Openness in adoption and its impact on adoptive identity

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Who and what are adoptees curious about? (Wrobel and Dillon, 2009)

- Three quarters of adopted adolescents were moderately or very curious about their birth parents.

Top 5 questions:
- Reasons for placing
- Birth siblings
- Appearance/physical characteristics
- How they are doing
- Personalities/behaviour
Survey: reasons for adoption

- Baby placed by parent/s
- Complex request
- Adopted from care
Children’s feeling about adoption in middle childhood (Neil, 2012)

• Most children felt integrated into their adoptive families
• Some children were starting to think about meaning of birth family and adoption
  – Birth parents ‘couldn’t cope’ – seen in terms of health, age or finances
  – Some strong themes of rejection or loss
  – Few narratives about abuse or neglect, but this main reason for adoption
  – Role of social services not referred to – adoption seen as parents decision
  – Themes of social stigma
Narrative identity: stories about the self

• Narrative identity: “the internalised and evolving story of the self that a person constructs in order to make sense and meaning out of his or her life” (McAdams, 2011 p.99).

• McAdams: auto-biographical storytelling is related to:
  – Theory of mind/perspective taking
  – Memories; knowledge of ‘facts’
  – Opportunities to recollect and tell stories – ‘scaffolding’
  – Cognitive development
  – Social & cultural forces
The role of parents/carers in identity formation

• Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011 – links between contact and narrative identity development in emerging adults mediated by *adoptive family conversation*

• Von Korff et al, 2010: adoptive mothers as ‘identity agents’
  – Expressed concerns about child’s identity, developed