'

The first time David and Carla stayed overnight in their new home, was an upsetting time for David. Carla's reassurance helped David to cope with this new experience. Stan explained:

'When they went off to bed.... David was very upset, at first, he was crying ... we were sitting on the bed and [we said] "don't worry we can take you back, it's not a problem ... if you're not happy" and Carla's sitting on the bed saying to David "Look ... this is your new home, this is your new mammy and daddy, there's nothing's going to happen, everything's going to be fine" ... Everything settled after that and everything was fine.'

The children moved into their new home soon after this. In order to illustrate the extreme poverty and deprivation that the children had experienced when living with their birth mother, Teresa told a story about the day that David's bed was delivered to the adoptive family home. Until that point David had been sleeping in a bed that was on loan from the local authority. Teresa explained:

'I remember when his bed came... He'd said (excitedly) "I've got a bed. I've got a bed" ... And he was going on and on about this bed and I said "David it's [only] a bed" you know. He said "yes, but I've never had one" I said "what do you mean, you had a bunk bed at Maggie's."...[he said] "Yes I know but I mean before that... you either slept on the floor or you slept on the settee" ... he'll say they had no carpets, just floor boards'.

Stan and Teresa explained that they and the children soon "fitted in with each other". The children started school and family life became routine. Stan said:

'And at the beginning, yes it's difficult. We used to put them to bed and come down like that (big exhale of breathe) .. for the first few weeks. But they did fit in very quickly to us. And we fitted in quite quickly to them. It works out. Now it's just second nature, you know?'

Stan and Teresa talked about some of the rewards of being a parent. Stan said:

‘I mean it’s just fantastic having kids around. I love taking them swimming, I love taking them to do their gymnastics, I love taking them to Saturday clubs, I love playing in the park... Just spending time with them, taking them out, teaching them about the countryside. They love that ... It’s just wonderful, being a father ... ‘

Teresa said:

‘I used to love taking them to things or doing things that they’ve never done before. Because they had led a sheltered life. They hadn’t been anywhere. They hadn’t done anything. They’d never been on a train. The circus comes to [the local] park. We never saw the performance because we’re watching them two all the time (laugh)... We took them to the theatre, as part of their Christmas present ... to see Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. We didn’t see that because we were watching them two all the time.’

They also talked about some of the challenges of being an adoptive parent. David’s behaviour has been problematic at times and they have been receiving support from the local psychology service. A question mark has been raised about whether David has ADHD. Teresa explained:

‘As I say [he’s] very short tempered. If he didn’t get his own way ... kick the door. Kick anything that goes ... He’s had two or three incidents in school where he has completely lost it. You know. He’s gone for other children. And we’ve been summoned to school on a few occasions... He’s been on behaviour charts. He’s been on detention and things..., it got to a point where he threatened to jump out of an upstairs window, you know. He’s thrown plates out of the window, through temper ... Now you can’t let him go on like that.’

David and Carla’s older brother Callum was adopted into another family while for their older sister, Lois, the plan was that her foster placement would be long term. The couple explained that it had been decided prior to the adoption that there should be no contact between the children and their birth mother but that there should be

twice yearly direct contact between the children and their siblings. However, this proved to be very challenging and had been difficult to maintain. Teresa explained:

‘The contact with [their brother and sister] really stopped .... They don’t see a lot of them. We’ve tried, but I mean the children don’t even get Christmas cards. We used to send presents and cards from them, for Birthdays and Christmases. But our two didn’t get anything. So we thought well... and ... in the earlier days especially with Carla, she would see them and she would revert back. It was “carry me” and “pick me up”. And I thought “enough, it’s not doing her any good”. I think in a way I was quite relieved when it stopped. But if they want to start it again, we’ll try it. We will try. And we have tried since. But on the other side it’s not forthcoming at all. So... ‘

Stan expressed his concern about the effect that inconsistent contact was having on David and Carla. He said:

‘We had dates, lots of dates, fixed up. None were ever right and when we got a date nobody would turn up. So we just said “well we’re not putting the kids through any more worry stresses and things like that”... There’s no point in us continuing with it and telling the kids that yes we want to meet them if we’re not actually going to meet them on the day. Because that’s just total disappointment for the children. So it’s just gradually whittled down to nothing.’

Life story books were prepared for David and Carla which they brought to their new home. Teresa and Stan described their adopted children as very different when it came to discussing their past and their adoption. Talking about her adopted daughter, Teresa said:

‘I don’t think she has a lot of memories of her time. I remember as I say that first Christmas and Ann had sent all the presents and Carla said “who are these off?” I said “well your birth mammy”. She said “who?”. I said “well, I’m your mammy now but you had a mammy before that. But she was poorly and she couldn’t look after you”. I said “that’s why you came to us ... they’re from her”. And David said “you know, our mammy”. And she just dismissed it... I don’t know if she doesn’t want to know about it or she doesn’t recognise she’s ever had anybody else.’

David has more memories about his life with his birth family and Teresa and Stan have helped him talk about these memories and answer his questions. Despite the challenges that they have faced Teresa and Stan considered their family to be unremarkable. They were both very positive about their experience of adoption. They spoke about the things they considered to be family successes. Teresa said:

‘Carla oozes confidence now, compared to what ... I mean she looked like a little lost waif. But if you see her now... She goes to gymnastics. She’s got her fifth badge. David does Sport for All. He’s onto his advanced trampoline thing. For all David has his hiccups, he’s still a kind caring little boy.’

Stan said:

‘The children are happy. They feel part of the family. They’ve got grandparents that dote on them. They’ve got friends that absolutely love them to pieces as well. They love seeing friends, they love going to grandma’s ..... [we’ve] knitted together as a family.’

### **4.3 Summary and implications of these stories**

The two couple’s stories presented above, to use Plummer’s phrase “*give flesh and blood*” (Plummer 1995, p.175) to the statistics provided earlier in the chapter. The first couple adopted relinquished babies. The children were white, healthy and arrived one at a time. The couple were married. The second couple were also married, slightly older than the first couple and adopted a brother and sister who were both of primary school age. The children had been looked after by the local authority. Despite these clear differences and the children being placed almost twenty years apart, there are some striking similarities between these accounts of adoptive family life. Both couples went through a rigorous assessment process before children were placed with them. Although the process of being matched and introduced to the children was very different the arrival of the children was for both families a major life change that presented a number of challenges. When the children had joined the new family, life was taken up by rather ordinary family concerns such as the children’s schools, hobbies, friends. However, in both families

the children's adoption continued to be a defining issue that was regularly discussed. There were also, though, some key differences between the two families. For one family any discussion about adoption was to some extent limited by the meagre information available to the adoptive parents about their children's birth family and the circumstances of their adoption. For the second family information was more available in the form of life story books and the possibility of ongoing contact with the children's older siblings. In the first family, the children had no memories of their birth family as they were adopted at just a few weeks old. In the second family, the children had experienced neglect and hardship and the older child had a need to discuss his memories of this with his adoptive parents. In each case this provides different challenges for the children and their adoptive parents. In the first family, the adoption took place at a time when much less was known about searching and reunions between adoptees and birth family members and openness was narrowly interpreted as telling the child they were adopted. Over the years, therefore, the couple may have had to re-evaluate their expectations of future contact between their children and their birth family and recently have experienced the reunion of their adopted daughter and her birth family. In the second family direct contact was an expectation and the couple agreed to support the children with this. However, the reality of direct contact proved to be very challenging and this led them to review the arrangement. The second family, unlike the first, has also had to accommodate the interventions of professionals in their family life.

In the next chapter I develop my analysis of the stories told by the twenty two adoptive parents about their adoptive family life and the challenges they face day to day. Some of the issues raised by the two stories presented in this chapter are explored in more depth as well as some additional themes.

## 5 Findings and discussion: the challenges of adoption and ways these are managed.

### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I addressed the first of four research questions, providing evidence of the changes that have taken place since the 1970s in the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through adoption. This chapter addresses the second and third research questions, namely:

- What challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
- How do adoptive parents manage the challenges of adoptive family life across the lifecourse?

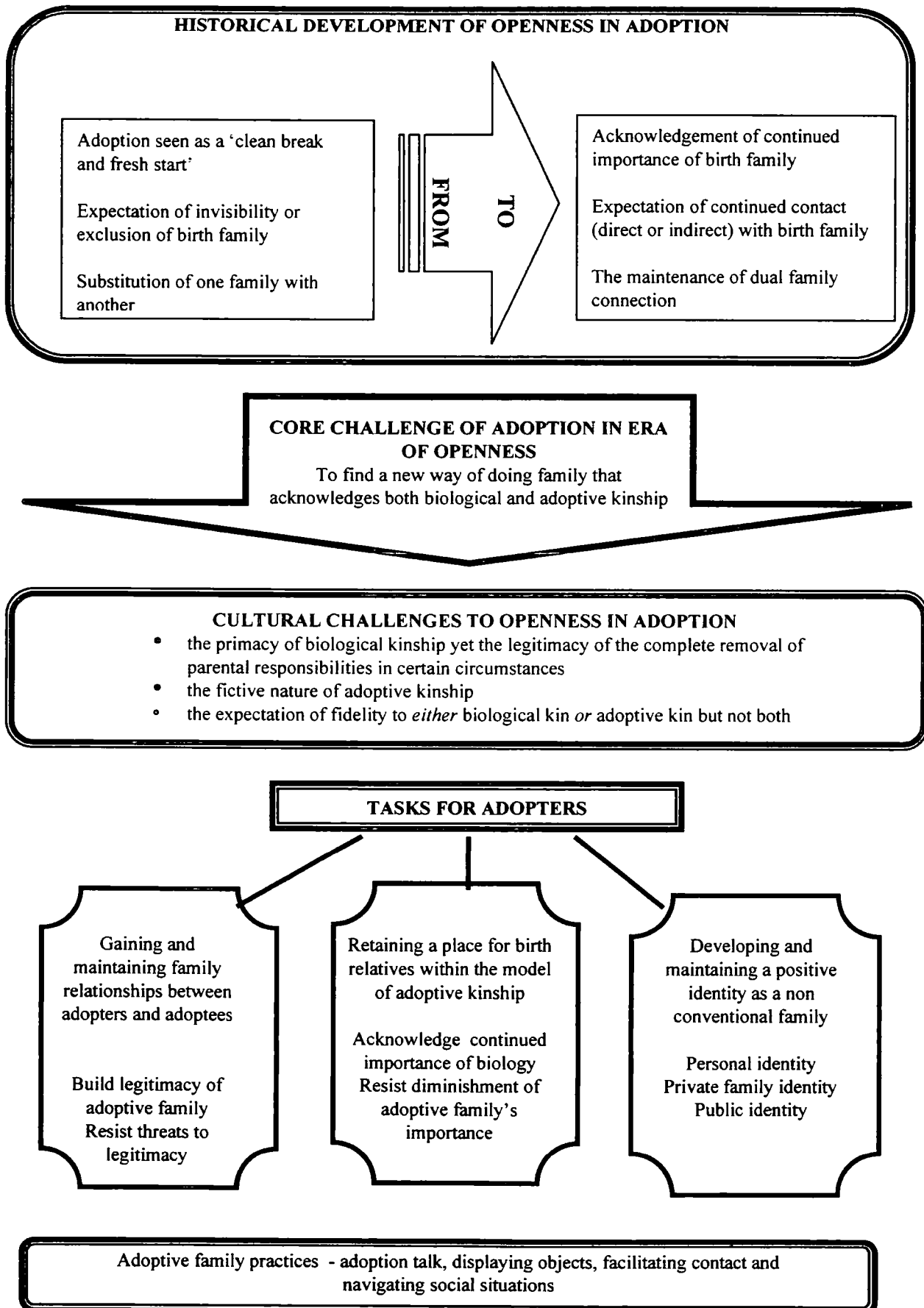
In the chapter I present an analysis of the empirical data collected through narrative interviews with adoptive parents. The fourth research question, relating to the implications of my findings will be addressed in chapter six.

A common feature of the stories told by adoptive parents in interviews was the dense description given of the work undertaken by them to establish the legitimacy of adoptive relationships as ‘family’. This was the case regardless of the nature or timing of the adoption. The thesis that I develop in this chapter is that the core challenge facing adoptive families in domestic stranger adoption is to create a unique version of kinship that enables adopters and adoptees to *gain* and *maintain* a sense of being family and enables birth family members to *retain* the status of ‘family’. This is done within a culture that on one hand values biological kinship over social kinship but on the other has historically legally sanctioned the complete removal of parental responsibilities from birth parents in favour of adoptive parents. The contradictory nature of this position has increasingly become apparent through the emergence of the concept of ‘openness’ within adoption. As a result, adopters are faced with the challenge of both resisting the discourse of biological primacy and recognising the continued importance of birth families within adoptive family life. The thesis asserts that the core challenge of finding a new way of *being* family also demands that adopters, adoptees and birth parents create new ways of *doing* family

(Hart and Luckock 2004; Morgan 1996). Adoptive parents' narratives highlighted the active work which they undertake at three levels to achieve this kinship. First, at the level of adoptive family relations where they have to find a way of doing family with unrelated strangers. Second, at the level of adoptive kinship where they have to find a way of doing family with the adoptee's birth family members. Finally, at the level of society, where they have to find a way of doing family within their wider community. Drawing on empirical data to develop my analysis, I explore the processes operating within adoptive families when undertaking the tasks associated with the creation of adoptive kinship. Figure 10 provides an overview of the key themes that are developed in the chapter.



**Figure 10 Doing adoptive family life within a climate of increasing openness**



## ***5.2 The making and remaking of adoptive kinship: the historical and cultural context***

In order to explore the challenges facing adoptive families, it is necessary to understand the historical and cultural context in which the meaning and practices of adoption have developed over the last thirty years. I will deal first with the historical context of adoption. Historically, adoption was believed to equate with getting on with being an ordinary family without further intervention of services or the state. There was an assumption that family relationships inevitably developed from the creation of family-like structures of new parents plus children and through the granting of the legal right for these adults to parent the children. Subsequently, the issue of 'difference' emerged and the ongoing needs of adoptive families for support with the special tasks of adoption was increasingly recognised. Some of these 'differences' related to the increasingly complex needs of children requiring substitute families. As a result the contemporary adoptive family was increasingly seen as a site of therapeutic intervention. Other 'differences' became apparent as acknowledgement grew of the continued importance of the birth family within the adoptive family and the need for adoptees to 'hold multiple families in mind' (Rustin 1999).

Examining the historical context of adoption policy and practice in Western culture, Grotevant and McRoy (1998) contrast two definitions of adoption. The first definition states that adoption is:

“... a social and legal process whereby a parent-child relationship is established between persons not so related by birth. By this means, a child born to one set of parents becomes legally and socially, the child of other parents, a member of another family, and assumes the same rights and duties as those that obtain between children and their biological parents”.  
(Costin 1972p. 359)

The later definition states:

“We define 'adoption' as a means of providing some children with security and meeting their developmental needs by legally transferring ongoing

parental responsibilities from their birth parents to their adoptive parents; recognizing that in so doing we have created a new kinship network that forever links those two families together through the child, who is shared by both. In adoption, as in marriage, the new legal family relationship does not signal the absolute end of one family and the beginning of another, nor does it sever the psychological tie to an earlier family. Rather it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved". (Reitz and Watson 1992, p.11)

As the meaning of adoption has developed, adoption has come to be conceptualised as a triangle connecting the lives of the adopted person, his or her birth family and the adoptive parents (Tugendhat 1992). The triangle acts as a visual reminder of the importance of all three parties within adoption. The term 'adoptive kinship network' has also been increasingly used in adoption literature to acknowledge the connections between birth and adoptive families. However, while helpful, these ways of conceptualising adoption also generate many questions for members of such adoptive kinship networks.

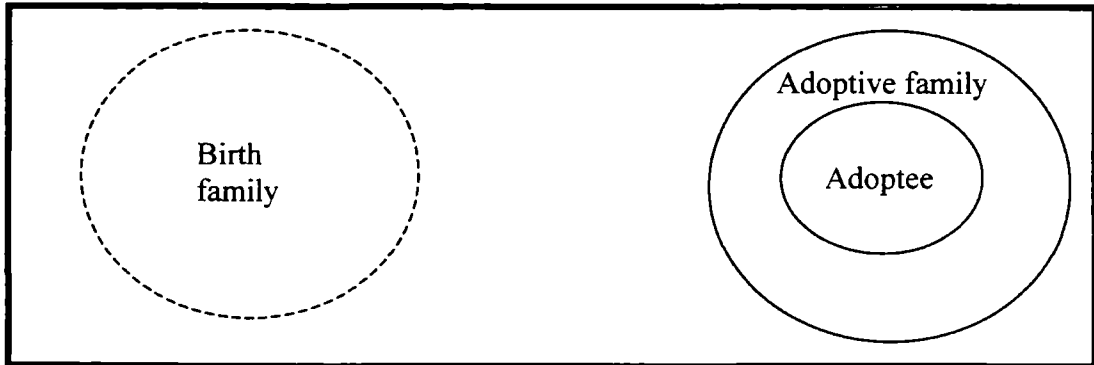
As an adoptive parent in a mediated adoption, I have often considered the idea of drawing a representation of my adopted children's family, both biological and adoptive, using photographs and symbols in order to promote their dual connection to these two sets of people or points of the adoption triangle. However, the complexity of such a task has stalled the process. Should the diagram represent my children's understanding of family now or the model of dual family connection that I wish to promote? Who should be included and excluded? Who should decide this? My difficulty and indecision arises from my intention to go beyond the creation of a map, geography or structural record of family or kinship and instead to create a visual representation of family relationships which are inherently deeply subjective, fluid and imbued with meaning. Equally, the terms 'adoption triangle' and 'adoptive kinship network' tell us little of the nature of family relationships between members, their negotiated nature, any potential conflict of interest and their impact on day to day family life.

The two definitions of adoption cited by Grotevant and McRoy (1998) suggest a range of possible models of adoptive kinship or adoptive family relations. Three such

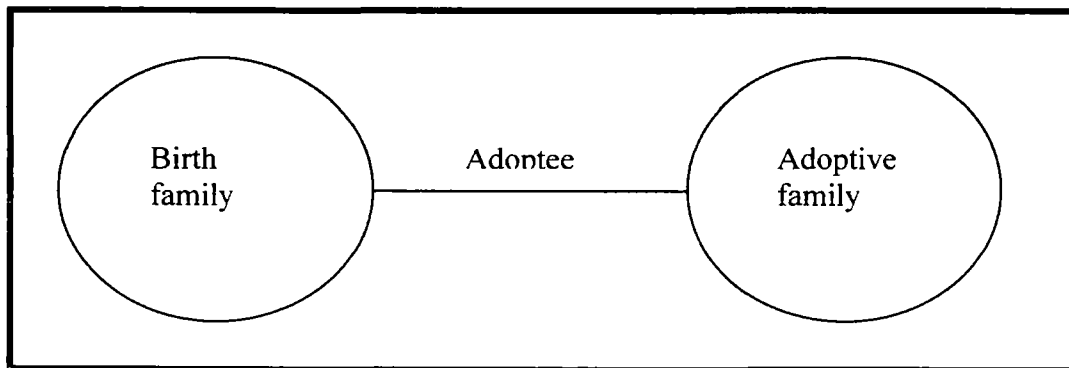
models are described below (see Figure 11, Figure 12 and Figure 13). Building on the work of Modell (1994) and Reiss (1992, cited in Grotevant and McRoy 1998), I have termed these the 'as if' model, the 'yoked families' model and the 'inclusive adoptive kinship' model. The models unavoidably simplify the reality of adoptive kinship, as experienced by its members, but offer some sense of the possibilities open to adoptive families. The models are not intended to represent a poor, better and best approach to adoption and no judgement is made here about the appropriateness of the models in different circumstances.

Costin's (1972) definition of adoption characterised adoptive parents as substitute parents and at the same time rendered the birth family invisible in the new legal and social arrangement. This definition resonates with Modell's (1994) description of the 'as if' principle in traditional adoption which demands that the adopter be 'as if the genealogical parent', the adoptee 'as if begotten by the adopter', and the birth parent 'as if childless'. The first model of kinship, therefore, reflects these themes of substitution and invisibility and is termed the 'as if' model of adoptive kinship (see Figure 11). This model of kinship casts birth family members into the category 'other family' rather than 'our family'. Reitz and Watson's (1992) definition of adoption, on the other hand, ensures the maintenance of links between the birth family and adoptive family through the child. It creates opportunities for the child to feel belonging or a dual connection to both birth and adoptive family (although does not make this inevitable), and resembles what Reiss (1992, cited in Grotevant and McRoy 1998) has called in work on post-divorce family arrangements the 'yoked' family. The second model of adoptive kinship is, therefore, called the 'yoked families' model (see Figure 12). The model replaces the logic of belonging to either this family *or* that with the logic of belonging to this family *and* that (Rosnati 2005). However, the model also maintains a separation of the two families and there is a danger that it can create for the adoptee two sets of 'us' to negotiate. Reitz and Watson's (1992) definition also raises the possibility of a more radical reconfiguration of traditional notions of kinship and family boundaries which can be termed 'inclusive adoptive kinship' (see Figure 13). This demands not only an ongoing relationship between child and birth family as well as child and adopters but also between adopters and birth family. The overlapping circles of the model are not necessarily intended to represent direct contact between all three parties (although this might take place) but instead represent a mindset of a collective 'us'.

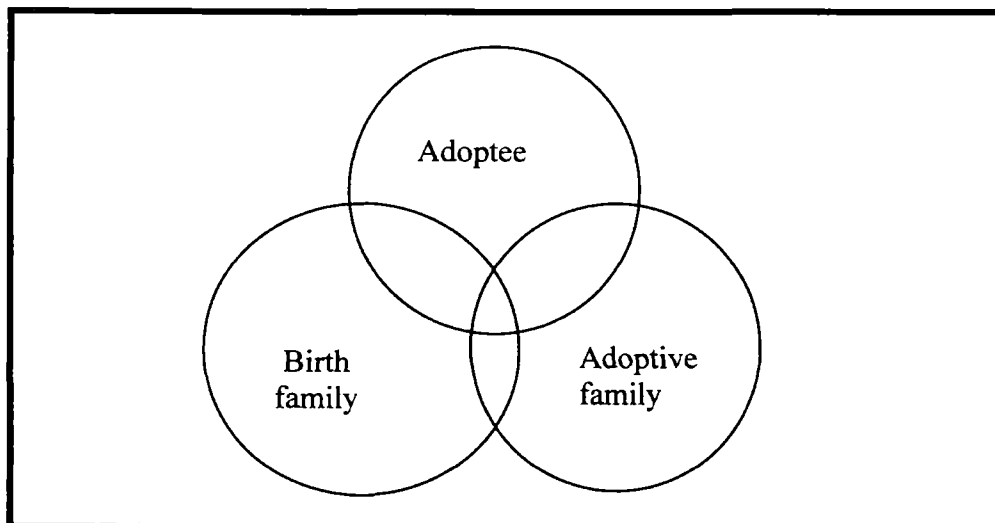
**Figure 11 Traditional ‘as if’ model of adoptive family life**



**Figure 12 The ‘yoked families’ model of adoptive kinship**



**Figure 13 A model of inclusive adoptive kinship**



Alongside the historical context of adoption, it is important to consider the cultural context in which western domestic stranger adoption operates and the difficulties this creates for adoptive families wishing to find a new way of ‘doing family’. Within

cultural anthropology, adoption has been described as 'fictive kinship'. The term has a range of meanings including fictitious, pretend and sham as well as fashioned or made. Importantly, the term 'fictive' recognises the possibility of social kinship, however, it also suggests that such kinship is inferior to biological relatedness (Carsten 2004). The task of fashioning adoptive kinship, therefore, must be achieved in the face of competing discourses which can either reinforce or undermine the adoptive family's sense of legitimacy and the birth family's place within the adoptive kinship network.

The ambiguities within conceptions of adoptive kinship and the ability of these to change over time was demonstrated by one adoptive couple who, when interviewed, told the story of their daughter's recent reunion with her birth family. The adoptive mother said that when her daughter made contact with her birth family she thought,

'Oh my god we've ... had her on loan.' *Mother three*

This expression conveys fears about the fragility of adoptive kinship within western society which gives primacy to biological ties and assumes a greater sense of permanency in biological kinship than in social kinship. However, the longer term experience of this family was that while their adopted daughter felt a need to explore her biological past this did not necessarily threaten to displace the adoptive family. Her adopted daughter was eager to convey this to her adoptive parents. The adoptive father explained,

'... [my daughter] says "I could never ever fit in there, its just not my home" ... She's got a lot of brothers down there and ... they've made her really welcome and she's really got on well with them ... but ... she'll come back in and say "whatever happens [my adopted sibling]'s my brother".'

*Father three*

This experience of reunion led to a reappraisal of the concept of adoptive kinship for all members of the adoption triad.

Additional structural and cultural barriers may also be faced by adopters from minority social groups. For example, Hicks (2005), in his work on gay and lesbian

fostering and adoption, has highlighted the dominance of a hetero-normative model of kinship, family and parenting in adoption policy and practice with the two-parent, heterosexual model being privileged. Negative societal attitudes about the parenting abilities of disabled people may also present a barrier to adoption. A publication from the Taskforce on Supporting Disabled Adults in their Parenting Role (Morris 2003) revealed that negative attitudes towards disabled parents are prevalent and the assumption is still commonly made that when a parent experiences impairment or illness this inevitably leads to child deprivation, potential harm or abuse and that children are better off with a non-disabled parent.

Given the historical and cultural context in which adoption occurs and the range of models of adoptive kinship or adoptive family relations possible, it is perhaps not surprising that doing adoptive kinship is fraught with dilemmas. As 'openness' in adoption has developed, awareness has not only grown of the increasingly complex family structures produced through adoption but also of the complexity of adoptive family relationships created. Theories, practices and empirical evidence relating to openness have exposed both the unsustainability of the 'as if' principle within adoptive family relations and some potentially positive outcomes of both structural and communicative openness. However, they have done little to uncover the very challenging nature of openness or inclusive adoptive kinship even where there is strong support for its benefits or a belief in openness as a moral imperative.

In the next three sections of this chapter I present empirical evidence from narrative interviews with adoptive parents to support my thesis that the core challenge facing adoptive families in domestic stranger adoption is to find a new way of doing adoptive family life that enables:

- adopters and adoptees to *gain* and *maintain* a sense of being family;
- birth family members to *retain* the status of 'family'; and
- adoptive kin to develop and maintain a positive identity as a non conventional family.

Data from interviews show that these are not one-off tasks but processes that require ongoing work and renewal. They require adopters to engage in a critical, reflexive and self conscious appraisal of the meaning of 'family' and 'kinship' and along with their adopted children to engage with the questions 'what sort of family are we? and

‘what sort of family do we want to be?’ to a greater or lesser extent throughout the lifecourse of an adoption. The empirical evidence is used to explore the processes operating within adoptive families to achieve kinship, the structural and cultural barriers faced by adopters and the ways that these are overcome.

### ***5.3 Gaining and maintaining kinship between adopters and adoptees: a lifelong task***

As stated earlier, adoption can be defined as the total and permanent legal transfer of parental responsibility from birth parents to adoptive parents. However, while legal adoption creates new family-like structures, it alone cannot create the family relationships or sense of family belonging that characterises family life. An important task facing adopters and adopted children, therefore, is the creation of family relationships with those with whom there is no biological connection. The narratives of adopters suggest that the task of creating family relationships with adopted children is started long before the legal adoption of the child and is not only a task in the early months of an adoption but endures throughout the adoptive family lifecourse as the meaning of adoptive status and kinship evolves. This suggests a task beyond the attachment process which is typically the focus of adoption practice literature. This section draws on adopters’ narratives to explore the processes within adoptive families which contributed to the development of a sense of family or kinship between adopters and adoptees and their movement from the status of strangers to intimates and from a fragile structure to an enduring set of relationships. The section also offers insights into adopters’ ability to tolerate and manage incongruities which threaten the family’s sense of legitimacy.

#### **5.3.1 Entry into parenthood – a rite of passage**

Adoptive parents began by telling the story of what led them to consider adoption, the preparation, assessment and approval process and how they became matched with children. They also spoke of their first meeting with their adopted children and the subsequent time spent getting to know each other.

For most adopters of babies there was an extensive process of assessment and a long wait after approval as an adoptive parent before being told that they had been matched with an infant. There was then a very short period of time before meeting the child and bringing him or her home. This process typically happened in less than



a week. For adopters of older children there was an equally extensive process of assessment. Once approved as an adopter, however, they were often active in the search for a suitable child to join their family using publications such as 'Be My Parent' and 'Children Who Wait'. The process of enquiring about a child, being interviewed by the child's placement worker, being officially matched with the child and meeting the child took place over several months. The process of getting to know the child or children, in the case of sibling placements, usually happened over a couple of weeks or more rarely a few months.

Despite the differences between the experiences of adopters of infants and adopters of older children, their stories had much in common. The arrival of letters or phone calls informing adopters that they had been matched with a child and their first meetings with children were recalled in vivid detail and stories were often told through dramatic descriptions of these events. Adoptive mothers, in particular, described the arrival of their soon to be adopted child or children as a great "*shock to the system*" and conveyed through their language the great responsibility they felt being entrusted with the care of a small child. Adoptive mothers of babies explained:

'... in a week really, you didn't have a family, then suddenly a week later you come home with a baby, which was a little bit frightening (laugh), because I had never held a baby really, I had seen other peoples and thought yes this is very nice and then suddenly you've got one, it was like an unexploded bomb really (laugh).' *Mother five*

'... we drove [to get the baby] on the Tuesday morning, it was thunder and lightening and I was in such a state I didn't even put a bra on (laugh). I was in a real state. I was just frightened I couldn't take to the baby... and we brought her home, and it was like carrying lemonade on the top of the car (laugh).' *Mother eight*

Adopters of older siblings also described the arrival of the child or children as disquieting. One adoptive mother said:

'I was just like a stunned mullet.' *Mother Two*

Another adoptive mother likened it to a personal trauma such as bereavement. She said:

‘... there’s a lot of issues to sort out, like them going to school, and making sure they’re registered with the doctor and registered with the dentist, all these things, they all keep you busy. It sort of reminds me of when someone dies, there’s so many things to do, that you stop functioning at some level because you’ve just got to function on the level of getting through all the procedures that need to be done.’ *Mother one*

The stories of becoming a family were, therefore, characterised by struggle, angst, exhaustion and conveyed a sense of a rite of passage into parenthood which although different from the birth of a child was equally significant and life changing. These stories of struggle appeared to function as confirmation of the deep commitment shown by adoptive parents to becoming a parent and being a family and made visible the great efforts expended by adopters to create a family.

### **5.3.2 The role of agency and its limits**

While the granting of the legal adoption had great significance for adopters particularly where there was some uncertainty about the eventual outcome, it was clear that the process of becoming a family began long before the ‘paper adoption’. As one adoptive father put it:

‘... well before, we went to court, I don’t know if we would have coped if she had been taken away... we knew from the moment we clapped eyes on her.’ *Father eight*

Many adopters, particularly, although not exclusively, those who had adopted babies, described an immediate sense of connection with the adopted child when they first met and described them at that point as feeling like ‘our’ child, ‘our’ baby, part of ‘our’ family. One adoptive father said:

‘... right from the very start we felt this is our baby, and that never changed there was never any time that it wasn’t like that, so that was wonderful.’  
*Father ten*

An adoptive mother said:

‘He was just ours from the word go.’ *Mother eleven.*

Others described an awareness of the work needed to establish family relationships. This was particularly an issue for adopters of older children. One adoptive father described his fears:

‘I think that it was a big worry that we both had ... how would they settle in? Would they treat you as your mam and dad? Could we be as normal a family as possible?’ *Father seven*

Some adopters of older children described their adopted children in the early days of placement as being ‘*like visitors almost*’ and ‘*basically strangers*’, that is, not yet kin. However, there was an expectation that this would change over time and they would ‘*learn to be a family*’. One adoptive mother said:

‘... I hoped they would learn to love me back.’ *Mother nine*

The close and well-established family relationships between siblings at the point of placement provided a contrast for some adopters with their new relationship with the children. One adoptive father explained:

‘... we always knew that [our older son] would look after [his little sister]. When she first came and if she cried, obviously because she knew [him] more than us, she would go to [him] for a cuddle, and they’re still like that, although they don’t admit it at 16 and 14 but they are still quite close.’  
*Father one*

Another adoptive father explained that his adopted son was very anxious and unsettled on the first evening that he slept in his new home. It was his adopted son’s younger sister who eased his anxiety. The father explained:

‘... [our daughter was] sitting on the bed saying to [her older brother] “look” she said “this is your new home, this is your new mammy and daddy, nothing’s going to happen, everything’s going to be fine” and she’s

like this size, telling her bigger brother... that everything's fine, there's no problems. She was as good as giving him cuddles and everything. Everything settled after that and everything was fine.' *Father seven*

While these examples of strong sibling ties acted as reminders of the lack of family relationships between adopted children and adopters in the early days, they also appeared to have a stabilising effect on placements.

It was also evident that adopters made a commitment to the children very early in the relationship. One adoptive mother explained that a few weeks after her adoptive daughter joined the family, new information emerged that her adoptive daughter had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy. The social worker enquired if the couple would still like to go ahead with the adoption. The adoptive mother recalled:

'I remember the social worker came here. ... She said "now its just come up that [your adoptive daughter] had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy. What do you want to do?" And [my husband] and I just looked at each other. I thought well, what can we do now? They're here. If your child's ill you just have to learn to cope with that.' *Mother seven*

The adoptive mother's reaction demonstrates her early commitment to being a family and her definition of family being permanence through thick and thin. It appears, therefore, that one of the first ways that adopters of both infants and older children forge these family relationships with adoptees is by perceiving them as family from the earliest possible point.

Adopters of older children were also aware of the child's ability to exercise agency to some degree and expressed fears that children would reject their parenting. The same adoptive mother of an older child recalled that, on the way to meet her adoptive son and daughter for the first time, she said to her husband:

'What happens if they don't like us? What happens if we don't click...?'  
*Mother seven*

However, it was also evident that agency alone could not guarantee the success of the establishment of family type relationships within adoptive families as personal

circumstances or structural factors could intervene to make this challenging or even impossible. For example, in two adoptive families there were ongoing concerns about the relationship between an adopted child and the adoptive parents. In both cases the children had been deeply affected by their early experiences with birth families and there was a long history of difficulties between the child and the adoptive parents as well as problems with day to day living such as schooling, and in adulthood, employment. Despite this, however, the adopters expressed an ongoing commitment to their adopted sons.

### **5.3.3 Intimacy through the day to day rhythms and rituals of doing family**

For adoptive parents of infants, intimacy and a sense of being a family was created in the early weeks of placement through the day to day care provided and getting to know the child's needs and preferences. Adopters of infants frequently described their sense of being totally out of their depth and feeling deskilled when a baby first arrived and '*muddling through*'. This was particularly, although not exclusively, a theme in the narratives of adoptive mothers who went on to describe a process of growing together as a family as they mastered the many practical tasks required when caring for a small baby. Often this was compared to having a birth child and an emphasis was placed on a naturalness that was 'earned' through practice or repetition or familiarity rather than coming from the biological relationship.

Carsten has written:

"Kinship is made in houses through the intimate sharing of space, food and nurturance that goes on within domestic space." (Carsten 2004)

While the domestic space was an important location for the making of family relationships, in the case of adoptive families the public doing of family was also important. Adoptive mothers not only saw the development of competence as a key aspect of becoming a family but also the displaying of competence to others (family, friends, community, social workers) in order to demonstrate the legitimacy of the new family arrangement. As one adoptive mother put it:

'I did feel all the eyes of the world were on me.' *Mother eight*

Both adopters of infants and older children stressed the importance of getting to know and meeting the *individual* needs of their adopted children.

Adoptive parents of older children described an extended period of getting to know each other. Like adopters of infants, they also developed a sense of family through the day to day living together and intimacies of caring. However, they also referred to additional challenges they faced. These included learning to meet the needs of children who had experienced abuse, neglect or a disrupted childhood and establishing new family rules. One mother described the arrival of her two adopted daughters who had quite challenging behaviours:

‘... it was almost coming up to half term, and I remember the school saying there’s no point in them coming to school that week because they will only be there for a week before we break up for half terms so you might as well keep them at home. And I thought to myself (laugh) I have to be at home by myself for two whole weeks with these children who were just completely wild and who got up at half past 5 in the morning ... I mean the first two weeks having them at home was just an absolute nightmare, trying to keep them occupied, they hadn’t got a clue how to play or do anything.’ *Mother six*

An adoptive father of older siblings described the process of becoming a family in terms of familiarity developed through being together, doing together and setting rules. He said:

‘There was a lot of physical activity because they had a lot of energy to burn off ... so really making sure there was a lot going on and sort of encouraging them and being with them... it’s being involved with them. And of course familiarity with each other is bred from that and they get to know how you are. And I suppose within this period there would have been times when we’d have to stop them doing some thing telling them off or “we don’t like that” or “you shouldn’t... this isn’t acceptable”.’ *Father nine*

Several other adoptive fathers of both babies and older children expressed the important place that family activities had in their family lives. Some linked ‘family’

and 'shared activity' in phrases such as "we're a big skiing family" or "we're a camping family". Where activities were father/child activities they were described as having a twofold importance. Firstly, they were seen as a demonstration of support to the adoptive mother giving her time to rest or get on with other more pressing tasks while relieved of childcare responsibilities. Secondly, they were seen as having a role in cementing the relationship between adoptive father and adopted child. Adoptive fathers' narratives revealed their belief that adoptive mothers occupied the primary role in the family as carer, listener, advisor and organiser of children. Adoptive fathers' narratives also described fears that their work life might diminish their family life and the need to take active steps to avoid this through the performance of family activities.

Adoptive fathers also saw one of their parental roles as providers of opportunities and experiences. This took on a particular significance when children had experienced an impoverished or neglectful family life within their birth family. Where shared family time did not exist, this was seen as a problem. One adoptive father of a teenage son and daughter explained:

'...we love to go to the theatre she loves going to the theatre, we like going on holiday, she loves going on holiday. [My adopted son] doesn't. He's got no time for the theatre, no time for holidays, all he wants to do is kick a football...' *Father two*

The repetition of certain family activities and routines meant that they took on the quality of a family ritual that was anticipated and welcomed. One adoptive mother explained:

'[My husband] always makes tea on Saturday night. It's the only time really we eat in [the lounge]... but Saturday's we watch a film. That'll start tonight. [the children will say] "what are we watching tomorrow?" But that's a family thing.' *Mother seven*

### **5.3.4 Intimacy as shared family history**

In recalling adoptive family life, adopters frequently referred to archetypal family events such as shared Christmases, family holidays, first days at school, family weddings and other similar family events. These milestones in family life appeared

to create a sense of family history which solidified the adoptive family and allowed adopters to express joy and pride in their adopted children, through for example, a story about a child's performance in the school play or deep concern for them, through perhaps, a story about an illness, accident or hospital admission. Often these family stories had a comical element or involved gentle teasing of a member of the adoptive family. For example, a story was told about the occasion when an adoptive daughter enthusiastically, and somewhat prematurely, volunteered to be a bridesmaid at a neighbour's wedding. The neighbour agreed to this and on the day of the wedding, as the adoptive mother tells the story:

'...[my daughter] was just so excited, I mean she looked lovely, and every picture that we tried to take of the wedding couple or the wedding party, she was in, somewhere on the picture (laugh) ...' *Mother three*

These events allowed families to build up a repository of family stories which could be told and retold. Adopters often produced objects relating to these stories such as family photograph albums to which they could refer. Several adopters also turned to commonplace family practices such as Christening or dedication services in order to celebrate the arrival of an adopted child. The story of the service was recounted during interviews and photographs were shown. These also appeared to contribute to their sense of family belonging.

### **5.3.5 Family as ongoing commitment and long term investment**

Adoptive family life was also described in terms of an ongoing commitment and long term investment. This included an emotional investment, showing concern for children and taking account of their best interests, investing time and effort in developing children's interests and talents such as sport, dance or group membership such as Scouts or perhaps investing financially in a family home and when necessary downsizing to pay university fees. Adoptive fathers' narratives in particular, often conveyed a sense of family equating with long term effort and emotional, practical and financial investment in the adopted child. Two adoptive fathers described the effort like this:



‘Even though it may not appear that your working at it, I don’t think you just let it happen, you have to work at, just like being a mum and dad anyway you have to work at it.’ *Father four*

‘... its not all bunny’s and roses and stuff you know, its hard work, you’ve just got to get on with it.’ *Father three*

A key difference between adoption and other permanency options for children in need of alternative parenting is the intention of adoption to offer the child a permanent lifelong family. The stories told by adopters demonstrated their commitment to their children beyond childhood and into adulthood. Adoptive parents frequently referred to their adopted children’s future plans, whether concrete or imagined and their hopes and wishes for their children. One adoptive father said:

‘I’m in absolutely no doubt that one’s commitment to the children and the worries which flow from them will continue long beyond childhood and adolescence. I’ve no doubt at all it will be well into adulthood... I know what people mean when they say “you never really get rid of them” (laugh).’ *Father five*

Narratives also revealed the expectation that their investment in children will continue into adulthood in some form through continued support of the adopted child or the expectation of continued investment in grandchildren. One adoptive father said:

‘I’ve got two at the other end now and I still wish that I had more time to myself but I mean that changed irrevocably, whatever life we had changed irrevocably from the day he walked through the door ... I think my wife and I have completely given ourselves over to the children (laugh) ... I’m in absolutely no doubt that one’s commitment to the children and the worries which flow from them will continue long beyond childhood and adolescence. I’ve no doubt at all it will be well into adulthood.’ *Father five*

Narratives included examples of ongoing commitment to adult adoptees by adopters and vice versa and concern for each parties’ wellbeing which were demonstrated through family practices. Adopters described providing child care for grandchildren,

sharing meal times with adult children who live away from home, providing lifts to each other and a daughter's decision to apply to universities near home so she could live away but stay in close contact as examples of these displays of family.

For some adopters the investment made was extraordinary and involved meeting the needs of children with, for example, a questioned diagnosis of ADHD, dependence on parents into adulthood due to learning difficulties, ongoing behavioural difficulties and in one family's case drug addiction, persistent criminal activity and violence towards adoptive parents. Even in this extreme situation the adoptive parents demonstrated persistent care and concern for their adopted son. They voiced and expressed deep regret and sadness that they had not been able to help him to overcome past trauma and an ongoing commitment to him and continued hope that he would recover from being "*lost to drugs*".

### **5.3.6 Maintaining kinship in the face of threats, disruptions or ambiguities**

As well as describing the process by which a sense of family was created within the adoptive family, adoptive parents also described a number of incongruities that they faced in day to day family life which could be seen as threats to the legitimacy of their status as a 'real family'. It appears that these can occur throughout family life. Adopters spoke about the way these were resisted or managed throughout the lifecourse of an adoption in order to maintain their sense of legitimacy as a family suggesting that the making of kinship between adopters and adoptees is not just a task with which they engaged in the early weeks or months following placement but instead kinship is made and remade throughout the lifecourse of the adoptive family. Often this was triggered by the changing relationship between adults and children as children mature or when the adoptive family was confronted by events or attitudes which contradicted their sense of family.

#### **The significance of foster carers to the making of kinship**

One of the earlier threats to the adoptive family's sense of legitimacy described by adopters was the meeting between them and the children's foster carers. These meetings featured heavily in adopters' stories of their early adoptive family life, particularly those of adoptive mothers. These meetings also appeared to be particularly problematic for adopters of babies even though these meetings were

often very short. Particular significance was given to the style of care given by the foster mother and the attitude of the foster mother to handing the child over to the adopters. Some foster mothers were described as “*military*” and “*organised*”. Where this was the case, adoptive mothers appeared to be expressing a lack of concern that their adopted child had become attached to the foster mother. Replacing the foster mother meant providing the child with a ‘proper’ loving mother. In other cases foster mothers were characterised as “*angels*” and “*beautiful*”. In these cases adopters expressed an appreciation of the foster mothers’ loving care but also their recognition of their temporary role as carer and gracious handing over of the child. Finally, some adopters expressed concern about the foster mother’s care as either *too* loving or inadequate. Where foster mother’s care was considered *too* loving there were fears that babies had become attached to the foster mother and vice versa and there was a perception that the child had difficulty attaching to the adoptive mother. Where care was considered inadequate the acceptance of the child into the adoptive home was portrayed as ‘rescuing’ the child from a bad environment.

While it appeared from the narratives that the significance of these stories was great, it was difficult to discern the deeper meanings of these for adopters beyond the stories told of children being rescued or handed over graciously. It may be that meetings with foster mothers required adopters to confront an uncomfortable truth that in order for them to gain a child another parent must suffer a loss.

Encounters with foster carers in non-confidential adoptions appeared to be less problematic. Some couples who adopted older children reported that they had ongoing contact with their adopted children’s foster carers, particularly in the first few years after the children joined the family. For some families, the status of the foster family was also ‘like kin’. One father explained:

‘... we also had the foster family down two or three times in that period as well, so they joined the extended family.’ *Father two*

It may be that relationships with foster carers in these cases are less uncomfortable as the moral justification for finding alternative parents for the child is strong.

### **Sharing parenting with the corporate parent**

An additional contradiction that adoptive parents described early in their relationship with children, and before the child is legally adopted, was their position as day to day parent with all of the responsibility that brings and yet being powerless to make certain decisions usually expected of a parent. This was particularly an issue for more recent adopters of older looked after children. For some of these adopters, contact with professionals after children were placed and before the legal adoption brought this contradiction into sharp focus reinforcing a sense of 'fictive' kinship.

For example, one adoptive mother expressed her fears about having to explain bruises to visiting social workers. She said:

'It didn't matter when you had the visits from the social workers either that day or the previous day had fallen down and she was always. Her knees were scraped, she had bruises and bumps and things and you would think "crickey, what are they going to think?"' *Mother seven*

Another adoptive mother recalled being advised by her social worker to avoid taking the children on trips away until they felt settled into their new home. The couple's idea of family was shaped by their experience as children of happy days spent at the beach on caravanning holidays with their parents and they had hoped to incorporate regular weekends away with their caravan into their family life. They decided not to take this advice in their desire to be a 'proper' family. However, the situation forced them to confront their lack of autonomy as parents. The same adoptive mother's husband expressed his awareness of 'the corporate parent's' potential to undermine the developing kinship between adopter and adoptee whilst at the same time acknowledging the need for ongoing input from the state until the legal adoption was granted. He said:

'[The guardian ad litem's] role was to protect the children obviously, but ... the most unhelpful thing was she didn't look back and see that together the children and myself and [my wife] were forming a family ... and she almost kept us apart a little bit.' *Father one*

While adopters demonstrated their ability to tolerate these contradictions largely, their narratives also exposed their belief that from very early in the placement, they were best placed to decide what was in the best interests of the child. Consequently, on occasions, they resisted the corporate parent's threat to their sense of family and autonomy as a parent. One adoptive father recalled that he and his wife were expected to inform the children's social worker when staying away from their home address. This was seen as an intrusion into family life by the adoptive father and at a particularly stressful time he and his wife chose to take their soon to be adopted children on a short break away in a hotel and inform the children's social worker afterwards.

### **The contradiction of revealing adoptive status yet maintaining adopter and adoptee family relationships**

Adopters were all encouraged to tell children adopted as babies that they were adopted as early as possible. The practice of revealing adoptive status to those adopted as babies is well established, however, fears persist that the acknowledgement of this different status as a family will in some way threaten the adoptive family. The adopters who were interviewed all followed this advice, however, having made the revelation, some adopters expressed fears about the consequences of this. One father said:

‘A child who is in some way argumentative or aggressive and kept bringing it up ‘ah I’m not your real child’. That would be very difficult.’ *Father five*

Adopters, particularly adoptive fathers, expressed relief that adopted children had not used this information to hurt or reject adoptive parents. Several adopters expressed fears that their adopted children would declare “*you’re not my real mum and dad*” and leave home in the heat of a family argument and gratitude that this had not happened. Only one adoptive father had experienced this sort of hurtful comment in the early days of his relationship with an adopted daughter. His daughter has learning difficulties and a very difficult past. He expressed relief that these comments were no longer made. Despite these fears, however, adopters associated openness with ethical parenting and secretiveness as a betrayal of trust and therefore a threat to the family relationship. One father said:

‘... it would have been worse if they hadn’t known about it, and one of their friends had passed it around and then suddenly they’d called that at school, and they didn’t know, that would have been tremendously wrong I mean this is why we made a point of not keeping it quiet.’ *Father three*

Although perhaps counterintuitive for adopters, therefore, their narratives suggest that such revelations maintain family type relations between adopters and adoptees rather than threatening them.

### **Resisting lack of family resemblance as a threat to adopter and adoptee family relationships**

The importance of careful matching of adoptive parents and adopted children is well recognised within adoption practice and the preoccupation of adoptees with gaps in knowledge about family resemblance is well documented (Hoopes 1990; Sobol and Cardiff 1983). However, the ongoing implications of matching and mismatching are less well understood. One adoptive father explained that his daughter, adopted as a baby, had been matched to him and his wife on the basis that her birth mother was an active sportswoman and the adopters were physical education teachers and the birth mother and adoptive mother shared the same religion. However, the birth parents were extremely tall unlike the adoptive parents and their adopted daughter grew to over six foot tall. This was often commented on by people with whom they came into contact who would ask ‘*was her granddad tall?*’ in a search for the family gene responsible for such a physical difference between daughter and parents. However, rather than this becoming a source of discomfort within the family, the adoptive father described such situations in terms of a joke to which only family and close friends were privy. While I did not have access to the meaning of these encounters for the adopted child, it appears that the adopter felt that the lack of resemblance was turned into a unifying factor in the form of an ‘in joke’ rather than one that alienated the adopted child from the adoptive family.

This father’s narrative reminds us both that the matching process is limited in its capacity to foresee how children will develop and mature physically, psychologically and socially and that the meanings of resemblances or differences that are constructed by the family through their everyday interactions are not easily foreseen during the matching process. It is also testimony to the capacity of adoptive family

members to accommodate this sort of mismatch or difference in a way that can contribute to the development and maintenance of family relationships between adopters and adoptees. This is not to suggest that family resemblance is unimportant but that its meanings cannot be easily predicted when a child and adopters are brought together. Adopters narratives contained several examples of the ways in which resemblances were actively sought out by adoptive family members in ways that could not be foreseen.

‘Actually my brother he’s dead now, but em.. funnily enough [my adopted daughter] did resemble him, and when she was about six, he lived in a caravan in [village] and they used to love going for weekends at the school holidays and she loved it when people said “oh she looks like [her] Uncle”, [My adopted daughter] thought that was great.’ *Mother three*

Adoptive couples often sought to identify resemblances other than physical resemblances between adopted children and themselves. These appeared to play a role in shaping kinship and a sense of ‘fit’. Adopters often spoke of adopted children being ‘like’ one or other adoptive parent in terms of personality and interests. Common interests allowed adoptive parents and adopted children to have shared activities which then took on the nature of family activities and therefore reinforced a sense of kinship. Adopters also reported friends and family’s tendency to look for resemblances. One father said:

‘Two of our good friends [who’ve] been involved with our family from the beginning ... said something about the characteristics in one of the kids, “its really strange that he does that and you do this”. And I said “you do know they are adopted” (laugh), he goes like this (slaps head with hand in gesture of silly me), and they’re two of our closest friends, who’d forgotten that they were adopted.’ *Father ten*

### **The contradictions of permanence in adulthood**

The adoptive parents of older teenagers and young adults spoke of their experiences of the transition of adopted sons and daughters towards and into adulthood. In western societies, this stage of family life is typically associated with children moving from school into the labour market, becoming economically independent and creating a household separate from the family home. However, there is considerable

heterogeneity in the timing, pace and degree of these educational, economic and domestic transitions as well as the nature of the continuing relationship with parents. These aspects of independence are also influenced by gender, class and ethnicity (Jones 2002).

A number of adopted children in the families taking part in the study had achieved or were moving towards adulthood. Thirteen of the twenty three adopted children were aged sixteen or over when interviews were conducted. Twelve of these adoptees had left school and were aged between sixteen and thirty one. Of these, seven were employed and three were in further or higher education. Two adoptees were unemployed at the time of interviews. Four of the twelve adult adoptees lived at a permanent address other than the family home. Most were in their mid 20s and one was in his early 30s. One of these adoptees was married and had a child. A further three adoptees, aged between 19 and 22, had temporary addresses away from the family home, two being at university and one in the Royal Navy. The remaining five, aged between 16 and 24, still lived permanently with adoptive parents.

One of the tasks facing parents as their children approach adulthood is that of 'letting go'. Adopters spoke at length about their concerns about children's growing independence and yet lack of maturity to deal with such independence. Some common concerns expressed related to debt, personal safety and poor career choices.

Adopters also spoke of the difficulties they experienced when the time came for adopted children to leave home. One father spoke of the day his son left home to start his basic training to join the forces:

'When he went off, well we were for taking away, I mean crying on the platform of Central Station, waving him off, er it was all very hard. He was 17, had his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday a few weeks later. But yes it was... heart wrenching... there's a hole there when he's not here'. *Father five*

Another adoptive father explained that there was a routine at home whereby his adopted daughter makes everyone a cup of tea for everyone in the evening. When she recently went to visit a residential college for a few days he joked that he kept saying to her "you going to make the tea yet" and then realising that she wasn't



there Adoptive parents, therefore, described the way they continued to 'hold children in mind' reminded about them by their absence.

While these experiences and concerns did not appear to be specific to adoptive families, there were some features of adoptive family life that added complexity to the issue of 'letting go'. The task of 'letting go' appeared to take on a particular poignancy, requiring adopters to re-evaluate the meaning of permanence for the adoptive family. The majority of adoptees aged sixteen or more at the time of interviews had been adopted as babies through a confidential adoption system. The changing place of the birth family for adoptees who had entered adoption in an era of confidentiality and grown up in a era of growing openness featured heavily in adopters' narratives as well as the possibility of search for and reunion with birth relatives. Four of the adoptees who were adopted as infants had re-established direct contact with birth family members in adulthood and two had sought additional information about their birth family from the adoption agency. One adoptee had been contacted by her birth family in an attempt to re-establish contact but the adoptee had chosen not to pursue this.

Whether a reunion had or had not taken place between and adoptee and birth relative, adopters reflected on issues relating to search and reunion. Adopters' narratives conveyed their fear that going forward with reunion equated with a lack of satisfaction with the adoptive family and that the purpose of reunions was to displace adoptive parents with birth parents as opposed to nurturing dual family connections. The countercultural nature of dual connection raised very contradictory feelings for some adoptive parents who felt compelled to support their adopted child's search whilst also fearing their loss. One adoptive father whose daughter had recently been reunited with her birth family very movingly voiced the contradictions he felt about offering permanence and also 'letting go':

'I've always said I would do anything I could to help her, but at the back of your mind there's always that little thing you know "is she going to go down there and find this big happy family, and relatives who she can relate to instantly and see a resemblance and she'll sort of drift into them and we would slowly drift away", and I thought "what a selfish way to think about it" you know its her life, and I just had to shut that off, and just see how it

goes, but I should have had more faith in her really (cries)..... Sorry, that's terrible ... I mean I should've had more faith in her because it just isn't the case it never was the case and it's been made plain since you know that... (cries) I'm not going to lose her, you know. That was my only fear, of losing her and it's obviously not the case.' *Father three*

Adopters also spoke of the challenge of finding a different way of 'doing family' when children have grown up and left home and there is little or no day to day contact.

### **5.3.7 Summary**

Adoptive family life is traditionally characterised as 'fictive' kinship. This term suggests a vulnerability, a second-best status and pretence to mimic 'real' biological kinship. However, adopters narratives challenge this notion and instead suggest that adoptive families work together to establish and maintain a sense of authenticity and enduring solidarity despite facing threats to their legitimacy as a family throughout the lifecourse. The ambiguities and potential threats to their legitimacy as a family with which adopters have to deal become apparent in such situations as the handover of children from foster carers to adopters, the involvement of the state before the legal adoption of the child, revealing adoptive status to the child, creating a sense of belonging through family resemblances and letting go when children reach adulthood. Despite these potential threats, adopters build a sense of family belonging through demonstrating commitment to the child in the face of adversity or barriers, exercising agency, displaying care and competency as a parent, undertaking shared activities as a family and developing a sense of shared history. Together these contribute to a sense of 'earned' family status through the efforts that are put into making adoption work. However, while adopters' narratives exposed a belief that adoptive kinship can be as strong and enduring as biological kinship, it appears that this is not guaranteed as personal and structural factors may intervene to make this difficult or impossible to achieve.

### **5.4 Finding a place for birth relatives within the adoptive kinship network**

The second important task facing adoptive parents, and their adopted children, is to find an appropriate place for the adopted child's birth relatives within the model of

adoptive kinship created. As I stated earlier, historically, it was assumed acceptable that birth families were rendered invisible and all kinship ties erased within the traditional 'as if' model of confidential adoption. More recently, however, the literature on openness talks of the acknowledgement of the 'dual connection' of the child to both adoptive family and birth family and there is the expectation that birth family members will have a continued present in the adoptive family.

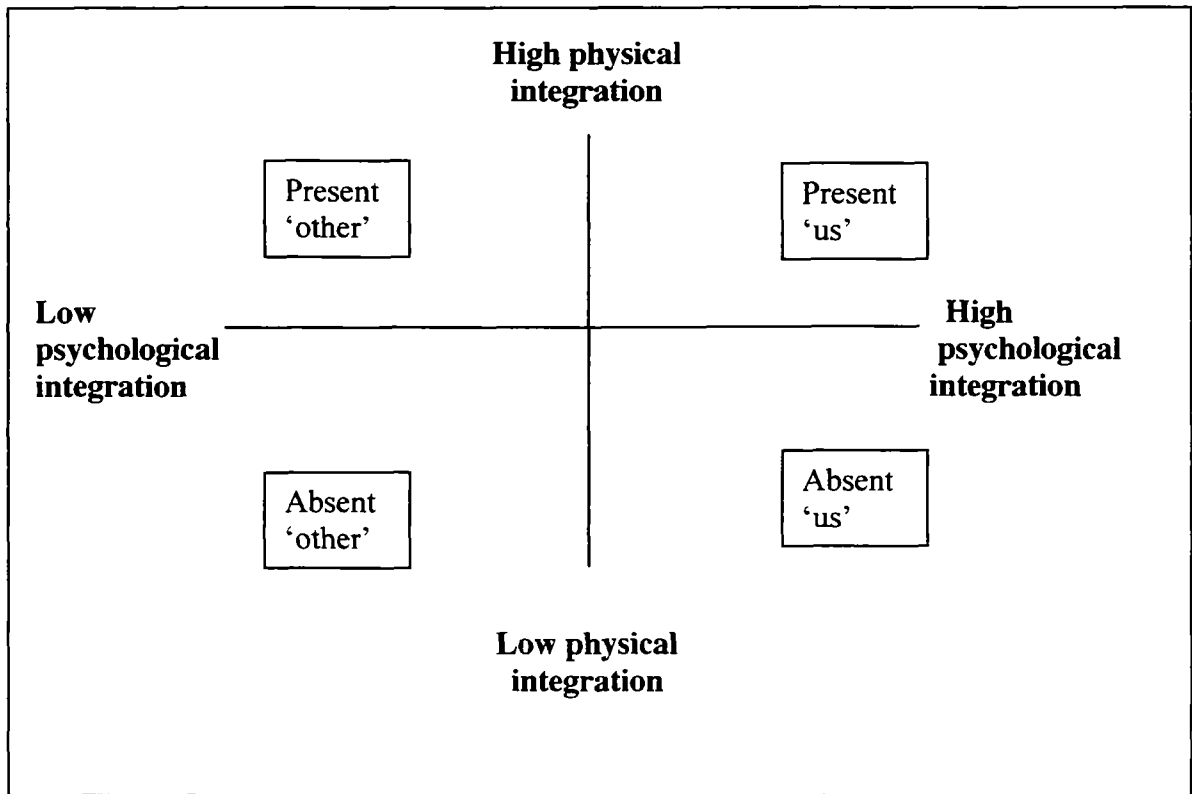
First, let me provide some context by reminding the reader about the range of adoption arrangements in place for the participants in this research. Eleven adoptive couples adopted 23 children from 18 birth families. Six couples taking part in interviews adopted babies and five adopted older children. Four of the six couples who adopted babies experienced an adoption that would be described as 'confidential'. 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 as children were growing up. These adoptions took place in the late 1970s in the 1980s. Two couples adopting babies had some limited indirect contact with the children's birth family. One of the families who adopted a baby in the mid 1980s received birthday and Christmas cards from birth parents but did not correspond with the birth family. The last family to adopt infants adopted two babies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This family had had a one-off meeting with one of their children's birth mothers and had ongoing indirect contact with both birth mothers. The five couples who adopted older children had them placed with them between 1992 and 2001. The children had been looked after by the state for a range of reasons including abuse, neglect and death of a single parent. Two of these families had direct contact with birth relatives at the time of the interviews. 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. Within one family arrangements were particularly diverse. The couple had adopted four children from three birth families. Two of their adopted children had indirect contact with their birth family, one had direct contact with a sibling and the other had no contact.

While these descriptions give some insights into the experiences of adoptive families of information exchange and types of contact, they tell us little about the impact of

these on adoptive families' constructions of adoptive kinship, the place given to birth families within their conception of kinship, or on day to day family life. For example, a common sense assumption may be that the less contact and information exchange in an adoption, the less presence the birth family will have in the adoptive family and the less their continued importance will be acknowledged. However, birth families were far from absent in the narratives of adoptive parents who had experienced confidential adoptions and their presence was often felt throughout the adopted child's growing up. A useful distinction can be made here between the physical and psychological presence or absence of birth families within the adoptive family (Reitz and Watson 1992). Therefore, while confidential adoptions did not allow for the physical presence of birth family members within the adoptive kinship network they did not necessarily preclude a strong psychological presence within the model of adoptive kinship lived out within the family. The 'as if' model of adoption was, therefore, difficult to sustain even in these circumstances. In contrast, adoptive families with direct contact with birth relatives did not necessarily perceive these encounters as contributing to a sense of dual connection as they did not experience these as family encounters. Figure 14 below provides a model for understanding the distinct impact of physical and psychological integration of birth family members on the version of adoptive kinship which is developed and the degree of dual connection achieved. The model is not intended to describe types of adoptive kinship as these are unlikely to be fixed categories but instead differentiates family practices which include or exclude birth family members. Both inclusive practices and excluding practices may be present within one adoptive family.

Having suggested the lack of simple association between physical or psychological presence and inclusion of the birth family in the adoptive kinship network, I now draw again on adopters' narratives to explore the processes which influence the creation of kinship within different contact arrangements, the way that physical and psychological presence operate independently within these arrangements and the barriers to the development of dual connectedness or inclusive kinship.

**Figure 14 Promoting the inclusion of birth family and dual connection in the model of adoptive kinship**



#### **5.4.1 Finding a place within the kinship model for birth family members in confidential adoptions**

##### **The unsustainability of the 'as if' model of adoptive kinship**

Four of the families taking part in the research had experienced confidential adoptions. These families had received little information about their adopted child's birth family and there was neither direct nor indirect contact between the adoptive family and the birth family. As stated earlier, a common sense assumption would be that confidential adoptions equate with the 'as if' model of adoptive kinship which renders birth families invisible. However, adopters' narratives highlighted several family practices which had the effect of ensuring that although birth family members were physically absent from day to day family life they did have a psychological presence. The 'as if' model of adoptive kinship was therefore, not a sustainable model within these families, at least not within the private sphere of the family or the consciousness of adoptive parents who also 'hold multiple families in mind'. The degree of psychological presence, however, varied from adoptive family to adoptive family from a minimal presence to a strong presence. Below, some examples are

given of the processes operating within adoptive families which had the effect of including the birth family to a greater or lesser extent.

### **The role of revelation of adoptive status and ongoing dialogue about adoption in finding a place for the birth family**

All of the adoptive parents participating in the research who had experienced confidential adoptions supported the practice of revealing adoptive status to their adopted children at the earliest possible opportunity and this had the effect of bringing the birth family into the adoptive family. It appears, however, that the revelation of adoptive status had different meanings for different adopted children and adopters and, therefore, had various influences on the model of adoptive kinship developed.

One adoptive mother described a very early memory of her first adopted daughter, when she was two and a half or three years old, skipping alongside her as they walked down the street where they lived and asking for something she wanted. When her mother told her she could not have it, her adopted daughter said, "*well my other mummy would have ...*" The adopted mother described this as a moment in which she realised that her daughter had "*in her little mind a different life, how things could have been, might have been*". Talk about adoption and her daughter's birth family became a regular feature of family life for this adoptive mother and daughter and the birth family metaphorically took a place at the family table. Recently the daughter has been reunited with her birth family. In contrast, the adoptive mother's younger adopted daughter was also aware of her adoptive status from an early age and yet rarely asked any questions or initiated conversations about her adoption or birth family. Instead her mother chose to initiate discussion on a small number of occasions in an attempt to anticipate her daughter's need for information as she was growing up. While her adoptive mother's actions demonstrated her willingness to open the door to let her younger daughter's birth family into the adoptive family, her younger daughter either resisted this to some extent or felt unable to take up the opportunity. When her adopted sister searched for her birth family the younger daughter is reported to have said "*I don't know why she wants to do it, you're my family*". The consequences of 'telling' and 'talking' about adoption on individuals' perceptions of 'family' were, therefore, very different.

In some other confidential adoptions, the revelation of adoptive status also represented the starting point of an ongoing dialogue about the meaning of adoptive status for the adoptee and adopter but this was lived out in many different ways and had different outcomes. Sometimes children were the instigators of 'adoption talk' and at other times adoptive parents were more proactive. Often adopters described one adopted child as intensely curious about his or her birth family and the circumstances of their adoption while another child in the same adoptive family appeared disinterested. Therefore, the degree to which birth families were included within the day to day model of adoptive kinship varied, not only from adoptive family to adoptive family but also from parent/child relationship to relationship.

### **The role of acknowledging birth families' stories in finding a place for the birth family**

One way in which birth families were given a psychological presence in families who had experienced confidential adoptions was through the acknowledgement of the birth relatives' story, most often the birth mother's story. Adopters demonstrated acute consciousness of their adopted children's birth families in the course of interviews by telling the birth family's adoption story alongside their own and their adopted children's adoption story. This was particularly, although not exclusively, the case for adoptive mothers. One adoptive father, however, said:

'There's always 3 sides to the truth isn't there.' *Father four*

The way adopters reflected on the stories demonstrated both the deep thought that they had given to these stories and their desire to see the story from the birth mother's perspective and to understand her circumstances and motivations. Most adopters had also shared details of the birth family's story with their adopted children, having judged what was appropriate for each child to know at certain points in their development. However, the sharing of birth families' stories with adoptees also raised a number of dilemmas for adoptive parents. Often the content of these stories was highly sensitive and adopters spoke of their anxiety about conveying this to their adopted children and its impact on day to day family life. These dilemmas and difficulties are discussed further in section 5.6.1.

### **The role of reunions in finding a place for the birth family**

Reunions are inevitably a time when adoptive kinship is starkly re-examined by adoptees, birth family members and adopters and this can be the source of both resolution and anxiety for each party. There is also great ambiguity about the model(s) of adoptive kinship likely to emerge from the reunion experience in a new era of openness. Adopters expressed much uncertainty about their role in the reunion and the new family arrangement. One adoptive mother explained:

‘We were hoping that we were going through and meeting [the birth parents], I know really it’s a bit daft now when I look back, it would have been far too much for [our adoptive daughter], so we didn’t meet them then, but we did a few weeks later.’ *Mother three*

One adopted daughter had spent some time getting to know her birth siblings and had then arranged for her adoptive mother, father and brother to meet these birth siblings. However, although there is some contact between adoptive family members and birth family members it appeared that the expectation of both members of the adoption triad and professionals was that reunions were predominantly between adoptee and birth family members rather than adopter and birth family members or involving the joining of two families. Another adoptive mother whose daughter had been recently reunited with her birth mother explained about the reunion process:

‘[My adopted daughter] kept me knowing what was going on, but I wasn’t really any part of it, it had to be between [her] and [her birth mother], so I was happy to stand aside there. I didn’t find that an issue at all. It was something I knew from very early that she was going to do.’ *Mother four*

Some fears were also expressed about reunions leading to separation from adoptive family. One adoptive father said:

‘... it would be a very sad day if they both upped and said I’m away off to live with my birth parents, but then you just have to say, well I gave 25 years, tried to do as well as we could in those 25 years and if that’s the outcome, well perhaps in 10 years time they’ll come back and say “I’m sorry I did that to you 10 years ago”.’ *Father four*



Within confidential adoptions, therefore it appears that reunions bring into consciousness the cultural expectation that we belong to this family *or* that, not this family *and* that (Rosnati 2005) and this raises anxieties. Where reunions had occurred in the adoptive families included in this research, the model of adoptive kinship which was prevalent was the ‘yoked model of adoptive kinship’ (see Figure 12).

#### **5.4.2 Finding a place within the adoptive kinship model for birth family members with whom there is direct contact**

A taken for granted assumption within the adoption literature is that direct contact is a more powerful facilitator of the adopted child’s sense of dual connection to birth and adoptive families than indirect contact or no contact at all and that contact leads to adoption talk (see for example, Beckett, et al. 2008). However, these data suggest that while adoption talk may, to some extent, inevitably flow from the experience of direct contact the relationship between type of contact and the content and function of adoption talk and the resultant meanings attached to adoptive kinship is less straightforward. In addition, while direct contact explicitly and actively acknowledges the continued importance of the birth family in adoptive kinship, it at the same time requires adoptees, adopters and birth family members to deal head on with a countercultural model of family life in which biological kinship and social kinship coexist side by side. This proximity throws both the strengths and limitations of these two versions of kinship into sharp relief. Below, adopters narratives of direct contact are reported. These narratives convey the ways in which direct contact both exposes the fragility of birth family/adoptee kinship in the absence of day to day family practices or intimacy and the ongoing work needed to maintain adoptive kinship between the adopter and adoptee where direct contact arrangements are in place. Some comparisons are drawn between experiences of contact and the meaning of the ‘family visit’ in adoptive kinship.

##### **Family visits as an adoptive family practice**

For many of us, visits to family members feature strongly in our childhood memories and are remembered fondly. My memories of visits to my maternal grandparents conjure up images of sweet jam tarts, singing along to my grandma’s record of ‘The Sound of Music’ and sitting in my favourite seat watching my granddad as he shouted encouragement at the radio as he listened to the Newcastle United football

match. The thought my grandmother gave to making sure that there were always jam tarts in her cupboard when I was visiting came to symbolise her care and concern for me and my grateful acceptance of jam tarts even years after I had become bored with them represented my attempt to reciprocate this care. Equally, some may remember family visits as children to relatives with whom one felt no connection and which were tolerated out of a sense of duty. Even in adulthood visits to family members or by family members may invoke feelings of dread or delight and may be endured or relished. The practices associated with family visits can, therefore, powerfully shape our construction of family. For members of the adoptive kinship network these practices can have diverse meanings which can reinforce or challenge notions of kinship and may be subject to change over time.

One couple taking part in the research adopted two brothers at ages nine and eleven. When the boys were in their late teens, they adopted a seven year old girl. They had regular direct contact with various members of their adopted children's birth families including their adopted son's birth grandparents and siblings and their adopted daughter's birth mother. All of their adopted children had experienced severe abuse or neglect and these contacts as described by the adopters were a testament to the ability of these parties with a difficult history to maintain a relationship of some sort. However, the degree to which this would be described as a 'family relationship' by the adoptee, birth family members or adopters was unclear. This is likely to be influenced by the way it is practiced and the meanings attached to such practices by individual family members. While there is evidence of the benefits of direct contact, therefore, it also raises complex questions about families and belonging which may be difficult for members of the adoption triad to reconcile.

### **Family visits: exposing a fragile kinship**

The adoptive father from the family described above expressed the difficult nature of direct contact saying "*They disturb them ... it sort of stirs them up*". Speaking about the last meeting with their adopted daughter's birth family, the adoptive father described a situation that arose. When they arrived there was a visitor in the house, a fourteen year old girl who is a neighbour of the birth family. The adoptive father explained that his daughter's birth mother introduced the neighbour saying "*she's like a daughter to me*". The adoptive father and mother perceived this as an act of thoughtlessness on the part of their adopted daughter's birth mother. They felt the

birth mother had shown a lack of empathy towards her birth daughter by giving equal status to her relationship with her birth daughter and her young neighbour. The birth father went on to say:

‘You know you only see your birth daughter twice a year and she wasn’t really making anything of her. It was like it could have been anyone coming in, you know. That really felt ughhh, I felt for her. I thought “oh that’s no good is it really”.’ *Father nine*

It is not possible to know how the adopted daughter or birth mother perceived or intended this situation to be. However, the adoptive parents appeared to be highly aware of the potentially fragile nature of kinship within this arrangement and the active effort required to make it work, not only between adoptee and birth mother but between all parties.

In the same way that adoptive relationships require ongoing work, it appears that the maintenance of birth family connections also requires active displays of care and concern and the doing of family. However, the ability of birth family members, particularly birth parents, to achieve this is somewhat restricted. Birth parents and adoptees live apart, making it difficult to develop the taken for granted intimacy associated with family life. Contact is usually occasional and, therefore, birth parents have fewer opportunities to perform the day to day caring practices associated with family life. Where contact does occur between adoptees and birth parents, the adoptive parent may be present. This can create a self consciousness in both the adoptive parent and birth parent about how to act. The adoptive mother also described her awareness of the uneasy juxtaposition of biological kinship and social kinship experienced by all parties during direct contact, She explained:

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

'[Adopted daughter] doesn't want to go but you know she does want to go. But we're having paddies beforehand ... and then of course when we go she loves her and cuddles her and kisses her, she wants to be there. It's just that fear, which is totally understandable. But is it fear that [birth mother] will keep her? Is it fear that she'll not love us anymore if she sees her? And the first few times it was awful because [adopted daughter] didn't believe she could love two people. You know, I have to love that mummy and not this mummy, because she was only seven or eight.' *Mother nine*

The adoptive mother raises the issue of parenting differences between her and her daughter's birth mother. These may act as a further barrier to the development of a mutually acceptable model of adoptive kinship. She also refers to the cultural expectation that we belong to either this family or that and not both. In an attempt to explain the uneasy co-existence of biological and social kinship, the adoptive mother drew on the model of arranged marriage where there is a linking of families and the expectation that love will grow. She said:

'... when I first went in I didn't perceive them as being mine. I perceived them as, like with [my husband], he still belongs to his other family. I've almost married them. So they're still allowed to belong to their other family but it's just that I could love them in a way that I hoped they would learn to love me back.' *Mother nine*

### **Family visits: challenging the categories of 'real' and 'fictive' kinship**

Another adoptive father whose adopted son had direct contact with his birth sister described their relationship. Both children are school age. He said:

'I don't think [our son] is really aware of who [his birth sibling] is because he was little when he was taken away. He sees [his three adoptive siblings] as his family. [His birth sibling] is just somebody that he goes to see and plays with occasionally'. *Father six*

While the adoptive couple's commitment to maintain contact between these birth siblings acknowledges the importance of the biological relationship between birth brother and sister, it appears that the distance between the biological siblings in terms of time and space inevitably affects the adoptive father's construction of family

particularly when contrasted with the close day to day contact with adopted siblings. In this adoptive father's narrative, the distinct categories of 'real' and 'fictive' kinship are 'unfitting' to his family's situation. The adoptive father's perception of his family challenges the fictive status of adoption and again highlights the fragilities in the relationship between birth siblings where occasional contact is maintained but day to day intimacy is missing.

### **The meaning of contact for adopters**

The experiences recounted in adopters' narratives of direct contact demonstrated the important role of the adults involved in maintaining contact and the importance of understanding their motivations to support contact. It was not clear from the narrative why the adoptive father above maintains contact in the face of contradictory versions of kinship. Perhaps it was because contact was prescribed by adoption practitioners, because contact was viewed as a human right, because it was considered to improve the child's wellbeing, or perhaps because of a belief that these relationships will take on a new meaning as the adopted child matures. It is evident, however, that adoptive parents have to tolerate these contradictions and to develop a long term view of the changing needs of their adopted children throughout the lifecourse. It is possible that these contradictions could lead to the breakdown of contact arrangements in some cases.

A third couple adopted two children, of primary school age in 2001. The children were part of a larger sibling group, one older sibling being adopted into another family and the other remaining in long term foster care. It was agreed as the adoption progressed that the children should have ongoing direct contact every six months. The first contact took place at the adoptive family's home and both of their adopted children's siblings attended. The second contact took place at the other adopted sibling's home but the sibling in long term foster care did not attend. By the third contact neither of the children's siblings attended. The adoptive father felt that his adopted children's siblings did not want to maintain contact and he and his wife decided not to persist with these meetings. In a similar timeframe the exchange of Christmas and birthday cards ceased. Their story highlighted the active work needed on the part of the adults to maintain dual family connections. Where there is no blood connection and no former relationship between these adults, the effort required to do

this cannot be underestimated. This raises questions about the role of agencies in supporting such arrangements, one of the issues addressed in the next chapter.

The adoptive couple referred to at the start of this section explained that their earlier experience of direct contact with their son's birth family, heavily influenced their attitude to direct contact between their daughter and her birth relatives. Over the years they had regular direct contact with their adopted son's siblings and birth grandmother. They had no contact with their birth parents as there was a history of serious abuse. The adopters explained that when their older son reached age sixteen he requested the help of social services to make contact with his birth parents. This request for help was refused as he was less than eighteen years old. They described their son as troubled and damaged by his early life experiences. He decided to seek out his birth parents independently and was reunited with them. He spent a couple of years moving between his adoptive home and birth hometown but now lives near his birth parents and continues to be troubled and uses drugs. The adopters explained that this experience led them to be supportive of direct contact between their adopted daughter and her birth family. The couple had twice yearly meetings between them, their adopted daughter and her birth mother and half siblings, usually in the birth family's home. One possible reading of this story is that contact provided a means by which the adopters could model inclusive adoptive kinship for their adopted daughter and her birth family. In addition, their motivation for such contact was that it might reduce their own vulnerability as adoptive parents and ensure that the model of adoptive kinship that emerged in adulthood included rather than excluded them.

#### **5.4.3 Finding a place for the birth family in the adoptive kinship model in mediated adoptions**

Mediated adoptions typically involve an exchange between adoptive families and birth families through a third party. This may, for example, include an annual letter exchange between the families or the receipt of cards or gifts by adoptees from birth family members. Indirect contact is generally viewed to offer a number of advantages in adoption arrangements such as maintaining a link with birth relatives, acknowledging the continued importance of biological connections, smoothing the way for reunions in adulthood and allowing the ongoing exchange of information between adoptees and birth families.

Mediated exchanges of letters, cards and gifts also have the ability to shape the view of kinship developed within the adoptive and birth family. Such exchanges as the receipt or exchange of cards and gifts on special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries and religious festivals are powerfully symbolic within families. The colourful line of cards on the mantelpiece or jumble of presents under the Christmas tree evoke the spirit of shared celebrations and family connections. Finch (2007) has conceptualised such symbolic acts as 'displaying family'. While the sending, receipt or exchange of cards, letters and gifts between adoptive families and birth families were a common feature of adoptive family life for interviewees, the meanings attached to these were complex.

### **The meaning of letters, cards and presents without contact – missed opportunities**

Letterbox arrangements that were in place between three of the participating adoptive families and four birth families and one of these couple had been approached recently with a view to setting up a new letterbox arrangement with their adopted son's birthfather. These arrangements were diverse. In one family an annual letter was sent to their adopted children's birth mother and birth grandmother. No letter was received from these birth relatives but various members of the birth family sent birthday cards to the children. In another family annual letters were sent to their adopted children's birthmothers with a photograph but no letter was received in return. In the third family a letter was sent to two of their adopted children's birthparents. There was no reply to the letter but birthday and Christmas cards and presents were received.

In two of these families adoptive mothers were responsible for keeping the letterbox arrangement. They explained that they had tried to involve the children in writing the letter or family newsletter. Usually they wrote these and then asked the children if they wanted to add something. However, they described this effort to involve them as hard work, particularly as children reached their teens. In the third family the adoptive father wrote the annual letter to his adopted children's birth mothers. He did not involve his children, who were aged seven and twelve, in the process but said that he had kept the letters in safe keeping for them to see when they were eighteen. It appears that the one-way provision of letters or newsletters to birth family

members contributes in a very limited way to the achievement of the aims of contact suggested in the literature. For example, BAAF guidance suggests that contact can

- Enable a child to develop a realistic understanding of the circumstances leading to adoption;
- Enable the child to grieve his or her loss of birth family;
- Enable a child to move on to his or her new placement with the blessing of birth parents;
- Reassure a child that birth relatives continue to care for him or her;
- Promote stability through the continuation of connections
- Reassure the child about the wellbeing of birth relatives;
- Provide an opportunity for a child to understand their family history and cultural background.
- Maintain communication which could facilitate future direct contact. (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 1999)

Instead this contact appears to function as a duty to be performed by the adopter for the sake of the birth family. Where items were received from birth family members, these tended to be cards rather than letters. While cards could act as an expression of care by birth families, the brevity of message and lack of longer replies to letters meant that the opportunity to provide information or reassurance for adoptees was often missed. Adopters also gave many examples of pieces of information, such as family medical history, that they did not have and birth families could have provided but these were not sought

The narratives of some adopters suggested that the formalised nature of letterbox arrangements meant that these exchanges of letters and presents were emptied of some of their meaning. One adoptive mother explained that her son regularly receives birthday and Christmas cards from birth relatives. While this could be seen as an expression of mindfulness of the child by the birth family, the adoptive mother contrasted the receipt of these cards with the absence of a card from her son's birth mother when he passed his GCSE exams. This absence appeared to diminish the demonstration of care and family belonging by the birth mother through the sending of greetings cards in the view of the adoptive mother. An alternative explanation may be that the birth mother did not feel she had the right to contact her birth son outside of agreed contact arrangements.



Where 'displaying family' is divorced from any additional contact or shared family activities this again raises difficult questions about the meaning of adoptive kinship. While it is not unknown within families to receive gestures of care such as birthday cards or gifts in the absence of other contact such as family visits or telephone calls, these are often associated with 'distant' relatives, that is, those who are further away in the family tree, emotionally less close, or geographically more distant. Lacking any accompanying shared space, routines or family practices, therefore, these displays of family throw into sharp contrast the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the adoptee, adopter and birth family and potentially create distance. Janet Carsten in her work on kinship put it like this:

"When the rituals which mark the special events of kinship become dislocated from the cumulative practical necessities that kinship commonly carries, these rituals are also emptied of much of their significance".  
(Carsten 2000)

### **Geographic distance and emotional closeness**

The contrast was sharp in the same adoptive mother's narrative of her son's tendency to talk less and less about the birth mother with whom he has indirect contact, with his ability to maintain a sense of close family ties across great distances with his adoptive grandparents. She explained that her parents, his adoptive grandparents, live in Australia. They moved there before she and her husband adopted their son and daughter and they have had few opportunities to meet face to face. However, she described the few occasions that they have all met face to face as special. She suggested that her adopted children's relationship with their adoptive grandparents is "*not the same as if they were here*" but still a loving grandparent/grandchildren relationship.

This relationship differs from the relationships between adoptees and birth families in confidential and mediated adoptions in a number of ways which may be relevant to discussions about openness in adoption and the promotion of dual connection to two families. First, although infrequent, there has been some face to face contact between the adoptive grandparents and grandchildren, usually shared holidays. This offers opportunities for sharing space and activities that become family practices or shared family history. There are many unanswered questions about the ways in

which the place given to the birth family in the adoption kinship network is influenced by this lack of direct contact and opportunity to develop shared family practices. Second, the adoptive grandparents and grandchildren talk regularly on the telephone. In an era of geographically dispersed families, a weekly telephone call to grandparents is a common feature of family life in many households in the UK and this itself represents a family practice. Again there are questions about the degree to which the birth family's place in the adoption kinship network is influenced by this lack of telephone contact. Third, the relationship exists because of an initial strong connection between the adoptive mother and grandparents. This sets the tone for the relationship between adoptive grandparents and grandchildren. The message the adoptive mother gives her children is 'these are my parents and I love them and I hope you will come to love them too'. While adoptive parents in confidential and mediated adoptions may at the very least be respectful of birth parents, they cannot model a loving family relationship with birth family members for their children.

The contradiction in mediated adoption between birth family members' physical absence from day to day family life yet psychological presence (see Figure 14) raises questions about the ability of adoptive parents to promote family relationships, or to promote 'closeness' or 'belonging' when there is physical distance.

#### **5.4.4 Summary**

The evidence presented here suggests that birth family members continue to hold a significant place within the adoptive family even within confidential adoptions and the revelation of adoptive status renders the 'as if' model of adoptive kinship unsustainable at least with the privacy of family life. However, the meaning of the birth family connection varies from individual to individual. Some individuals are intensely curious throughout growing up while others appear seemingly disinterested. The meaning of dual connectedness also varies across the lifecourse and may become more or less significant as life events unfold. It is likely to be difficult, therefore, to predict for whom biological relatedness will be or become significant, when this will happen and what its significance will be. Instead timely and responsive supports are likely to be needed across the lifecourse of an adoption. The data also suggest that biological kinship can be diminished or lose some meaning without the accompanying practices that constitute kinship. Where these practices are missing in adoptive situations, therefore, adoptive kinship's strength

can become biological kinship's weakness. These practices include direct contact but are not limited to this as kinship can be retained through a number of other practices including adoption talk and gestures of care or intimacy between birth family members and adoptees. There is, therefore, no simple relationship between feelings of connectedness and level of structural openness. Together these findings throw into question the traditional conceptualisation of adoptive and biological kinship as 'fictive' or 'real', fragile or enduring, distant or intimate. Instead it is possible for both biological and adoptive kinship to be experienced as real, fictive, fragile or solid. Finally, the meaning of contact for adopters cannot be ignored as they play a key role in facilitating and reinforcing connectedness through their participation in kinship practices. The implications of these issues for adoptive families and support agencies will be discussed in the next chapter.

### ***5.5 Developing a positive identity as a non conventional family***

The third major task facing adoptive families which emerged from adoptive parents' narratives was that of developing a positive identity as a family despite perceived differences from cultural norms. Kirk (1964) first highlighted the importance of acknowledging differences between adoptive and non-adoptive families. While adoption predominately creates families that at first sight appear to replicate conventional family structures, these families are non-conventional, to some degree, in a number of ways. For example, the journey from birth to relinquishment or removal of parental rights and into adoption is often difficult and, unlike many birth and parenthood stories, may be considered undiscussable outside the family. Also the configuration of the kinship network formed through the movement of a child from one family to another is not typically part of people's common experience. The birth family may be highly visible and active or relatively abstract in the day to day life of the adoptive family, and vice versa. Also, the degree to which adoptive family members identify with their status as 'adoptee', 'adopter' or 'birth family member' may vary.

The narratives of adoptive parents provided insights into the work undertaken by them to incorporate these non-conventional elements of adoptive parenting and adoptive kinship into their personal biography, their private family life and their public identity. These are each explored below.

### **5.5.1 The ongoing identity work in which adoptive parents engage: a personal journey**

The identity issues facing adopted individuals are much explored in the psychological literature on adoption (Brodzinsky 1987; Grotevant 1997; Grotevant, et al. 2000; Hoopes 1990). However, issues of identity and biography facing adopters and birth family members have been given less attention. Bury (1982) developed the concept of biographical disruption within the field of the sociology of health and illness. One of the notable features of adoptive kinship is the presence of multiple experiences of biographical disruption for all members of the adoption triad. For birth parents the source of the disruption is an unplanned pregnancy or a decision by the state to terminate parental rights. For the adoptee, the source of the disruption is separation from their family of origin. For the adoptive parents the source of the disruption may be primary or secondary infertility. Bury's analysis usefully draws attention to the impact of disruptive or critical life events on self concept, personal biography, relationships with others and expectations of the future. Drawing on the work of Bury in research on involuntary childlessness, Exley and Letherby (2001) showed that disruptive life events can impact on self-identity both positively and negatively, however, achieving positive effects often involves hard work.

Some of the narratives of the adopters participating in this research described not only the primary disruptive event that they experienced but also the ongoing identity work in which adopters engaged throughout the lifecourse of an adoption. This was particularly a feature of the narratives of adoptive mothers. It was demonstrated very vividly by one adoptive parent's narrative of becoming a grandmother. The adopter had experienced two confidential adoptions. She explained that she, her husband, her adopted daughter and her daughter-in-law's family were present at the hospital before and soon after her grandchild was born. She went on to say, with great emotion:

' ... when I picked [the baby] up and held him I was in tears ... and I said "I don't know what's wrong", I said "do you know this is the youngest baby I've ever held" ... and I looked at [my adopted son and daughter] and thought "oh I shouldn't have said that," you know... But they were okay because when we came back I said to [my adopted daughter] "oh I should not have said that", and she said "I know but its true" ... but ... to me that

would make them think “who had that experience with them, who would feel like that for them?” ... because it must be awful to think you weren’t really wanted. But what I always said to them “don’t ever think you weren’t wanted, because they could have had an abortion” ... I just didn’t ever want them to ever think, okay they knew we wanted them but I didn’t ever want them to feel rejected at the very very beginning.’ *Mother three*

This event long after the legal adoption of her children led this adoptive mother to revisit her biography as a mother without a birth story. Issues of identity and biography, therefore, can be just as significant for adopters as adoptees and can require adopters to engage in ongoing identity work. The same is likely to be the case for birth family members.

The story above of becoming a grandparent not only led this adopter to revisit her own biography as a mother without a birth story, but also forced her to confront her adopted children’s biographies as ‘relinquished’ babies and their birth mothers’ biographies as childless mothers. This suggests that the ‘adoption story’ is more accurately a collection of interdependent, overlapping ‘adoption stories’ which deal with multiple actors, experiences, feelings, motivations and potentially competing interests. For each member of the adoption triad, therefore, ‘your story is part of my story’. Carsten’s research focused on the experiences of adult adoptees reunited with birth family members. Her analysis suggested that one of the main motivations for adoptees seeking reunions is to achieve ‘biographical completion’ (Carsten 2000). She drew on Antze and Lembek’s (1996) work on memory and identity to demonstrate the importance of narratives of the past for adoptees in order to “*bridge dislocations and build a continuous identity*” (Carsten 2000, p.697). If, as I assert, ‘your story is part of my story’ this suggests that Carsten’s concept of ‘biographical completion’ is important for all members of the adoption triad. Reunions, therefore, can also be viewed to be as much about the ongoing identity work of adopters as adoptees. This raises issues about the involvement of adopters in their adopted children’s search and reunion activities and support available to them when these occur. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 5.5.2 The identity work of the adoptive family: in the private domain

While adopters engaged in identity work related to their sense of self, they also undertook identity work related to adoptive 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 yours forever". 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 seven*

This situation presented the adoptive father with a number of difficult tasks 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 alienating him from his birth family. Engagement with these issues presents great challenges to adoptive parents but at the same time can provide opportunities for a new family script to emerge that addresses the question 'what sort of family are we?'

The arrival of birth children following adoption also raised questions about family and identity. One adoptive mother voiced her fears about the impact of the arrival of her birth daughter on the family, saying:

'what do you say to two adopted children, when your natural child comes along. I was a bit worried about that....it's not so much when they're little, I just think when they get a bit older, you know, would they be thinking.... if you had had her first you wouldn't have had us, you wouldn't have wanted us ... and I just thought I wouldn't want them to feel... like they were second best in some way'. *Mother five*

This change brought into the adoptive mother's consciousness, the cultural expectation that biological connection is more valued than adoptive kinship and her narrative revealed her determination to resist this discourse within the family. She speculated, though, that this had resulted in her adopted daughter being "*indulged*" more than her birth daughter. This suggests that achieving some sort of equal status of biological and adoptive kinship within a family is challenging.

### **5.5.3 The identity work of the adoptive family: in the public domain**

Adopters not only have to engage in ongoing work to manage their personal biography and private identity as a family but also to manage their public identity as a family. While adoptive family members attempt to establish and maintain family relationships that work, their day to day encounters with people and institutions outside of the immediate family can act to reinforce this sense of family or disrupt it. The normative view of 'family' and the discourse of 'blood is thicker than water' pervade daily life and although adoption gains legitimacy through being legally sanctioned, it remains socially challenging even in times of increased family diversity. Adoptive family members face the tasks of resisting the discourse of biological primacy in their encounters with the wider community, repairing these disruptions and deciding how much to reveal about their identity as an adoptive family. The experiences of adopters in negotiating their encounters with members of their community or society are explored below.

#### **The wider community celebrates the new family**

Just as the arrival of a new baby into a family is celebrated, the arrival of adoptive children was also a source of celebration. Some adopters described their friends, family and community members' spontaneous celebrations when a baby joined the family:

'Oh the factory where [my wife] was ... the production stopped for the day ... Yeah they couldn't get any work out of them ... they were smashing.'

*Father eight*

‘We had non stop company for five days... we never had a minute to ourselves, everybody wanted to see our baby. We’d been married for 15 years before we had a baby, and everybody wanted to see the baby.’ *Mother eight*

‘... when we came back somebody in the church had put a big banner across the whole [front of the house], welcome home [baby’s name], right across the whole as big as the house it was, and then we had people in, constantly.’  
*Father ten*

Similarly, when older children joined a family this was celebrated. One mother explained:

‘I had worked in the same place for quite a long time, and it was quite a big office and the day that we found out that we were the ones chosen to have [the children] placed with us, I had a very good friend who I worked with and we literally went round the whole office and cried over everybody (laughing), ‘oh look they’re so gorgeous (mock crying), and so everybody had been so supportive at work and loads of them before I left brought presents in for the children and it was such a big thing. I remember one woman coming up to me and saying “I went home and I told my mam all about it and my mam was crying, and isn’t it lovely they’re adopting two and they’re brother and sister” (laughing), and so I had such a lot of support from work before I left, and kept in touch all the time I was on adoption leave.’ *Mother one*

The actions of the wider family and community members such as looking at photographs, giving gifts and visiting new arrivals appeared to reinforce the adoptive family’s sense of family. However, they reflect practices associated with biological families and importantly do little to acknowledge the place of the birth family. They, therefore, position adoptive families within the ‘as if’ model of adoptive kinship at an early stage of forming a public family identity.



### **Revealing status as an adoptive family – uncontentious or culturally challenging?**

For some families, such as the couple who adopted transracially, their identity as a non-conventional family was more visible than in other cases although the nature of their difference was not. The adoptive father said:

‘... toddling round with three small children, two very dark and one very fair, it doesn’t make any difference, but you always suspect that people think ‘ah must be a second marriage somewhere along the line.’ *Father five*

However, for nearly all of the adopters interviewed the decision to tell people outside the family about the family’s adoptive status was described as uncontentious. Two fathers, one who was part of a confidential adoption and one who adopted more recently, put it like this:

‘I’m middle class now and all my friends are all middle class so they don’t care a monkey’s toss either do they, its not like 50 years ago if a girl had a baby, that’s a disgrace, and if she kept the baby, that’s shocking, the world has change.’ *Father four*

‘I don’t go out of my way to keep it a secret but then I don’t go out of my way either to broadcast it, you know they’re just ‘the family’... I mean it’s just something we’ve never really thought of.’ *Father six*

Adopters also felt that increasing acceptance of new family forms such as single-parenting and step-parenting help adopted children to feel less stigmatised. However, adopters also went on to give examples of encounters with people outside their family which highlighted the problematic nature of disclosing adoptive status and the primacy of biological relatedness in the public consciousness. Two adoptive fathers recalled:

‘... people saying to me “wouldn’t you like some of your own”, which riles me, because they are my own.’ *Father ten*

'... nobody's ever said "what you bringing them up for, they're not yours", I have heard that mentioned ... Someone made that comment, but it didn't cut any ice with us ...' *Father three*

Adoptive families often appear to others to mirror the traditional family form of mother, father and children. Birth family members may have a low visibility or even an invisibility to others observing the day to day lives of the adoptive family from outside. Therefore, revealing adoptive status alone does little to shape outsider's understanding of what it means to be part of an adoptive kinship network. One adoptive father explained:

'I think everyone who I'm er... close to or related to who have always known that we had adopted children ... just accept that we're a family unit, that's what it is.' *Father five*

However, the term 'family unit', in this case refers to outsiders' perception of the adoptive parents and adopted children as family while the birth family are absent from the model of adoptive kinship. So, while the 'as if' model is unsustainable privately within the adoptive home, it survives outside the home.

The taken-for-granted nature of the normative view of family, however, caused problems for some adoptive families when their adopted children were attending school. 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 sometimes painful for children with little knowledge about their background and origins or no baby photographs and teachers were often unaware of the potential impact of such assignments for adopted children. These often led to adoptees revealing their adoptive status to classmates which in turn sometimes 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 two*

The same adoptee was bullied by a classmate because of her adoptive status as was another adoptee who was taunted with comments such as "you've got a fake family". A recent report by the Children's Rights Director at the Commission for Social Care Inspection has estimated that one on twenty five adoptees experience some form of bullying because of their adoptive status (Morgan 2006). Adopters participating in this research 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 when children were not mature enough to understand the potential consequences of disclosure.

One adoptive couple explained that when asked in class to talk about 'the most important thing' their adopted son had announced that it was the day he was adopted. They said that this disclosure did not have any negative consequences for their son but this and the previous stories remind us of the importance of school as a site of potential reinforcement or reduction of family belonging for adopted children.

The need to be in control of disclosure was seen as important by some adopters. One couple who adopted a baby in the 1980s were distressed when their file at the GP baby clinic had 'adopted' written in large letters and was on the reception desk and therefore, visible to the public. Adopters frequently mentioned visits to hospitals which led to them revealing their child's adoptive status to doctors. These appeared to be particularly memorable to adopters as they were placed in a situation where their choice to disclose this information was taken away from them.

There was a sense from some adopters' narratives of 'family talk' being commonly perceived as 'public talk' and this leading to unexpected disclosures. One adoptive mother who adopted her children transracially told a story about being approached by a woman in a café who rudely enquired about her family. She said:

'I was once (laugh) I was once in Marks and Spencer having lunch with the children ... and the lady was sitting at the next table (laugh), and she said "are all those children yours!"; I mean we look like a Benetton advert, you

know because we're all slightly different skin tones. I said "yes". "Well they must all have a different fathers!" [the lady continued]. And I said "yes and a different mother as well" ... It never ceases to amaze me how people feel they can... are entitled to comment.' *Mother five*

The ubiquity of 'family talk', especially among mothers, also requires adopters to make decisions about when to reveal the adoptive status of their family. For example, this situation arose for me when a neighbour whose child attends school with my youngest son and shares a birthday with him assumed that we were in the same Scottish maternity unit together at the time of our children's birth. As she raised the issue, a series of questions and emotions presented themselves as I quickly had to make a decision about what to tell this neighbour. Do I respond briefly by saying that my son was born in England and hope that she assumes that this is because I too am English? If I do this and she asks more questions do I risk appearing unfriendly when I am evasive? Do I tell the neighbour that my son was adopted from England? At the same time I was evaluating my relationship with this woman and whether I trusted her to be discrete with any information I disclosed and empathic towards my adopted children's situation.

### **Revealing details of adoptive kinship – selective disclosure and the problems of public status and private stories**

While the decision to tell people outside the family about the family's adoptive status was largely seen as uncontentious, there was evidence that adoption talk outside the adoptive family presents challenges. The relative invisibility of adoptive kinship, the primacy of biological connectedness and the ubiquity of normative family ideology all present adoptive families with choices to make about what to tell to whom about the family's adoptive status and in what circumstances.

In many interactions with friends and neighbours adopters were likely to reveal adoptive status as the appropriate circumstances arose but no further details about the adoption as these were considered a private matter. In particular, details of birth family circumstances and contact arrangements with birth families were most protected again rendering the birth family absent and invisible. However, I would like to suggest that the revelation of adoptive status without further disclosure can be potentially problematic as selective disclosure invites the other person to create a

story of their own to fill the gaps of what has not been revealed. Many people's awareness of adoption experiences is limited to media representations of adoption, therefore, a revelation of a child's adoptive status without further details of the circumstances of the adoption may conjure up images of desperate infertile couples, abandoned children and wronged birth mothers. The stories created are likely to be at best simplistic and at worst damaging. That said, revealing details of the story is problematic too as it involves the telling of three parties' stories. This raises questions about confidentiality and the right to privacy. Adopters are left in the precarious position of either saying nothing and allowing adoption myths to continue, talking in vague generalities in an effort to educate the public about adoption or revealing highly personal information in order to ensure that the children's community is more adoption sensitive, somewhat of a Hobson's choice. There is, therefore, a general need for more public education about adoption and its changing nature. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

While very close friends and family were often privy to some details of the birth family's circumstances that led to the child's adoption, there were some details that were considered too sensitive to share even with them. Couples relied on each to support the other in holding this information and deciding what to reveal and when to adopted children. In some cases the nature of the difficulties faced by adoptees and adopters meant that it was inappropriate to share certain aspects of adoptive family life with others as it was so outside the experience of most people. One adoptive father whose adopted daughter displayed disturbing sexualised behaviour explained:

'The only other people I've talked to... like the thing I've talked about now, the sexual things, I wouldn't dream of talking to certain, there are only probably only two sets of friends I could do that with, [name and name] because of the sort of people they are and [name and name] who are both high up in social work. So you can talk to them about things you wouldn't dream about talking about to other friends because they haven't got the insight or the knowledge to really understand what you're talking about... So [name and name] you could trust to talk to them about the weirdest things imaginable and they're not going to go anywhere. You've got confidence in that. You talk about things to do with the family but certain things aren't talked about with certain people. It's not that they're not friends just you don't go into that level of detail.' *Father nine*

Therefore, adopters have to walk a fine line between disclosure and protecting family privacy making decisions along the way and carefully negotiating everyday interactions with family, friends and community members.

#### **5.5.4 Adoptive family life – the same *and* different**

Kirk (1964) made a distinction between two coping strategies in adoptive families which he called ‘acknowledgement of difference’ and ‘rejection of difference’. These categories have since been developed to include a further coping strategy, that of ‘insistence of difference’ (Brodzinsky 1987). More recently, these have been replaced with the term ‘high versus low distinguishing’ in recognition of the negative connotations of denial contained in the term ‘rejection of difference’ (Kaye 1990). The narratives of adopters revealed a deep awareness of the extra challenges that adoption brings to family life, however, they rejected categorisations of adoptive family life as either different *or* not different. For the adoptive parents interviewed as part of this study, the process of developing a positive identity as a non-conventional family involved the active ‘recognition of sameness’ to other more conventional types of family as well as the ‘acknowledgement of differences’. Difference and sameness were not mutually exclusive categories for adopters. Instead they considered their families to be both the same *and* different.

It appears that this sense of ‘sameness’ had an important role in the making of adoptive kinship between adopters and adoptees providing them with a sense of legitimacy as a family. A sense of sameness came from the day to day doing of family life and the accompanying joys, concerns, struggles and achievements. Adopters narratives described the milestones of adoptive family life in terms of typical family milestones such as potty training, starting school, family illnesses, moving to secondary school, exams and moving on to work or university. Sameness was also equated with a naturalness or taken-for-grantedness in the relationship between adopter and adoptee. This sense of sameness also came from shared activities with other family members, friends and neighbours within the adoptive family’s community and an accompanying sense of belonging and acceptance. One adoptive father said:

'We've got about three couples with their families that we've always been quite close to, and probably once a year we would go down to Centreparks with them for a weekend ... so when [our adopted children] came along they just sort of slotted in ... they just fitted into them and almost treat them like cousins.' *Father one*

Although adopters considered their families to be both the same *and* different, it was apparent that adopters' gave different emphasis to their identity as a parent and their status as an adoptive parent in different circumstances. This was particularly evident in the narratives of adoptive fathers who spoke frequently of the irrelevance of the family's adoptive status. Adoptive fathers involved in confidential adoptions explained:

'My only experience is that we've got two children who happen to be adopted and as far as I feel and observe when I see other families is that we just seem to be the same as everyone else... they're just part of a normal family.' *Father five*

'I think you forget about it .. she's ours, it's normal, we couldn't possibly love her anymore if she had been born to us naturally than we did.' *Father eight*

One father in a mediated adoption said:

'I mean to be honest in the hour and half [of this research interview] its probably the first time I've thought about it, and talked about it in ten years, nine years probably, so I haven't consciously spent much time talking about it other than the odd occasion when it comes up on a form or something like that.' *Father one*

This may reflect fathers' relative lack of engagement in adoption talk with their adopted children in comparison to mothers. As one adoptive father put it:

'I've always made myself there with the girls, but they talk with [my wife].'  
*Father four*

However, insistence of the ‘sameness’ or ordinariness of adoptive family life did not equate with denial or rejection of differences in adoptive family life. Other points in adoptive fathers’ narratives suggested a deep awareness of differences and the additional tasks of adoptive parenting. Kaye (1990) also found that denial of difference did not equate with a lack of communicative openness.

It appears that adoptive family status moves from a foreground to a background issue depending on the circumstances of individuals or their interactions with the wider world. Rather than the terms acknowledgement or rejection of difference, therefore, more helpful terms may be ‘relevance of adoptive status’ and ‘irrelevance of adoptive status’ in different contexts. These terms may also be applicable to the experiences of adoptees who express different degrees of curiosity at different times.

The concept of ‘identity salience’ as developed by Stryker (1987, cited in Hogg, et al. 1995) is helpful here. This concept recognises the differing emphasis given to certain roles and identities by individuals within various contexts. The concept is tied closely to behaviour and it is suggested that two people with the same identity, for example ‘parent’, may act out this role in very different ways depending on the salience of the role and the context in which they find themselves (Hogg, et al. 1995).

### **5.5.5 Summary**

Identity work is frequently discussed in the adoption literature in relation to adopted children, however, adopters’ narratives uncovered a more complex picture of identity work undertaken by both adopters and adoptees at three levels:

- at the level of individual identity or biography
- within the private realm of the family; and
- at the level of community/society.

At the level of the individual, identity work is ongoing throughout the lifecourse and the biographies of adopter, adoptee and birth family are interdependent. Family practices within the privacy of the family home require adoptive family members to not only revisit their personal biographies but also their identity as a family and to ask ‘what sort of family are we? Within a more public arena adoptive families are both celebrated and challenged. Adopters’ narratives convey the use of selective disclosure in order to manage the discomfort this can create. However, using this



strategy, it is difficult to achieve a balance between avoiding the provision of too little information to those outside the family, which may lead to misinformation, and avoiding the provision of too much information which may threaten confidentiality. Finally, the narratives of adopters challenge Kirk's (1964) suggestion that successful adoptive family life relies on the acknowledgement of difference as opposed to the rejection of difference and instead suggests that acknowledging sameness and difference are both important aspects of developing a positive identity as an adoptive family.

### **5.6 The role of 'adoption talk' in the crafting of kinship<sup>e</sup>**

One of the key processes related to the crafting of kinship that emerged from adopters' narratives was the engagement in 'adoption talk' both within the adoptive family and with those outside the immediate family. 'Adoption talk' is therefore, related to but not synonymous with Brodzinsky's (2005) term, communicative openness. The importance of communicative openness within the adoptive family is well established and it has been associated with a number of benefits including the wellbeing of the child (Brodzinsky 2006), the development of a positive identity as an adopted person (Howe and Feast 2003) and higher levels of satisfaction with the adoption expressed by the adoptee in adulthood (Howe and Feast 2003; Raynor 1980). The data that have been presented in the previous sections of this chapter suggest, however, a number of other important benefits of adoption talk. There is evidence that adoption talk can also contribute to the development and maintenance of family relationships between adopters and adoptees, the inclusion or exclusion of birth family members as adoptive kin and the development of a positive identity as a non-conventional family.

While there is broad consensus that communicative openness is desirable, less is known about the processes that take place within adoptive families to promote or discourage adoption talk and the challenges that this presents to adoptive families. Brodzinsky (2005) has asserted that it is over-simplistic to adopt a 'more is better' approach to communicative openness as his empirical work has demonstrated that individuals' needs differ over time. He has cautioned against extreme positions on

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<sup>e</sup> This section of the thesis has been adapted for publication and can be found at: Jones, C. and Hackett S., 2008, Communicative openness within adoptive families: adoptive parents' narrative accounts of the challenges of adoption talk and the approaches used to manage these challenges. *Adoption Quarterly*, Vol. 10 (3-4), doi: 10.1080/10926750802163238

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). The data from adopters' narratives provide evidence of the difficulties experienced by adopters in achieving this middle road and mutual satisfaction within the family. They also provide evidence of the strategies that adopters adopt to manage these difficulties. These difficulties and strategies are the subject of this section. I begin by describing some of the challenges that adoption talk presents for adoptive family members.

### **5.6.1 The challenges of 'adoption talk' within the adoptive family**

The key challenges of adoption talk which adopters' narratives highlighted were the very complex nature of the adoption stories to be shared with adopted children, the great sensitivities within the stories, the need to tell positive yet honest accounts of adoption and the challenge of meeting the individual needs of adopted children.

#### **The complexity and sensitivities within the adoption stories**

One of the most striking characteristics of the adoption stories told by participants was their complexity. As stated earlier, 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 state 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 challenge revealed within the adoption narratives told by adoptive parents was the highly sensitive nature of the stories. 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 parents' 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 chose not to share the details of these with me.

### **The need for positive yet honest accounts**

A further challenge was that of 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, “you're special, because we chose you”.’ *Mother five*

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 eight*

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 one*

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 eight*

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 eight*

The provision of positive yet honest accounts was further hampered by the lack of availability of information in many families. This was particularly an issue for adoptive families who had experienced confidential adoptions. However, free availability of information was not guaranteed in mediated adoptions or even adoptions where there was some direct contact between adoptive and birth families.

### **Meeting individual needs**

A further challenge evident in adoptive parents' narratives related to uncertainty about which aspects 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, et al. 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 three*

'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 four*

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 one*

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 any more 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 five*

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 three*

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

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.

As can be seen, Brodzinsky's suggestion that adopters steer a middle road between denial and insistence of difference and aim for mutual satisfaction in adoption talk presents great challenges for adopters. 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.

### **5.6.2 How adoptive families make storytelling 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.

#### **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 eight*

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 five*

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. Some adopters in confidential and mediated adoptions also had in safekeeping pieces of jewellery given by a birth mother to an adopted child when the child was relinquished. Others had cards from birth family members. One adoptive father of a



twelve year old girl explained that his daughter was adopted as a baby. She was relinquished by her birth mother who was a teenager at the time of the pregnancy. As the adoptive father knew the name of the school attended by his daughter's birth mother he was able to keep up-to-date with her progress through education taking cuttings from the local press about her exam results and graduation from university. These cuttings were then added to a folder of information including a photograph of his daughter's birth mother which he intended to share with her when she was older.

Objects appeared to be particularly important in confidential and mediated adoptions where they appeared to function as tangible reminders of absent people or distant events for both adopters and adoptees. The care with which these objects were safeguarded and safely stored away conveyed both the importance given to the objects and conversely the lack of common currency in everyday family life. Adopters expressed some uncertainty about how and when to introduce these to their adopted children. Where it had been explained to adopted children that these objects existed, the adoptees sometimes expressed a wish to see them and at other times did not. Adopters also expressed some concern about the likely impact on the adoptee/adopter relationship of producing these objects. This is perhaps an indication of the power of such objects in shaping identity and kinship. Carsten (2000) refers to such objects as 'artefacts' conjuring up a sense of historically important pieces which are to be treasured, displayed and researched so that stories can be told about them. This metaphor suggests a role for adoptive parents as the 'curators' of such collections.

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 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 it's 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 three*

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 one*

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.

Adopters' narratives often contained references to objects relating to adoption which were of some importance within the adoptive family and their role in adoption talk.

### **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 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 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 one*

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 four*

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. The story of the night when an adoptive mother became a grandmother

which was referred to earlier provides an example of such a situation. This was a very emotional time for the adoptive mother, 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 three*

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 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

### **5.6.3 Summary**

The data suggest 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, there are also a number of similarities between the two groups. 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. Despite these difficulties adopters do engage in adoption talk with their adopted children to varying degrees. They make this more manageable through the telling of child-friendly stories, finding

openings into adoption discussions, drawing on other people's stories and becoming emotionally attuned to the (un)discussable within the relationship. The adoption talk in which adopters and adoptees engage has a number of important benefits beyond the identity formation of the adopted child. Adoption talk can contribute to the development and maintenance of family relationships between adopters and adoptees, the inclusion or exclusion of birth family members as adoptive kin and the development of a positive identity as a non-conventional family.

### **5.7 Chapter summary and conclusions**

The data presented here provide evidence of the core challenge facing adoptive families in domestic stranger adoption, that is, to create a unique version of kinship that enables adopters and adoptees to *gain* and *maintain* a sense of being family and at the same time enables birth family members to *retain* the status of 'family'. This is challenging within western cultures as the expectation is that we belong to this family *or* that not this family *and* that (Rosnati 2005). This makes adoptive kinship difficult to negotiate and demands a self-consciousness of members of the kinship network.

The narratives of adoptive parents revealed the power of practices of openness to shape perceptions of adoptive kinship and vice versa. These practices can have the effect of bringing members of the adoption triad together, but can also expose contradictions between individual perceptions and social and cultural expectations of kinship and create distance between members of the adoption triad. The ethic of openness grew out of evidence that confidential adoptions are damaging as they deny the continued importance of biological connectedness. Practices of openness, however, such as direct and indirect contact, do not straightforwardly address this issue and rather than necessarily confirming the importance of biological kinship they raise questions of 'who are you to me?' for all members of the adoption triad.

Adopters' narratives suggest that they build a sense of family belonging between them and their adopted children through demonstrating commitment and a sense of obligation to the child, exercising agency, displaying care and competency as a parent, undertaking shared activities as a family and developing a sense of shared history. This is achieved in the face of threats to their legitimacy as a family throughout the lifecourse. Together the efforts that are put into creating kinship and

resisting threats to the family's legitimacy contribute to a sense of 'earned' family status. This evidence challenges the notion of adoptive family life as 'fictive' vulnerable, and second-best to 'real' biological kinship and instead suggests that adoptive families work together to establish and maintain a sense of authenticity and enduring solidarity. However, the narratives also reveal that a strong and enduring kinship is not inevitable as personal and structural factors may intervene to make this difficult or impossible to achieve.

The data also suggest that birth family members continue to hold a significant place within the adoptive family even when they are physically absent. While the model of kinship that enables birth family members to *retain* the status of 'family' is typically associated with more recent 'open' adoptions the data suggest that this version of kinship can exist, at least as a mental model, even within adoptive families that experienced confidential adoptions more than thirty years ago. Within these families birth family members have a psychological presence to some degree. This suggests that the 'as if' model of adoption has been unsustainable within daily family life for many of these families. That said, the meaning of the birth family connection varies from individual to individual and is shaped by both the personal and the social. Some adopted individuals are intensely curious throughout growing up while others appear seemingly disinterested. The meaning of dual connectedness also varies across the lifecourse and may become more or less significant as life events unfold. It is likely to be difficult, therefore, to predict for whom biological relatedness will be or become significant, when this will happen and what its significance will be. The data also suggest that biological kinship can be diminished or lose some meaning without the accompanying practices that constitute kinship. Where these practices are missing in adoptive situations, therefore, adoptive kinship's strength can become biological kinship's weakness. This suggests that it is possible for both biological and adoptive kinship to be experienced as real and enduring, fictive and fragile. The practices which contribute to creating kinship include family visits and contact, adoption talk and gestures of care or intimacy between birth family members and adoptees. However, these practices are in themselves challenging and adopters and other members of the adoption triad have to find ways to make these practices manageable.

The data also reveal that the importance of understanding the identity work undertaken by adopters as well as adoptees. This work is ongoing throughout the adopters' lifecourse and requires the adopter to engage with three key questions:

- Who am I?
- What sort of family are we?; and
- How do we want to present our family to the wider community/society?

The data make apparent that the biographies of adopter, adoptee and birth family are to some extent interdependent and all of these stories are reflected upon by adopters when addressing the questions above. However, it is within the public arena that adoptive kinship presents the greatest challenges. Within this arena adoptive families are both a celebrated and contested social phenomenon and adopters manage this contradiction through selective disclosure of their status. This presents adopters with yet another challenge, however, as it is difficult to achieve a balance between avoiding the provision of too little information to those outside the family and this leading to misinformation and avoiding the provision of too much information which may threaten confidentiality. Finally, the narratives challenge Kirk's (1964) suggestion that successful adoptive family life relies on the acknowledgement of difference as opposed to the rejection of difference and instead suggests that acknowledging sameness and difference are both important aspects of developing a positive identity as an adoptive family.

To conclude the data suggest that **all forms of kinship are fictive** in the sense that they are made and remade over time and all have the ability to endure or be lost. This aspect of adoptive family life has been somewhat taken for granted in previous adoption research yet has potentially profound implications for adoption policy and practice, particularly in relation to openness in adoption. Doing adoptive family life also requires adopters and other members of the adoption triad to be able to tolerate high levels of uncertainty, **incongruity** or inconsistency within the private domain and the public domain of their family life and this needs to be acknowledged and addressed in adoption policy and practice. The data also suggest that a **lifecourse** approach is valuable in helping us to understand the ongoing processes within adoptive families involved in the making and remaking of kinship between adopters, adoptees and birth family members and this principle should guide adoption policy and practice. In addition, the data reveal the importance of understanding the **meanings** that adoptive parents and their adopted sons and daughters attach to their



identity as adopter or adoptee and member of an adoptive family and understanding these meanings within an **historical and cultural context**. The meanings of **sameness and difference** in adoptive families are particularly important. The research also reveals the benefits of focussing on **practices** as a way of accessing the connections between individuals' historically and culturally situated meaning making and behaviour. The implications of these findings for adoption theory, policy and practice is the subject of the next chapter.

## 6 Implications for theory, policy and practice

In this chapter I address the final research question posed in the thesis, namely:

- What implications do the findings of the research have for contemporary adoptive parenting and adoption theory, policy and practice?

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the findings presented in the two previous chapters in order to build on or develop explanatory theories in light of the findings, and to make recommendations in relation to adoption policy and practice.

The previous chapters described the historical shifts that have taken place within adoption discourse, policy and practice and the lived experience of members of the adoption triad. Whereas previously adoption was defined in terms of a shift of legal responsibility from one set of parents to another (Costin 1972), in contemporary times adoption is conceptualised as the linking together of two sets of families and a redrawing of the boundaries of kinship (Reitz and Watson 1992). The data presented in the previous chapters support Modell's assessment that, in an era of increased openness, "*adoptive parents stand at the edge of a new kind of kinship*" (Modell 1994, p230). This raises a number of questions about the meaning of family and kinship within adoptive relations and beyond.

The ethic of openness in adoption has also created novel demands for adoptive parents. Openness places increased responsibility on adoptive parents that had previously been carried by adoption agencies and requires contemporary adoptive families to engage in a number of unfamiliar tasks such as revealing adoptive status to adoptees, adoption talk both within and outside the adoptive family, acknowledging the birth family's story, actively facilitating regular direct or indirect contact with birth family members, the careful handling and guardianship of adoption related objects, artefacts or keepsakes and supporting and surviving reunions between adoptees and birth families. These practices contribute to what Carsten (2000) has called the transmission of kinship. The great challenges that these practices present to adoptive parents and other members of the adoption kinship network are described in the previous chapter. They require adopters to display great

skill and sensitivity in a number of roles which I have termed family-builder, curator, storyteller and social navigator, roles for which they have received little preparation. Questions remain, however, about the role that practitioners should take in supporting adoptive parents in the task of creating adoptive kinship in an era of openness and the role of policy in promoting and supporting adoptive kinship and openness.

The implications of the findings presented in the previous chapters for policy and practice are explored later. I begin by suggesting a reconceptualisation of adoptive kinship in light of these findings and recent developments in the theory of family and kinship. I then suggest an alternative definition of ‘openness’ in adoption.

### ***6.1 Conceptualising adoptive kinship***

Within social anthropology, adoptive kinship has traditionally been categorised as fictive kinship, that is, mimicking ‘real’ kinship formed through biological connection (Schneider 1984). Within this context fictive refers to a pretence to sameness and to mirror the biological family. It also implies a fragility within a relationship that is second best. The categorisation of biological kinship as ‘real’ on the other hand, implies a strong and permanent tie resulting inevitably from biological relatedness. The data presented in the previous chapter, however, challenge this dichotomy of ‘fictive’ and ‘real’. Adopters’ narratives suggest that while biological connection is an immutable fact and can continue to occupy an important place in the consciousness of adopted children, kinship between adoptees and birth family members can also be lost or lose some meaning when the two are separated by distance, time and a lack of day to day intimacy or opportunities to develop a shared history. Carsten’s (2000) research with adults reunited with birth family members also showed that once lost, these relationships are often difficult to re-establish except at a rather superficial level. What results could be described as an alternative ‘fictive’ kinship. Biological kinship within the context of adoption, therefore, cannot be taken for granted. A fragility is created by adoption and active work is required to retain the permanence of kinship between adoptees and birth family members. At the same time, adopters’ narratives revealed that adopters and adoptees can create kinship and a sense of legitimacy and permanence as a family despite their previous status as strangers. Traditionally it is assumed that this legitimacy comes from the legal sanctioning of the adoption, however, the data

show that while the legal process is not unimportant in creating adoptive families, it alone cannot guarantee kinship between adopters and adoptees. Instead kinship is formed and reinforced through practical care, shared routines, long term commitment and involvement in many of the ordinary practices associated with family life. The evidence suggests, therefore, that both biological and adoptive kinship can be enduring or fragile and much depends on the meanings given to these relationships by actors. These meanings vary from individual to individual and across time.

Recent analyses of kinship have moved away from categories of 'real' and fictive' kinship and the concept of agency in the construction of family relationships has been given greater emphasis. A distinction has, therefore, been made between 'given families' or 'families of fate' and 'families of choice' (Pahl and Spencer 2003; Stone 2004; Weston 1991). Adopters' narratives also contained evidence that choice is a factor in crafting kinship, however, agency as the central concept of adoptive kinship is problematic. The rhetoric of choice has a long history in adoption. Traditionally the explanation given to adoptees of their journey into adoption was as the 'chosen child'. However, the 'chosen child' analogy has been demonstrated to inaccurately capture the experience of those adopted as infants whose testimonies exposed the paradox that to be chosen by adopters relied on them being rejected by birth parents (Modell 1994). Equally, the discourse of choice contains an assumption that adopters have some autonomy in their situation as adoptive parents when in fact their choices are restricted in several ways. Their decision to adopt a child brings them into a system of assessment, checks and processing to which they can offer little resistance. The limits on autonomy are likely to be even greater for birth families, particularly where their children become looked after by the state. Weston's (1991) emphasis on mutuality and reciprocity in order to maintain kinship also suggests an equality within relationships that is difficult to attain between members of the adoptive kinship network. Adopters' narratives intimate that the maintenance of kinship may be motivated as much by a sense of obligation as choice. For example, adopters described their continued effort to maintain indirect contact between their adopted children and birth family members despite this contact being one-way and their dissatisfaction with the arrangement. Finally, the discourse of choice is problematic in the context of a 'market' in child adoption as it conjures up particular meanings that are at odds with ideas of kinship. Placing choice as the central concept of kinship, therefore, is inappropriate as it does not adequately acknowledge the limits

of agency within adoptive kinship and does not take account of the power imbalance between adults and children and between adopters, adoptees, birth family members and the state. Importantly, it pays little regard to the social and cultural barriers to kinship that exist.

If terms such as ‘fictive’ ‘real’ and ‘chosen’ are inappropriate, we must look elsewhere for ways of conceptualising adoptive kinship. Weston’s (1991) analysis of kinship has something to offer here. As well as referring to the concept of choice, Weston also refers to the importance of mutual practices, shared history and the ‘selective perpetuation’ of kinship. It is this sustained effort to become or endure as family that I suggest is the core of adoptive kinship. Weston’s analysis also goes on to recognise the cultural and structural limitations on “*families we choose*” and refers to “*families we struggle to create, struggle to choose, struggle to legitimate – struggle to keep*” (Weston 1991, p 212). Adoptive kinship is equally vulnerable to cultural and structural limitations. Rather than referring to given and chosen families, therefore, I suggest that a more appropriate conceptualisation of adoptive kinship as a lifelong relationship may be conveyed in the terms ‘*retained families*’, ‘*estranged families*’ and ‘*gained families*’. The term ‘gained families’ describes the relationship between adoptee and adopters as it moves from being a relationship between strangers to one of intimates. The term ‘retained families’ describes the relationship between adoptee and birth family where the link between the two is maintained despite the legal adoption and, in some cases, physical separation of the parties. Finally, the term ‘estranged families’ describes the relationship between the adoptee and birth family where the link between the two is lost through the legal adoption. The terms remind us that family relationships cannot be seen as a ‘birth right’ or legal inevitability. Instead ‘enduring solidarity’ must be actively produced and reproduced through family practices which promote permanence, intimacy and at the same time challenge cultural and structural forces which undermine the legitimacy of adoptive kinship.

## **6.2 Reconceptualising ‘openness’ in adoption**

The findings of this study also throw into question current conceptualizations of ‘openness’ in adoption. Before exploring this further, I will first summarise the evidence relating to openness in adoption.

Openness has generally been promoted as a 'good thing'. The arguments that have been put forward in support of openness in adoption have drawn on evidence from social science research, personal testimony and have also made reference to human rights. There is empirical evidence of the potentially negative consequences of secrecy in adoption (Raynor 1980; Rosenberg and Groze 1997; Triseliotis 1973) and this has been confirmed by the personal accounts of adoptees relinquished at birth and birth parents who have relinquished babies (Lifton 1975; Logan 1996). However, the empirical evidence in relation to the risks and benefits of openness for adopted children is underdeveloped and the findings are in some cases inconclusive. This area of research also remains methodologically challenging (Neil 2003). That said, in relation to structural openness, there is some evidence that this can lead to improved communication and relationships between adoptive parents and adopted children (Berge, et al. 2006; Grotevant and McRoy 1998; Silverstein and Demick 1994a) and increased understanding and empathy between adoptive parents and birth families (Grotevant and McRoy 1998; Silverstein and Demick 1994a). Studies have also indicated that contact can aid grief resolution for some birth parents (Grotevant and McRoy 1998). In relation to communicative openness, an association has been shown between this and the wellbeing of the child (Brodzinsky 2006), the development of a positive identity as an adopted person (Howe and Feast 2003) and higher levels of satisfaction with the adoption expressed by the adoptee in adulthood (Howe and Feast 2003; Raynor 1980). Although the evidence is still emerging, the academic community is overwhelmingly supportive of communicative openness and largely supportive of structural openness, although the latter still remains controversial among some academics, practitioners and adoptive families. Despite the great challenges that structural openness can present, it also appears to be the case that adoption triad members generally manage to make contact work (Logan and Smith 2005; Sinclair, et al. 2005).

A review of the evidence from social science research and personal testimony, however, highlights a difficulty faced when trying to make a judgement about the value of openness, that is, the term covers such a diverse range of practices within a broad set of contexts. Much of the US research evidence on openness relates to the placement of infants whereas much of the UK research has focused on the experience of special needs adoptions. Lessons from each country are, therefore, not easily transferable from one setting to the next. Openness can also include practices

as diverse as revealing adoptive status, a one-off exchange of information or meeting between birth and adoptive parents, communication between adoptive parents and adopted child about adoption, an ongoing exchange of information between birth family and adoptive family, an ongoing relationship between birth family, adoptive parents and adopted child, involvement of birth parents in the process of an exchange of a child, or shared parenting. These diverse practices and contexts are, therefore, difficult to untangle when considering the evidence. This is not always clearly articulated within analyses of research evidence and as a result, this evidence has at times been vulnerable to being used inappropriately to support a particular ideological stance.

As well as drawing on social science research evidence and personal testimonies, some have made a case for openness being seen as an issue of human rights, whether this be the human rights of the adopted individual or the human rights of the biological family. For example, in the USA, adoptees have been vocal in their campaign for the abolition of sealed adoption records. In the UK, contact between looked after children and their birth family and significant others is regulated by the Children Act 1989. The Act places a duty on local authorities to support contact wherever possible and is guided by the principle of the best interests of the child. The Human Rights Act 1998 also has relevance for members of the adoptive kinship network as it protects individuals' right to a 'family life' (Bainham 2003). While an appeal to human rights appears at first to be persuasive, in reality it has been highly contentious and it has proved difficult to resolve the conflicts of the rights and interests that exist. For example, the limited success of the adoption reform movement in the USA has partly resulted from the conflict between adopted adults' claim to the right to know their biological origins and relinquishing birth parents' claim to the right to confidentiality (Carp 2002). In the UK, concerns have been expressed about a lack of clarity within English law about the relative rights of children and birth parents separated through adoption (Bainham 2003). For example, under the Children Act 1989, courts have the power to put in place a 'contact order' in order to ensure the child's needs are met following adoption. In practice, however, this power is rarely used and instead courts rely on birth and adoptive families to reach voluntary agreements about contact. In the case of a dispute, courts are generally unwilling to impose contact orders on reluctant adoptive parents where this might jeopardise a child's placement. There is also a potential for conflict between

the Children Act 1989's emphasis on the best interests of the child and the requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998 to balance the child and biological parent's right to a family life (Bainham 2003). As decisions about contact are generally made informally outside the court system, this places a great burden on practitioners and members of the adoption triad to take account of the moral and ethical dimensions of openness. Ryburn (1998) has described the great difficulties involved in discerning the relative risks and benefits of openness in adoption for the members of the adoption triad in order to reach a conclusion about the best interests of all involved and ultimately the best interests of the child

One of the key problems with taking forward research on openness in adoption, therefore, is that the theoretical groundwork needed to delineate 'openness' as a construct is just beginning to emerge. I will now go on to explore current conceptualizations of openness, their strengths and limitations and to suggest an alternative theoretical approach. This must be seen, however, within the context of individual rights and ethical practice.

### **6.2.1 Openness as a structure**

One way in which openness is currently conceptualised is as a continuum of arrangements. Grotevant and McRoy (1998) 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 an adoption agency. While Grotevant and McRoy's typology has allowed researchers to operationalise openness for the purposes of descriptive or outcome focused research, it has some limitations.

Firstly, the simplicity of the typology obscures the diversity of the phenomenon 'openness'. As little research has been undertaken to explore the richness of the phenomenon I would suggest that such a typology may be premature. Secondly, this definition speaks of the 'what' of openness but has limited utility as it makes no reference to the 'how' of openness. Given that family process variables have been shown to be more important determinants of a child's emotional wellbeing than family structure, the emphasis on structural arrangements within the adoptive kinship



network without any reference to family process is unhelpful (Brodzinsky 2005). Thirdly, although the rhetoric of openness is about individual needs, the use of a continuum has come to be interpreted as a hierarchy, that is, it has been taken to imply that a more open structural arrangement is better than a less open arrangement (Hughes 1995). This begs the question better for whom and in what circumstances? The evidence from this research and other studies suggests that relationships between adoptees and birth family members are more complex than this. Writing specifically about communicative openness Brodzinsky (2005) asserts that it is over-simplistic to adopt a 'more is better' approach as individuals' needs differ over time. Interviews with adopters conducted for this research also suggested that contact does not necessarily result in family type relationships and lack of contact does not necessarily preclude the development of psychological kinship ties. Instead attention is needed to the quality of the arrangement. A definition of openness in terms of family structure is therefore of limited value.

### **6.2.2 Openness as a process**

Brodzinsky (2005) has made a distinction between 'open' adoption and 'openness' in adoption. He has described the former as a particular type of family structure characterized by the sharing of identifying information and some direct contact between the birth family and adoptive family. 'Open' adoption is, therefore, synonymous with Grotevant and McRoy's category of 'fully disclosed' adoption. He then went on to suggest that 'openness' in adoption is a much broader construct that describes a process of communication and emotional support, a willingness to explore the meaning of adoption. Above all he refers to it as "*a state of mind and heart*" (Brodzinsky 2005, p 149). He differentiates former definitions of openness and his definition through the use of the terms 'structural openness' and 'communicative openness'. Brodzinsky (2005) makes a case for the decoupling of structural and communicative openness arguing that one is not dependent on the other. This was also a finding from the research reported here. Brodzinsky (2005) also stressed the need for this process to be fluid and responsive to the changing needs of members of the adoption triad.

Brodzinsky's broader definition of openness and focus on family process, therefore, offers a more helpful starting point for the study of openness in adoption. However, his use of the term 'communicative openness' is somewhat problematic. Brodzinsky

describes ‘communicative openness’ as both an informational and emotional communicative process and says that it is concerned with the quality of adoption exploration achieved with and between individuals. However, the term implies that emotionally supportive adoption talk within the adoptive family and across the adoptive kinship network is the core of ‘openness’. He, therefore, takes no account of the adoption related encounters between members of the adoption triad and members of the wider community or society and appears to disregard the many other practices that contribute to positive relationships between members of the adoption triad. His focus is on what you say and how you say it as opposed to the wider aspects of doing family within a social context.

### **6.2.3 Openness as an outcome**

While Grotevant and McRoy’s (1998) and Brodzinsky’s (2005) definitions deal with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of openness, they take for granted assumptions about the ‘why’ of openness. Research has suggested that the purpose of openness is often neglected by support agencies (Logan and Smith 2004). It is therefore, important to make outcomes, functions or purposes of openness more explicit. The functions of contact have been suggested to include:

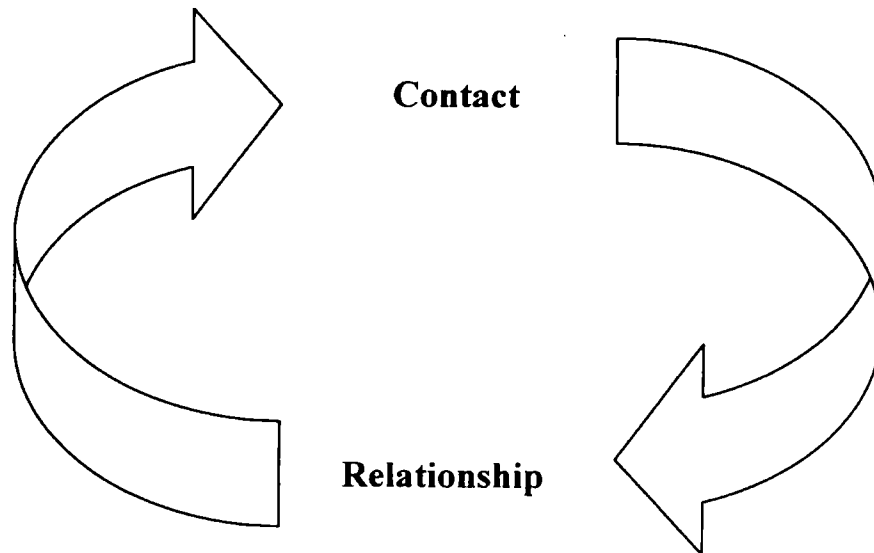
- enabling a child to develop a realistic understanding of the circumstances leading to adoption;
  - enabling the child to grieve his or her loss of birth family;
  - enabling a child to move on to his or her new placement with the blessing of birth parents;
  - reassuring a child that birth relatives continue to care for him or her;
  - promoting stability through the continuation of connections;
  - reassuring the child about the wellbeing of birth relatives;
  - providing an opportunity for a child to understand their family history and cultural background; and
  - maintaining communication which could facilitate future direct contact.
- (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 1999).

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, given the emphasis of the Children Act 1989 on the best interests of the child, these focus exclusively on the desirable outcomes for adopted children. While these outcomes are important, this focus raises a number of issues. Firstly, as stated earlier, the evidence that openness achieves such outcomes or is

associated with child wellbeing is patchy. Secondly, it could be argued that the focus on outcomes related to wellbeing reflects a tendency to pathologise members of the adoption triad and instead the emphasis should be on more fundamental outcomes such as the maintenance of family relationships. Thirdly, although there is an assumption within the Children Act 1989 that the best interests of the child must take precedence, it could be argued that there is also a moral obligation to attend to the potential outcomes of openness or lack of openness, whether positive or negative, for birth relatives and adoptive parents (Ryburn 1998). Finally, an emphasis on outcomes is problematic as it may oversimplify the dynamics of contact. It has been suggested that treating contact as simply 'a means to an end' can lead to it being used in a mechanistic way (Trinder 2003).

Trinder's (2003) work on 'contact' between children and their families who are separated through divorce or adoption raises an interesting question about the nature of the link between contact and outcomes. On several occasions she uses the terms 'contact' and 'family relationships' almost interchangeably implying that these are synonymous. She goes on to make a distinction between contact as an instrument to maintain a relationship (a 'means to an end') and contact as an integral component of a relationship. This distinction implies that relationship may result from contact but equally contact flows from the relationship. The connection between contact and relationship can perhaps be characterised as a virtuous cycle where contact can lead to relationship and relationship to contact, each being the outcome of the other (see Figure 15). Where one of these elements falls out of the cycle, however, something is lost. Without relationship, contact loses meaning and without contact the relationship becomes fragile.

**Figure 15 The virtuous cycle of contact and relationship**



This connecting of contact and relationship fits well with the conceptualisations of openness present in the narratives of adopters whom I interviewed. This is discussed more below.

#### **6.2.4 Emic understandings of openness**

While efforts have been made in recent years to further develop the theory of ‘openness’ in adoption (Brodzinsky 2005; Grotevant and McRoy 1998), there is a paucity of research which attempts to access the meanings (as opposed to experiences) of openness in adoption from the perspective of those involved. This study has something to add to this from the perspective of one member of the adoption triad, that is, adoptive parents. The data presented in previous chapters provide an insight into adoptive parents’ own understandings of openness and some of the challenges this presents. The adopters’ narratives suggest that the essence of openness for them is about finding a new way to ‘do family’ which acknowledges both the significance of biological relatedness and the legitimacy of adoptive kinship. This requires adopters to challenge cultural norms about the meaning of ‘family’ and to break new ground in terms of creating kinship. It requires adopters to engage in problematic tasks such as creating kinship with strangers, retaining kinship with birth relatives from whom children are separated and developing a positive identity as a non-conventional family.

Having suggested that the essence of openness for adoptive parents is about the making and remaking of family or kinship, I would like to draw on recent theories of family to develop the concept of openness further. The sociological analyses of family developed by both Morgan (1996) and Finch (2007) appear to have something valuable to offer here. Morgan has written about the difficulties of defining contemporary families in terms of structure as these family relationships are increasingly diverse, fluid and likely to be spread across multiple households. Instead he suggests that families are more easily defined in terms of 'family practices'. The term practices captures the work undertaken to create a sense of family belonging, These practices are "*little fragments of daily life*" (Morgan 1996, p.189) which have both a sense of regularity and adaptability. They are influenced by personal biography and the historical and social context in which they take place which may be felt as facilitative or constraining of these practices. I suggest that practices of openness can be helpfully thought of as a subset of 'family practices'. These practices of openness include revealing adoptive status to a child, direct and indirect contact, communicative openness and search and reunions.

The recent work of Finch (2007) has built on Morgan's concept of 'family practices' and developed the term 'displaying family'. Finch has stressed, not only the 'doing' of family but also the importance of 'being seen to do'. Displaying family is, therefore, about confirming to others (and to each other) that these are family relationships. She has suggested that these displays become particularly important where a family is non-conventional in some way or where practices are not embedded in family relationships. This way of conceptualising family is reminiscent of Trinder's (2003) distinction between contact as a 'means to an end' and as an integral component of a relationship. This suggests that contact can be both a way of promoting kinship and an expression of kinship. Displays of openness, therefore, become expressions, displays or gestures of kinship, care or love in fragile circumstances. Finch also refers to the notion of tools of display. These may include photographs, personal objects and stories. This concept fits well with adopters' narratives generated through this research which frequently referred to the importance of stories and artefacts within adoptive families and were concerned with the visibility of adoptive family life within society and the self-consciousness of adoptive parenting.

### 6.2.5 A new definition of openness

Drawing on the core ideas suggested in Morgan's use of the term 'family practices' (Morgan 1996), Finch's 'displaying families' (Finch 2007), Brodzinsky's emphasis on family process (Brodzinsky 2005) and the data generated in interviews with adopters, I now suggest a new definition of openness as:

**a diverse group of *family practices* which both *express* and *promote* kinship between members of the adoption triad. These practices convey the value of both biological relatedness and gained family membership. They are sensitively negotiated and continually adjusted in order to respond to individuals' changing needs and expectations.**

This definition moves away from previous definitions which have suggested a connection between levels of contact and levels of openness and implied that confidential, mediated and fully disclosed adoptions represent poor, better and best versions of openness. It focuses on the diverse range of practices that can contribute to kinship and views practices of openness as expressions of kinship as well as promoters of relationships. It focuses on the meanings of practices for those involved and pays attention to process and lifecourse issues. It requires families and support agencies to address the questions:

- how do we practice openness?
- why that way?
- what does it mean to those involved? and
- what are the consequences?

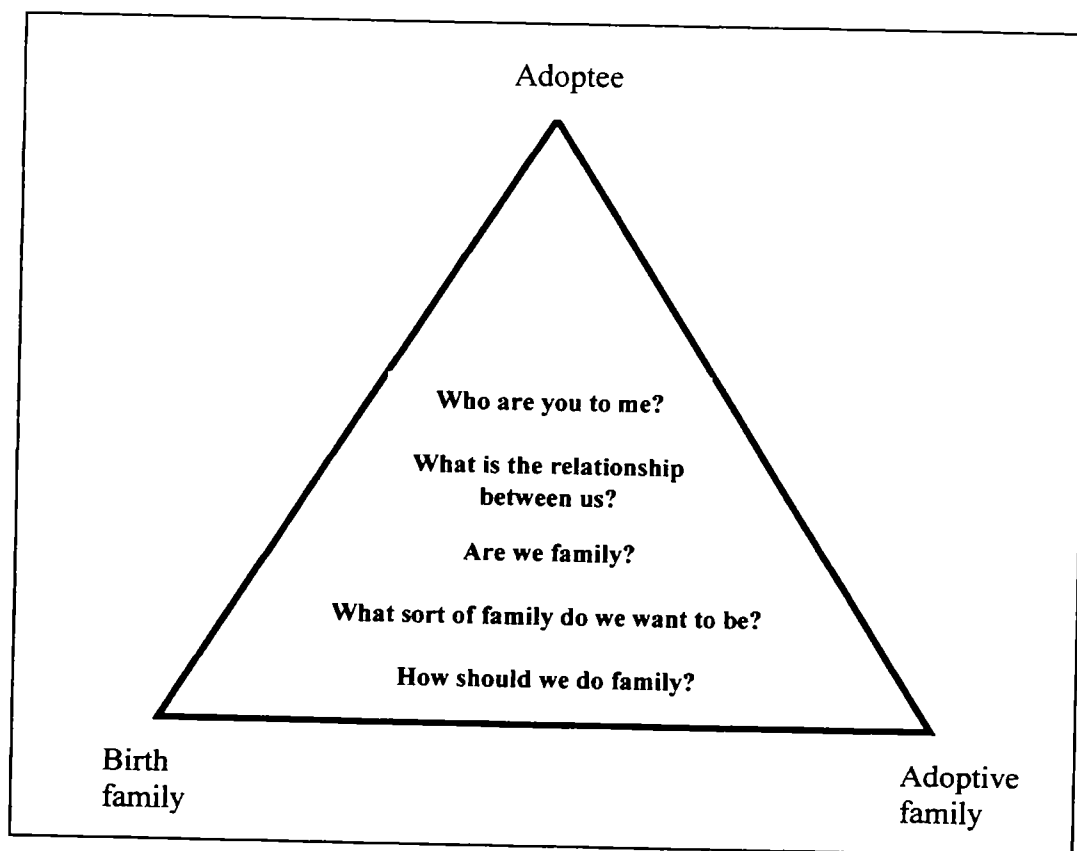
Crucially the definition relies on families and practitioners addressing the ethics of openness and acknowledging the potential tensions created by competing interests.

### 6.2.6 Openness as dual connection or a triad of connectedness

This new definition of openness also suggests a need to re-evaluate another orthodoxy within adoption, that is, that openness is about dual connectedness (Brodzinsky 2005; Neil 2007). This term refers to the child's sense of belonging to both birth family and adoptive family. However, while the term fits well with understandings of the parent/child dynamic, it does not adequately capture the

experience of the wider adoptive kinship network. Importantly, it disregards the dynamic between the adoptive parents and the birth parents. Adopters and birth family members are inevitably brought into some kind of relationship with each other through the adoption process which may or may not constitute a 'family' relationship. The narratives of adoptive parents suggest that this dynamic is an important aspect of making adoption work. This can place demands on adoptive parents whether they are involved in adoptions with or without contact often requiring them to be active facilitators of adoption talk, communication between the adoptee and birth family, or direct contact between the two. The literature also stresses the important role of adoptive parent empathy in making openness work (Neil 2002). While the term 'dual connectedness' suggests that adoptees and birth family members engage with the questions outlined below in Figure 16, it does not take account of the requirement placed on adopters and birth family members to also ask of each other such questions as 'who are you to me?'. The existing literature relating to adoptive parent empathy and the data generated by this study, therefore, lead me to conclude that openness is less about dual connectedness and instead there is a triad of connectedness. This inevitably means a triad of interests, which may at times compete.

**Figure 16 The ambiguities of adoptive kinship**



The construction of openness as being concerned with dual connectedness may also have contributed to a downplaying of the importance of support for adoptive parents' when an adopted child searches or is reunited with a birth family member. Data presented in the previous chapter suggested that reunions between adoptees and birth parents are seen as an issue primarily concerning these two parties and there is an expectation that while adopters will undertake a supportive role they will occupy the sidelines in the process. The data also showed, however, that reunions impact just as much on adopters as on adoptees and birth families forcing adopters to revisit their own biography as well as that of their adopted children and their birth families and engaging them in a re-evaluation of the meaning of kinship. This process is likely to be difficult and require support in its own right, not as an adjunct to the support offered to adoptees.

### ***6.3 Implications of the reconceptualisation of adoptive kinship and openness for policy and practice***

Notably, the new definition of openness in adoption that I offer above makes no reference to the role of adoption support agencies or the state in 'openness'. In this respect it differs from previous conceptualisations of openness which include in the continuum of openness a continuum of the level of involvement of adoption agencies (Grotevant and McRoy 1998). This definition moves away from assumptions about agency involvement and opens up the whole question of how the state, adoption support agencies and families can work together to achieve openness. Below I explore the role that policy and practice can play in facilitating openness and the gaining and retaining of family status for adoptive kinship members. I also make a distinction between service practices and family practices of openness, the former being practices which are likely to be generated by institutions or at least develop out of the adoption service culture and the latter being practices which are associated with and grow organically from day to day family life. I also examine the implications of such a differentiation for adoptive family life.

#### **6.3.1 Implications for adoption policy**

Adoption legislation and policy is relatively silent on the issue of 'openness' in adoption despite the heavy emphasis placed on the issue within adoption practice.



Openness is most frequently framed, within adoption policy and legislation, in terms of 'contact'. This term was introduced into socio-legal discourse through the Children Act 1989 which replaced 'access orders' with 'contact orders'. This Act and the Children and Adoption Act 2002, however, makes no reference to wider issues of openness such as the right of the child to disclosure of adoptive status (Bainham 2003). The Human Rights Act 1998 makes implicit reference to the issue of openness in adoption when it refers to the 'right to a family life' which has been interpreted as a right to contact (Bainham 2003). In addition, adoption legislation and policy makes no attempt to reconcile the potential conflict of rights and wishes of the adoption triad which results from the Children Act 1989's emphasis on the preeminence of the best interests of the child and the Human Rights Act 1998 requirement that the rights of the child and parents start from a point of equality (Bainham 2003). The narrow focus of legislation and policy on 'contact' and 'family life' and the ambiguity of the law leaves much room for interpretation.

There is widespread scepticism about the ability for legislation and policy to have an impact on family behaviour and adoption legislation and policy in relation to openness continues today, as it has for many years, to lag behind adoption practice. The case has been made, however, for the law to have a symbolic function, that is, a role in setting out values and ideals (Bainham 2003). There is scope for policy to spell out more clearly the range of practices that come under the term openness and to provide clearer guidance or standards of practice in relation to the promotion and support of 'openness' in its broadest sense.

### **6.3.2 Implications for adoption practice**

#### **Supporting 'family practices' and 'service practices'**

So far I have suggested that practises of openness should be considered as types of family practice which aim to express and promote kinship between members of the adoption triad and convey the value of both biological relatedness and gained family membership. These include practices such as revealing adoptive status to a child, direct and indirect contact, communicative openness and search and reunions. However, these practices of openness could also be described using an alternative language as the exchange of cards, letters or gifts, gestures of care, family discussions, story telling and family visits. When discussing practices of openness,

therefore, I would like to make a distinction between ‘service practices of openness’ and ‘family practices of openness’.

One adoptive mother’s narrative of mediated contact, told in the previous chapter, exposed the difference between family practices and service practices very clearly. At the time of the adoption, a system was put in place whereby the adoptive family send an annual letter to the adopted children’s birth mother and the children receive birthday cards from their birth mother each year. However, the adoptive mother expressed her unease about the routine arrival of birthday cards from birth family members through the formal letterbox system, yet the lack of a card to congratulate her adopted son on his GCSE exam results. Congratulations cards were received from adoptive family members and the lack of a card from the birth mother appeared to be seen by the adoptive mother as a lost opportunity to express care and, as a result, kinship between the adopted son and his birth mother was perceived to be more fragile. This example raises questions about the relationship that is possible between the adopted child and his birth mother, how this can be expressed and the ability of formal systems to enable or support this.

Examination of the role of formal support systems in such situations also raises questions about the meaning of the term ‘mediated’ adoption. Letterbox schemes are now common practice in the UK although there is little consensus about how these can best be provided (Logan 1999) and the role of services in such an exchange. As mediator, the adoption agency’s role could simply be to monitor contact to ensure compliance with arrangements put in place by a court or through a voluntary agreement between adopters and birth family members and to forestall a breakdown in arrangements. The role could also involve the maintenance of anonymity, distance, and censorship of exchanged materials to ensure that the child’s safety and wellbeing are maintained (Logan 1999). If openness is defined in terms of the expression and promotion of kinship, however, the adoption agency could have a role in ensuring that opportunities for this are maximised *despite* the need for mediation or intervention by a third party.

The potential dissonance between family practices and service practices and the impact of state intervention on family life is not just an issue for adoptive families. Sir Bob Geldof’s personal testimony of his experiences of ‘contact’ with his

biological children following his separation from his wife very eloquently describes the sharp contrast between this legally prescribed event and his previous experience of family life, family practices and parenting while living with his children. He says:

One does become like a visitor from Mars, infrequent and odd, making contact with strangers in an alien landscape with all the concomitant emotion of excitement, fear, anticipation, suspicion and dislocation... This wasn't a dad with his kids. This was an awkward visiting Uncle in false fleeting situations of amity. (Geldof 2003, p 187)

From this and the previous adoptive mother's story of indirect contact with her adopted children's birth family, we can conclude that service practices and family practices are different in character and therefore experienced in different ways. Morgan has suggested that:

Part of the complex process of the construction of family practices is that such practices often seem natural, inevitable and significant to the parties involved. (Morgan 1996, p 192)

Family practices are, therefore, characterised by their spontaneity, responsiveness and their often taken-for-granted and evolving nature. This is likely to have implications for the style of support needed to facilitate such practices if adoption support agencies are to avoid negatively affecting spontaneity and responsiveness. The examples of direct and indirect contact above suggest that legal or service practices of openness are, on the other hand, almost by necessity, more likely to be formal, routinized and procedural. Service practices, unlike family practices, are also typically done 'for' or 'to' families by a third party rather than done 'by' the family members themselves. They may be welcomed, grudgingly accepted or resisted.

As well as being different in character, however, they importantly have different functions within the lives of families separated by divorce or adoption. Previously I have suggested that an important function of practices of openness is to enable the promotion and expression of kinship. The characterisation of family practices as spontaneous, responsive and evolving and service practices as formal, routinized and procedural implies that service practices are poorly suited to the task of *expressing* kinship. However, service practices may be able to *promote* kinship and, in addition,

may be necessary in order to uphold rights, promote best interests, offer child protection and meet certain statutory requirements. I suggest that adoption support agencies have an important role in both supporting family practices of openness and putting in place service practices of openness where necessary. In order to do this effectively it is vital that the different functions of the two are clearly articulated and the various interests of members of the adoption triad are made explicit

It is possible that family practices and service practices will not always be compatible. In some circumstances service practices may need to be conducted in such a way that they are perceived to be 'not doing family'. For example, supervised contact within a local authority facility may be perceived in this way by those taking part, although, there may be very valid reasons for practicing openness in this way. Equally, the birthday gift of a mobile phone by a birth grandmother to her adopted granddaughter may be done in the spirit of expressing kinship but may make it difficult for the child's adoptive parents to ensure her safety. Another important issue for both families and services, therefore, when practicing openness is to consider what constitutes 'safe practices' of openness.

### **Supporting unrelated adults with practices of openness**

Finch's (2007) term 'displaying family' draws attention to the need for family practices to be undertaken deliberately and conspicuously, particularly where families are considered non-conventional or vulnerable in some way. This seems to fit well with the experience of adoptive parents who were highly aware of the issue of visibility and invisibility and self consciousness for all members of the adoption triad. In practice, however, the responsibility for the conspicuous display of family connectedness between birth family members and adopted children is likely to fall on the shoulders of the adults involved, in this case adoptive parents, adult members of the birth family and in some instances foster carers. This is especially the case when the children are young. To use an example from my own family, it is my husband who buys a Mother's Day card and helps our adopted children write a message to me expressing their love. While my adopted children enjoy participating in this family ritual, they are at such an age that it would not happen without the intervention of their adoptive father. The narratives of adoptive parents also indicated that annual letterbox contact relied on adoptive parents taking the initiative and encouraging adopted children to participate in this family event. The key difference between the

first example and the second, however, is that in the first situation my husband and I have a close loving relationship. Helping the children to send me a Mother's Day card is, therefore, as much an expression of his love for me as it is intended to be an expression of love by the children. In the second example, there is no such relationship between the adoptive parents and birth family. As I suggested in the previous chapter, therefore, the facilitation of kinship between adopted children and birth family members, particularly through mediated contact, is likely to be challenging for adopters with no established 'family-like connection' with the birth family. Equally, the birth family members may feel inhibited to express care and kinship by displaying family via a third person who is a relative stranger. Logan and Smith's (2005) study revealed that agencies tend to concentrate their efforts on the needs of children for contact with little emphasis on preparing adopters. Practices of openness expose the skill and sensitivity needed by adopters and birth family members to make such arrangements work. Grotevant and McRoy (1998) have described contact as a 'relationship dance'. This suggests a high level of implicit or explicit negotiation between the parties. Agencies have an important role to play in making these parties aware of the work involved, offering practical support and advice and providing training to develop skills in this area. Adoption agencies also have an important role to play in providing emotional support to adopters, adoptees and birth family members practicing some form of openness.

### **Supporting the ongoing adjustment of practices of openness**

It is usual for practices of openness to be agreed before a child is placed for adoption with an adoptive family and for these to commence when the child is placed. They are then mediated by adoption services or in some cases the expectation is that families will 'do openness' and 'do family' without further intervention. While good practice would indicate that these arrangements should be regularly reviewed, there is little empirical evidence about whether such reviews are conducted and if so, how this is done and over what period of time (Logan and Smith 2005). Such reviews are important as there is evidence that adopters agree to contact arrangements suggested by professionals in order to avoid conflict with professional before they are approved as an adopter or officially matched with a child (Logan 1999) and this may account for the tendency for contact to reduce over time in some situations (Rushton, et al. 1988). The model of adoptive kinship that I develop in the previous chapter suggests that contact will be seen as much more threatening to an adoptive parent at the start

of their relationship with an adoptive child than if asked to consider closer contact when the relationship between adopter and adoptee is more established. This may lead to lesser contact arrangements being put in place than would have been possible later in the relationship. There is also evidence to suggest that birth parents' need for information about relinquished children may become more intense as time goes on (Logan 1999). This all suggests that interim arrangements should be agreed before placement but that these should be considered provisional arrangements and should be regularly reviewed as the adoption progresses.

### **Supporting the tools of displaying family**

Finch (2007) also draws attention to the importance of tools of display within families. It was evident from the narratives of adoptive parents that objects were highly important within adoptive families. The narratives suggested that a range of tools such as reports, life story books, photographs, keepsakes, adoption related novels, personal documents and later-in-life letters all have a potentially important role within the practice of openness, particularly within the practice that I have called adoption talk. It appears that these tools may help to provide permission to talk and a springboard for dialogue about adoption within the adoptive family. Finch also specifically refers to narratives as a tool of displaying families. The concept of tools of openness seems to me to be very fertile ground for further research. The concept raises many questions for adoptive families and support agencies. It may also be helpful to differentiate between 'tools of family practices' (such as a family photograph album) and 'tools of service practices' (such as a life story book). It will also be necessary to study the culturally specific nature of such tools within diverse types of adoptive families.

### **Supporting the management of a public identity as an adoptive family**

So far we have been discussing practices of openness that take place between members of the adoptive kinship network, and are sometimes mediated by adoption support services. The data presented in the previous chapter showed, however, that practices of openness also extend into the encounters between adoptive families and members of the wider community. Adopters described some of the dilemmas they faced when attempting to negotiate public assumptions, prejudices and ignorance about adoption. They had to find a delicate balance between disclosure and holding back information in order to avoid creating problematic hidden identities for them

and their adopted children while at the same time protecting the confidentiality of their children, their children's birth families and themselves. This suggests that there is a task to be undertaken to increase awareness of adoption issues in schools and educate the public more generally to ensure that adoptive family life is acknowledged and valued as way of 'doing' family life.

A recent report revealed that one in 25 adopted children are bullied because of their adoptive status (Morgan 2006). Schools, therefore, have an important role to play in supporting adopted children and ensuring that adoptive status is not stigmatised within schools. Schools need support to recognise and deal with the consequences of setting assignments that raise issues for adopted children. At present this mainly relies on individual families or adoption practitioners working with individual teachers to increase adoption awareness. A more structural approach to tackling this as a social issue rather than a personal trouble is required.

There may also be value in tackling these issues within the context of discussions on 'family diversity' as opposed to being seen as 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. Adopters' organisations, practitioners and policy makers can have a role in ensuring that adoption is presented in a balanced and realistic way in the media. Initiatives such as National Adoption Week and the recent BBC television series about adoption are examples of good practice in this area.

#### **6.4 Summary and conclusions**

Drawing on the narratives of adoptive parents, I have challenged the conceptualisation of adoptive relations as 'fictive' and biological connectedness as 'real' kinship and have presented evidence of the potential for both to be rendered

fragile or to endure where there has been a legal adoption of a child. I have also exposed the inappropriateness of alternative concepts that have emerged in contemporary anthropology, particularly 'families we choose'. I offer a new way of conceptualising adoptive kinship, that is, '*retained families*', '*estranged families*' and '*gained families*'. The term 'gained families' describes the relationship between adoptee and adopters as it moves from being a relationship between strangers to one of intimates. The term 'retained families' describes the relationship between adoptee and birth family where the link between the two is maintained despite the legal adoption and physical separation of the parties. Finally, the term 'estranged families' describes the relationship between the adoptee and birth family where the link between the two is lost through legal adoption. In addition, the data generated from interviews with adopters also revealed that typologies of adoption as 'confidential', 'mediated' and 'fully disclosed' inadequately capture the diverse experiences of adoptive families. I have, therefore, developed a new definition of 'openness' in adoption which takes account of adopters' narratives, extends current theories of openness and incorporates the sociological concepts of 'family practices' (Morgan 1996) and 'displaying family' (Finch 2007) to adoptive relations. Finally, the implications of such a redefinition for adoption policy and practice have been explored. In considering the potential role of adoption agencies in supporting practices of openness, I have made a distinction between practices of openness as either 'service practices' of openness or 'family practices' of openness and have suggested that this differentiation must be clearly articulated if adoption support agencies are to have a positive impact on adoptive family life.

These alternative conceptions of adoptive kinship and openness in adoption raise many further questions about the future of adoption support and the resource implications of this, a topic which has been much debated since the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Hart and Luckock 2004). There is broad agreement in reports of empirical studies that adopters do not want a style of support that amounts to ongoing supervision or state surveillance (Lowe, et al. 1999; Phillips 1988) and Lowe and colleagues (1999) propose an educational model of support. Luckock and Hart (2005) however, assert that fundamental questions remain unanswered about the 'what', 'for whom' and 'how' of adoption support. While the research conducted here did not specifically set out to address this question, it does appear to offer some direction in relation to the 'how' of support. The data suggest



that adopters rely on 'learning from doing' and are reluctant to seek the help of specialist services. They see themselves as families first and adoptive families second, creating some tensions around the appropriateness of services to intervene in their lives. They place a high value on 'sameness' suggesting that more generic sources of support which avoid stigmatising or pathologising adoption may be more welcome than specialist services. Taken together these findings suggest that adoption support should aim to offer proactive and ongoing advice and support, should aim to support generic services to be more adoption aware as well as directly providing specialist provision, should intervene at the organisational or societal level as well as the individual or family level and should aim to empower individuals to act through education and support as well as therapeutic interventions.

In the final chapter of the thesis I provide an overview of the new knowledge generated through this doctoral research. I set out the strengths and limitations of the research and suggest some directions for future empirical investigation.

## **7 Summary and conclusions**

In this chapter I begin by summarising the key findings from the empirical data generated in interviews with adoptive parents. I then identify new knowledge generated by the study. I describe the main strengths and limitations of the research and offer some personal reflections on the process of undertaking the research and preparing the thesis. Finally, I suggest some issues that future adoption research could pursue.

### **7.1 Summary of findings**

The questions addressed by the research were:

1. In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic adoption changed between 1976 and 2001?
2. What personal and social challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
3. How do adoptive parents manage the challenges of adoptive family life across the lifecourse?
4. What implications do the findings of the research have for contemporary adoptive parenting and adoption theory, policy and practice?

I begin by summarising the main findings of the research in relation to these questions, starting with the first question:

- In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic adoption changed between 1976 and 2001?

The data from DFW Adoption and national statistics confirmed the general picture conveyed within the literature that adoption practice has changed substantially since the introduction of the Adoption Act (1976). These changes include a broadening of the range of people being accepted as adopters (in terms of age, marital status, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, family composition) and of the range of children considered adoptable (in terms of age, ethnicity, impairments, sibling groups).

However, the analysis also revealed that these changes have not occurred consistently across agencies and there are likely to be local variations.

Within DFW Adoption, the number of adoptions of babies has reduced substantially over the last 30 years and the majority of children adopted in contemporary times are placed with adoptive parents when they are beyond infancy. In addition, while children were predominantly placed singly by DFW Adoption in previous years, approximately half of children placed for adoption are now placed with a sibling. The gender of children placed has remained evenly split over the years. No consistent statistical data were available in order to describe the ethnicity or special needs of the children placed by DFW Adoption. From the data that were available it appears that the profile of children being placed by DFW Adoption, in terms of gender, age and those in need of single or sibling placements, broadly mirrors national adoption practices. The data also reveal some less frequent adoption activity which is worthy of research attention, such as the continued placement of 'relinquished' infants in contemporary times and the placement of a small number of considerably older children despite age being strongly associated with risk of disruption (Barth and Berry 1988; Dance and Rushton 2005b; Holloway 1997b; Rushton, et al. 2001; Smith and Howard 1991).

Turning to adopters, data from DFW Adoption show that the profile of adopters using their service between 1976 and 2001 mirrors that of the general population of adopters in the UK, that is, they are predominately white heterosexual married couples. Data from DFW Adoption also showed that the age of those adopting children has risen over the years and that this in line with data from national adoption surveys and a general societal trend towards later child-bearing (Babb, et al. 2006). However, the profile of adopters using DFW Adoption's service between 1976 and 2001 differed in some respects from the national profile. Some important minority categories of adopter such as foster carer adopters, single adopters, adopters from minority ethnic communities and gay and lesbian adopters were either few in number or absent. The low numbers of adopters from minority ethnic communities is a particular concern because of the proportionally higher numbers of children from minority ethnic communities requiring new families and the preference for matching these children with adopters of the same ethnicity.

These differences highlight the need for adoption researchers to pay attention to local variations in the changing profiles of adopters and adoptees rather than making the assumption that general trends apply consistently across the UK. These variations may have implications for sampling when conducting adoption research and for achieving locally sensitive dissemination and implementation of research findings. The limitations of the transferability of the findings of this research are discussed in a later section.

Together the national and local data provide confirmation that adoptions no longer predominantly involve the placement of healthy white infants with childless couples. They present a picture of the age range of children available for adoption increasing, the numbers of children from minority ethnic communities being placed for adoption remaining relatively high as a proportion of all adoptions and more children being placed as part of sibling groups. The narratives of adoptive parents provided some additional insights into the demands that these changes have placed on the families created through adoption and on adoption agencies. One important finding of the study is that it is too simplistic to suggest that adoptive family life has become more difficult for recent adopters as a result of the changing profile of children requiring adoptive families. Instead this research suggests that adoptive family life has consistently presented challenges to adopters throughout the lifecourse of an adoption but that these challenges have changed as adoption discourse has shifted over the years.

For the family participating in this study who adopted relinquished babies two years apart in the 1980s, any discussion about adoption was to some extent limited by the meagre information available to the adoptive parents about their children's birth family and the circumstances of their adoption. For the family who adopted two siblings from the public care system in 2001, information was more available in the form of life story books and the possibility of ongoing contact with the children's older siblings. In the first family, the children had no memories of their birth family as they were adopted at just a few weeks old. In the second family, the children had experienced neglect and hardship and the older child had a need to discuss his memories of this with his adoptive parents. In each case this provided different challenges for the children and their adoptive parents. In the first family, the adoption took place at a time when much less was known about searching and

reunions between adoptees and birth family members and openness was narrowly interpreted as telling the child they were adopted. Over the years, therefore, the couple may have had to re-evaluate their expectations of future contact between their children and their birth family and recently has experienced the reunion of their adopted daughter and her birth family. In the second family direct contact was an expectation and the couple agreed to support the children with this. However, the reality of direct contact proved to be very challenging and this led them to review the arrangement. The second family, unlike the first, has also had to accommodate the interventions of professionals in their family life.

There were also some striking similarities between these two families' accounts of adoptive family life despite having adopted children almost twenty years apart. Although the process of being matched and introduced to the children was very different the arrival of the children was for both families a major life change that required a period of adjustment. Life was then mostly taken up with rather ordinary family concerns such as the children's schools, hobbies, friends, however, in both families the children's adoption continued to be a defining issue which was regularly discussed. Together the statistics and the stories provide some insight into the enduring complexity of adoptive family life over the last thirty years.

I will now summarise the findings of the research in relation to the second and third questions:

- What personal and social challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
- How do adoptive parents manage the challenges of adoptive family life across the lifecourse?

The narratives of adoptive parents generated through this research suggest that the core and ongoing challenge facing adoptive parents is to find a unique way of 'doing' adoptive family life which acknowledges the importance both of biological ties and legal kinship. This was found to be the case regardless of the year of the adoption and continues to challenge these families today. From this core challenge, three tasks emerge, that is, developing and maintaining family relationships between adopters and adoptees where none previously existed, finding a place for birth

relatives within the adoptive kinship model and developing a positive identity as a non conventional family.

Dealing first with the relationship between adopters and adoptees, the narratives of adopters described the work undertaken within the family to establish and maintain a sense of intimacy, authenticity and enduring solidarity throughout the lifecourse of the adoption. Adopters build a sense of family belonging through demonstrating commitment to the child in the face of adversity or barriers, exercising agency, displaying care and competency as a parent, undertaking shared activities as a family and developing a sense of shared history. However, while adopters' narratives exposed a belief that adoptive kinship can be as strong and enduring as biological kinship, it appears that this is not guaranteed. Adopters must also find ways of managing potential threats to their legitimacy as a family. These threats become more apparent at points of transition in the lifecourse of an adoption such as the handover of children from foster carers to adopters, the parenting of the child before the legal adoption, and when adopted children approach or reach adulthood.

Turning now to the role of the birth family in adoptive family life, the evidence from adopters' narratives suggests that birth family members continue to hold a significant place within the adoptive family even within confidential adoptions. However, the meaning of the birth family connection varies from individual to individual and across the adoptee's lifecourse. The data also suggest that biological kinship can be diminished or lose some meaning without the accompanying practices that constitute kinship. These practices include direct contact but are not limited to this as it appears that kinship can be retained through a number of other practices including adoption talk and gestures of care or intimacy between birth family members and adoptees. Together these findings suggest that it is possible for both biological and adoptive kinship to be experienced as real, fictive, fragile or solid and both require ongoing work in order to maintain a sense of family belonging.

Finally, I turn to the task of developing a positive identity as a non-conventional family. The narratives of adopters uncovered a complex picture of identity work undertaken by both adopters and adoptees at three levels:

- at the level of individual identity or biography;
- within the private realm of the family; and

- at the level of community/society.

At the level of the individual, identity work is ongoing throughout the lifecourse and the biographies of adopter, adoptee and birth family are interdependent. Family practices within the privacy of the family home require adoptive family members to revisit not only their personal biographies but also their identity as a family and to ask 'what sort of family are we? Within a more public arena adoptive families are both celebrated and challenged. Adopters' narratives conveyed the use of selective disclosure in order to manage the discomfort this can create. However, using this strategy, it is difficult to achieve a balance between avoiding the provision of too little information to those outside the family, which may lead to misinformation, and avoiding the provision of too much information, which may threaten confidentiality.

Adopters' narratives also conveyed the central importance of adoption talk as a family practice within adoptive families. However, the data revealed the complex and sensitive nature of adoption talk and the dilemmas faced by adoptive parents. These include 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. Adopters described ways in which they make these challenges and dilemmas more manageable through, for example, the telling of child-friendly stories, finding openings into adoption discussions, drawing on other people's stories and becoming emotionally attuned to the (un)discussable within the relationship.

I will now summarise the findings relating to the last research question, that is:

- What implications do the findings of the research have for contemporary adoptive parenting and adoption theory, policy and practice?

Drawing on current research evidence, contemporary theories and the findings of this research, I offer a new way of conceptualising adoptive kinship as '*retained families*', '*estranged families*' and '*gained families*'. The term '*gained families*' describes the relationship between adoptee and adopters as it moves from being a relationship between strangers to one of intimates. The term '*retained families*' describes the relationship between adoptee and birth family where the link between the two is maintained despite the legal adoption and physical separation of the

parties. Finally, the term 'estranged families' describes the relationship between the adoptee and birth family where the link between the two is lost through legal adoption. I also develop a new definition of 'openness' in adoption as:

a diverse group of *family practices* which both *express* and *promote* kinship between members of the adoption triad. These practices convey the value of both biological relatedness and gained family membership. They are sensitively negotiated and continually adjusted in order to respond to individuals' changing needs and expectations.

I suggest that adoption policy should play a greater role in defining openness, spelling out more clearly the range of practices that come under the term and providing clearer guidance or standards of practice in relation to the promotion and support of 'openness' in its broader sense. In considering the potential role of adoption agencies in supporting practices of openness, I make a distinction between 'service practices of openness' and 'family practices of openness' in order to provide a conceptual framework for service interventions in this area. I also suggest that sensitive interventions require an understanding of the tools of openness, such as stories, correspondence or photograph albums, and a commitment to regular review and ongoing support for families. Finally I highlight the important role of adoption agencies in educating schools and communities about adoption issues.

## **7.2 Summary of new knowledge generated**

Through an analysis of narratives of adoptive parents I have been able to take forward the adoption research agenda in a number of ways. The research has added the voice of adoptive parents to previous evidence provided by adoptees of the lack of fit of anthropological concepts of kinship, such as 'fictive' and 'real', with real life experiences of adoptive kinship (Carsten 2000; Modell 1994). The research has also demonstrated that the conceptualisation of kinship as 'families we choose' (Weston 1991) which has become the main theoretical alternative to the concept of 'fictive' and 'real' is also unfitting in the case of adoptive family life. Instead, I develop a new conceptualisation of adoptive kinship from the narratives of adoptive parents, that of '*retained families*', '*estranged families*' and '*gained families*'. In relation to theories of openness, my analysis of the narratives of adopters alongside a critique of current conceptualisations of openness (Brodzinsky 2005; Grotevant and McRoy 1998) and an appreciation of contemporary sociological theories of family (Finch



2007; Morgan 1996) have led me to a redefinition of openness. This redefinition attempts to convey the complexity of adoptive relations and provide a much more expansive approach to the research of openness than was offered by previous definitions of openness as a continuum (Grotevant and McRoy 1998).

While the changes that have occurred in adoption policy and practice are well documented, to date, research has done little to increase understandings of the impact of these changes across the lifecourse of an adoption. The influence of contemporary adoption discourse on long established adoptive families created in an era of confidentiality has also been given little attention. The research has shown that birth family members had a strong psychological presence throughout some adoptive families' lives rendering the 'as if' model of adoptive family life (Modell 1994) unsustainable. The lifecourse approach has also challenged the orthodoxy that adoptive kinship is formed through the legal mechanism of adoption. Instead, the data makes explicit the ongoing process of the making and remaking kinship which takes place within adoptive families as events unfold and individuals revisit the meaning of adoptive status for themselves and their family. This evidence strengthens calls for the ongoing support of adoptive families to be given greater priority (Luckock and Hart 2005).

Previous research has uncovered some potential benefits of both structural and communicative openness for members of the adoption triad (Berge, et al. 2006; Brodzinsky 2006; Grotevant and McRoy 1998; Howe and Feast 2003; Raynor 1980; Silverstein and Demick 1994a) and some studies have exposed the very challenging nature of openness or contact (Logan and Smith 2005) even where there is strong support for its benefits or a belief in openness as a moral imperative. This research has added depth to the understanding of the challenging nature of openness through its examination of practices of openness through the lens of contemporary theories of kinship and family. The formulation of the what works question as 'what makes adoptive family life work' in this research has also shifted the focus of attention from outcomes of adoption and openness to the process of managing challenges and in so doing this research has been able to explore in depth adoptive parents' day to day experiences of adoptive family life in an era of increasing openness, the challenges this presents and the strategies adopted by them to manage these challenges. In particular, a detailed account is offered of the challenges faced by adopters and the

management strategies employed in relation to adoption talk within the adoptive family. I also develop the terms family-builder, curator, storyteller and social navigator to describe the roles that have emerged for adoptive parents as a result of the great challenges that are presented to them in an era of openness in adoption.

Finally, in order to add to the 'what works' agenda within adoption policy and practice I make specific reference to the implications of these findings for adoption policy and practice. While the research does not attempt to develop an action plan for adoption policy and practice as such, it does raise issues in such a way as to encourage policy makers and practitioners to question their assumptions about adoptive family life thereby forcing a re-evaluation of orthodoxies that exist within adoption policy and practice.

### ***7.3 Strengths and limitations of research***

The quantitative element of this research has usefully confirmed the trends in adoption practice that have been previously identified and provides a context for the qualitative exploration of adoptive family life. The main strengths of this research, however, are apparent in the analysis that has been developed from the qualitative data generated in narrative interviews with adoptive parents. The value of the narrative approach taken lies in its ability to access meanings, explore motivations and understand these within an historical, cultural and political context (Mischler 1986; Riessman 1993; Riessman 2008). The inductive approach taken to narratology has led to the development of new concepts that can be used to explain and explore the phenomenon of adoptive family life. This inductive approach to theory development in the field of adoption research has been somewhat lacking to date. The use of a lifecourse approach has also placed adoption within the context of a life long journey rather than simply a one-off event when a child is placed in the care of adoptive parents (Freeark, et al. 2005; Rosenberg 1992) and has emphasised the importance of biography and biographical disruption within adoptive kinship (Bury 1982; Carsten 2000).

Much has been written about the power of narratives to promote social change (Personal Narratives Group 1989; Plummer 1995). An emphasis has been placed in the literature on the transformative potential of story construction and narration at both a political and personal level. It has been claimed that narrative production can

play a role in helping an individual to make sense of a life experience, transition or trauma and unexpected or disordered experiences (Riessman 1993). Smart (2006) in her work with children whose parents were divorcing suggested that narrative construction provides an opportunity to stand outside one's situation, to evaluate it and to generalise lessons in order to guide future behaviour. Narrative inquiry has also been closely associated with feminist and other emancipatory research models (Personal Narratives Group 1989). Ben Okri puts it simply when he says:

*"If we change the stories we live by quite possibly we change our lives".*  
(Okri 1997p. 46)

I can only speculate at this point about the transformative potential of this research although the enthusiasm with which DFW Adoption, the partner in the ESRC CASE award has taken up the ideas from the research as they have emerged provides some indication of the research's potential for application across practice settings in the UK.

The study does inevitably have some limitations. It is important to acknowledge that it has little to say about black adoptive family life, gay and lesbian adoptive parenting, disabled adoptive parenting and single parent adoptive family life as the voluntary adoption agency's service users, even in recent years, were overwhelmingly white non-disabled married couples and applications by gay and lesbian couples were not considered by the agency until 2003, a period which falls outwith the focus of this study. Further research is needed to address this limitation. Also, the study has focused specifically on adoptive parents' experiences. This decision was not intended to diminish the important perspective that adopted children and adults and birth family members can offer but was made both on pragmatic grounds as well as being guided by the review of literature undertaken when the research proposal was prepared. Further research is needed to seek the perspective of these other two members of the adoption triad.

## ***7.4 Personal reflections on the process of developing the thesis***

The production of the thesis has inevitably been a personal journey as much as it has been a research training experience. Throughout undertaking the doctoral research I have found myself questioning many of the assumptions I held about myself as an adoptive parent and my adoptive family. In particular, the process has brought to my attention the great complexity of issues and interests that permeate adoptive family life. This in turn has led me to approach parenthood and family life in new and perhaps less naïve ways. Whether my loss of naivety in some matters proves to be helpful or unhelpful remains to be seen. Nevertheless change was inevitable and as a result of undertaking the research I am currently renegotiating the arrangements for indirect contact between my adopted children, myself and the children's birth family.

I am in no doubt about the value of this reflexive process to the process of the research itself. As well as my personal experience as an adoptive parent, the research has been inevitably influenced by encounters with others' experiences. I have read a number of novels, biographies and newspaper articles on the topic of adoption throughout the period of the research and have attempted to transform personal revelations that have resulted from my intellectual and emotional engagement with these resources into deeper interpretations and insights (Finlay 1998).

## ***7.5 Potential for future research***

Above I suggest a need for further research to establish the relevance of these findings for birth family members, adoptees and black, gay and lesbian and disabled adopters. In addition, the findings suggest a number of important avenues for new research.

Having established the potential usefulness of the concepts 'displaying family' (Finch 2007), 'family practices' (Morgan 1996) and 'service practices' this opens up a number of possible research questions to pursue further. For example:

- How can families and support agencies maximise opportunities for family practices of openness?
- How do we assess the risks and benefits of family practices of openness?

- How do we minimise any negative impacts of service practices?
- What are the barriers to practices of openness (personal, structural, cultural)?

As I suggested in the previous chapter, I also believe that the concept of 'tools of openness' and the culturally specific nature of such tools would be very fertile ground for further research. In conducting such research, it may be helpful to differentiate between 'tools of family practices' (such as a family photograph album) and 'tools of service practices' (such as a life story book).

Several issues relating to the role of siblings in family process have arisen from this study. This would be a fruitful area for further research especially as sibling placements are increasing in number and there is evidence that sibling placements may be more stable than single placements yet little evidence about why this may be the case (Rushton, et al. 2001). This study suggests that sibling kinship may provide stability in the early days of placement. One explanation may be that kinship practices between siblings are brought into the new setting creating anchors of familiarity and less 'strangeness'. This hypothesis would require testing. The study has also shown that siblings have great influence over the practice of adoption talk within adoptive families. There would be much to learn from research looking at the negative and positive influences of siblings on such practices of openness.

Many of the issues relating to openness in adoption raised in this research appear to be particularly problematic in relation to mediated adoptions. Although mediated contact is the most common contact arrangement in contemporary adoption, it has been the subject of research much less frequently than direct contact between adoptees and birth family members. This is perhaps because mediated contact is considered less controversial and less of a risk to the wellbeing of a child or the stability of a placement than fully disclosed adoption arrangements. However, this doctoral study and others (Logan 1999) show that mediated contact is not a straightforward option and there is a danger that opportunities for members of the adoption triad to benefit from mediated contact are being lost due to a lack of clarity about the purpose of mediated contact and the best way to encourage, support and facilitate such contact. It also indicates that the role of adoption support agencies in mediated contact is highly ambiguous and further research in this area would be of great value.

The findings also indicate that the impact of reunions between adoptees and birth families are currently understood within a model of openness as dual connectedness (Brodzinsky 2005; Neil 2007). The rethinking of openness as a triad of connectedness suggests a new approach is needed to search and reunion research which views the role of adoptive parents as more than one of support for the process taking place between adoptee and birth family member. Instead there needs to be an equal emphasis on the experiences of all members of the adoption triad. As more children who were separated from birth parents as a result of abuse or neglect as opposed to being relinquished babies, reach adulthood, this area of practice and experience will also need to be explored through research.

While this study has acknowledged the gendered nature of adoptive family life, it has not been within the scope of the study to analyse data in terms of gender differences. However, there is already some evidence of gender differences in practices of openness. For example, Logan (1999) has highlighted the fact that birth fathers were much less involved in letterbox contacts than birth mothers. This was also the case for adoptive fathers. The study of gender differences would, therefore, be another valuable approach to research on openness in adoption.

These potential areas for future research attention suggest an interesting time ahead for adoption theory, policy and practice development.

## **8 Appendices**

8.1 Appendix A - Table summarising outcome studies

8.2 Appendix B – Letter of invitation to participate in the study

8.3 Appendix C – Study information Leaflet

8.4 Appendix D – Information and consent forms for interviewees

8.5 Appendix E– Interview topic guide and stimulation cards

## 8.1 Appendix A - Table summarising outcome studies

Table 1: Key studies using disruption as an outcome measure of permanent placements of children in public care\*

Authors	Date	Focus	Sample	Age at placement	Design	Point(s) of data collection post placement	Disruption rates**
Fein et al	1983	Range of placement types	187 children	Infancy+	Prospective longitudinal	4 months, 6-10 months and 12-16 months	3% (adoptive placements)
Nelson	1985	Adoption	177 families	Infancy +	Retrospective cross-sectional	1 to 4 years	3% *** (adoptions)
Barth et al	1988	Adoption	926 children	3+	Retrospective cross-sectional	1 to 4 years	10% (adoptive placements)
O'Hara et al	1988	Adoption and Long term fostering	335 children	2+	Retrospective cross-sectional	1 to 6 years	11% (all placements)
Tizard and Hodges (follows up Tizard 1977)	1990	Adoption and return to birth family	65 children	2+	Prospective longitudinal	2 years 6 years 14 years	8% (adoptive placements)
Borland et al (follows up O'Hara et al 1988)	1991	Adoption and permanent foster care	194	2+	Retrospective Cross-sectional	Up to 7 years post placement	20.6% (all placements)
Strathclyde Regional Council Social Work Department	1991	Permanent placements	117 placements	Infancy+	Prospective Cross-sectional	3 years post placement	43% (all placements) ****



Authors	Date	Focus	Sample	Age at placement	Design	Point(s) of data collection post placement	Disruption rates**
Fratter et al (see also Thoburn and Rowe 1988)	1991	Adoption and permanent fostering	1165 placements	Infancy+	Retrospective Cross-sectional	18 months to 6.5 years	21% (all placements)
Rushton et al (follows up 1988 study)	1993	Adoption and long term fostering	18 boys	5-9	Prospective longitudinal	1 month 6 months 12 months 5 and 8 years	0% (adoptive placements)
Holloway	1997	Adoption and Long term fostering	234 placements 129 adoptive	Infancy+	Retrospective Cross-sectional	3 to 5 years	20% (all placements) 2% (adoptive placements)
Quinton et al	1998	Adoption and Long term fostering	61 families 49 adoptive	5-9	Prospective longitudinal	1 month, 6 months and 12months	5 - 26% (all placements)
Thoburn et al	2000	Adoption and permanent foster care	297 children of minority ethnic origin	Infancy +	Retrospective Cross sectional	10 to 15 years after placement	24% (all placements)
Rushton et al	2001	Adoption and Long term fostering	133 siblings	5-11	Prospective longitudinal	3 months and 12 months	10 - 21% (all placements)
Rushton et al	2004	Adoption and Long term fostering	99 children	5-11	Prospective longitudinal	Mean of 6 years post placement	23% (all placements)

Authors	Date	Focus	Sample	Age at placement	Design	Point(s) of data collection post placement	Disruption rates**
Selwyn et al	2005	Adoption and Long term fostering	130 children	3+	Prospective longitudinal	Mean of 7 years post placement	17-23% (adoptive placements)
Sinclair et al	2005	Various placements	596 children	Infancy +	Retrospective longitudinal	Minimum 2 years post adoption	9-11% (adoptive placements) *****

\*All children had 'special needs' whether related to age, disability, emotional or behavioural difficulties, ethnicity or care history.

\*\*Where a figure is given for disruption rates in adoptive placements specifically, this is included in the table. Where the figure reported is for all placements this is quoted.

\*\*\*Figures quoted are for dissolutions post legalisation only.

\*\*\*\*10% of placements in the Strathclyde sample were defined as 'permanent placements' and yet described as 'temporary' or 'trial' placements. The high disruption rate should therefore be seen within this context.

\*\*\*\*\*The majority of adoptions were by foster carers rather than strangers.

## **8.2 Appendix B – Letter of invitation to participate in the study**



Chris Jones  
School of Applied Social Science  
Durham University

Dear .....,

### **Research Study: What makes adoptive family life work?**

I am undertaking research looking at the challenges and rewards of family life for adoptive fathers and mothers. The study is entitled 'What makes adoptive family life work?' I have enclosed an information sheet about the study. My main supervisor is Simon Hackett of Durham University. The research is being supported by DFW Adoption, formerly known as Durham Family Welfare Association. I am also an adoptive parent and so have a personal interest in finding out more about the things that help and hinder adoptive family life.

As part of the study, I am organising a series of interviews with adoptive fathers and adoptive mothers who had children placed with them through DFW Adoption between 1976 and 2001. Your name and address was given to me by DFW Adoption and I would like to invite you to take part in an interview.

The purpose of the interview is to hear adoptive mothers' and fathers' views and experiences of adoptive family life, the challenges you and your children face and to learn about the resources that adoptive parents draw upon when they and their children need practical and emotional support. If you are able to take part in the study, I will interview each of you on a one-to-one basis at a time and place that suits you. Travel expenses can be paid, if necessary.

Each interview will last up to two hours. In order to make sure that I can represent people's views accurately, I will record interviews on tape and then put them into a written format. The information you and other adoptive parents provide in interviews

will be summarised and analysed in order to build a picture of adoptive family life and draw some conclusions about what makes adoptive family life work. The information you give me will be treated confidentially and kept in secure storage. The recording and written materials will only be seen or heard by me and my supervisors at Durham University. Your personal comments and views will NOT be shared with DFW Adoption, though the overall lessons learned from the study will be fed back to DFW Adoption and to other people who work in the adoption field. Your name will not appear in any way in my study and you will not be identifiable to anyone who reads about my project. All tape recordings of interviews and my notes will be destroyed when the study is complete.

I am planning to hold approximately 30 interviews in total with adoptive mothers and fathers at many different stages of family life. Some will be the parents of young children while others will have teenage or adult children in their family. When the interviews have been completed, the findings from them all will be summarised in a short report which will be made available to you and other interviewees. You will then be invited to attend a meeting to discuss the report with the other interviewees and the researcher and comment on the findings.

I will call you in the next few days to answer any questions that you may have about the study and to find out if you are able to take part in an interview. If you need to contact me you can leave a telephone message on ..... or you can reach me by email at .....

I hope you will be able to contribute your time and views to this study as I believe it is very important that adoptive parents have a say about how practitioners and policy makers can best support adoption. I shall be very grateful for any time you can give me to help other adoptive parents in this way.

Yours

Chris Jones  
PhD Student

### **8.3 Appendix C – Study information Leaflet**

## **What makes adoptive family life work?**



### **Introduction**

Adoption is a unique way of creating or extending a family and offers many challenges as well as rewards for adoptive parents. Adoption has been the subject of much research yet little is known about the ways that adoptive families cope with parenting challenges and make adoption a success day to day and year to year throughout childhood and into adulthood. This study aims to fill this gap in our knowledge.

### **Who is involved?**

The research is being undertaken by Chris Jones, a PhD student based in the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University. She is working on the research in partnership with DFW Adoption, a leading voluntary adoption agency in the North East of England. Chris is the main contact for the study and she is being supported by Simon Hackett and Helen Charnley of Durham University and Margaret Bell of DFW Adoption. The study is taking place between October 2005 and September 2008.

### **What questions are being addressed?**

The research aims to address four key questions:

1. In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through adoption changed over the last 30 years?
2. What challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?

3. What resources have adoptive families drawn upon, developed or had made available to them, in what circumstances, and how effective have these resources been in supporting adoptive family life?
4. What lessons can be drawn from adopters' views and experiences to shape policy and practice?

### **How will the research be carried out?**

The research will have four stages:

- ◆ a review will be undertaken of the existing research, policy and practice literature to find out what we know about 'what makes adoption successful';
- ◆ an analysis of DFW Adoption case records relating to children placed for adoption between 1976 and 2001 will be undertaken to develop a profile of adopters and adopted children in that period;
- ◆ approximately 15 adoptive fathers and 15 adoptive mothers will be interviewed on a one-to-one basis to explore their experiences of family life, the challenges they have faced and the resources they have developed to achieve successful adoptive family life;
- ◆ finally, adoptive parents who take part in the interviews will be invited to attend a discussion group to discuss the findings of the interviews and the lessons from these for policy and practice.

### **Where can I find out more?**

For more information please contact Chris Jones at:

Address:

Telephone:

Email:

## **8.4 Appendix D – Information and consent forms for interviewees**

### **What makes adoptive family life work?**

Research information sheet and consent form  
Interview participants

#### **What is the research about?**

Adoption is a unique way of creating or extending a family and offers many challenges as well as rewards for adoptive parents. Adoption has been the subject of much research yet little is known about the ways that adoptive families cope with parenting challenges and make adoption a success day to day and year to year throughout childhood and into adulthood. This study aims to fill this gap in our knowledge. The research is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

#### **Who is working on the research?**

The research is being undertaken by Chris Jones, a PhD student based in the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University. She is working on the research in partnership with DFW Adoption, a leading voluntary adoption agency in the North East of England. Chris is the main contact for the study and she is being supported by Helen Charnley and Simon Hackett of Durham University and Margaret Bell of DFW Adoption. The study is taking place between October 2005 and September 2008.

#### **What questions are being addressed?**

The research aims to address four key questions:

1. In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through adoption changed over the last 30 years?

2. What challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
3. What resources have adoptive families drawn upon, developed or had made available to them, in what circumstances, and how effective have these resources been in supporting adoptive family life?
4. What lessons can be drawn from adopters' views and experiences to shape policy and practice?

### **How will the research be carried out?**

The research will have five stages:

- ◆ a review will be undertaken of the existing research, policy and practice literature to find out what we know about 'what makes adoption successful';
- ◆ an analysis of DFW Adoption case records relating to children placed for adoption between 1976 and 2001 will be undertaken to develop a profile of adopters and adopted children in that period;
- ◆ approximately 20 adoptive fathers and 20 adoptive mothers will be interviewed on a one-to-one basis to explore their experiences of family life, the challenges they have faced and the resources they have developed to achieve successful adoptive family life;
- ◆ adoptive parents who take part in the interviews will be invited to attend a discussion group to discuss the findings of the interviews and the lessons from these for policy and practice;
- ◆ finally, a postal survey will be sent to 350 adopters randomly selected from DFW Adoption case records who adopted a child or children between April 1976 and March 2001 to follow up issues raised in interviews.

### **How can you help?**

We are seeking adoptive parents who are willing to take part in an interview and discuss their experiences of adoption. The purpose of the interview is to hear adoptive parents' views and experiences of adoptive family life, the challenges they and their children face day to day and to learn about the resources that adopters draw upon when they and their children need practical and emotional support. Approximately 40 interviews are planned in total with adoptive mothers and fathers at many different stages of family life. Some will be the parents of young children while others will have teenagers or



adult children in their family. The interview will last approximately two hours and can take place at a time and place that suits you. Travel expenses can be paid, if necessary.

### **What will happen to the information that is collected?**

The interview will be tape-recorded and then notes written from the recording. The information you and other adoptive parents provide in interviews will be analysed alongside information collected in discussion groups and the postal questionnaire. Together these sources of information will help us to build a picture of adoptive family life and draw some conclusions about what makes adoptive family life work and how practitioners and policy makers can better support adoption. The information you give will be treated confidentially. The recording and notes will be kept in secure storage and only be seen or heard by the researcher and her colleagues at Durham University. Your personal comments and views will NOT be shared with DFW Adoption though the overall lessons learned from adopters' experiences will be fed back to the agency. As you will appreciate, the only situation in which confidentiality will not be guaranteed is if in the unlikely event that an interviewee provides information which leads the researcher to believe that a child is at risk of abuse or significant harm. Reports, papers and journal articles will be prepared as the project progresses which will summarise what we are learning through the project. Your name will not appear in these and you will not be identifiable. Tape recordings and notes will be destroyed when the study is complete.

**Please note:** you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you would like any further information before deciding to take part please contact Chris Jones on 0191 334 1230 or by email at [c.a.jones@durham.ac.uk](mailto:c.a.jones@durham.ac.uk)

## Consent form – interview participants

I agree to the following (please tick):

To take part in a two hour interview about adoptive family life

I understand that (please tick):

I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The information I give will be treated confidentially (except where child protection is an issue) and will only be seen by the researchers from Durham University. My personal comments will not be discussed with DFW Adoption.

All information I give will be made anonymous. It will be summarised along with information given by other adoptive parents and my name will not appear in any reports, papers or journal articles produced by the researchers.

Print Name .....

Signed ..... Date .....

**8.5 Appendix E– Interview topic guide and stimulation cards**

- **Tell me the story of how you came together as a family.**
- **What was life like in those early days.**
- **Bring me up to date now. How old are the children and what's life like now?**
- **We've talked about life when you first became a family and life now. Can you tell me about some of things that have happened in between now and then - the ups and downs, highs and lows, memories and milestone?**

**FAMILY**

**SUCCESS**

**ACHIEVEMENTS**

**CHALLENGES**

**OPENNESS –  
INSIDE AND OUT**

**ORDINARY OR  
DIFFERENT**

**SUPPORT**

**?**

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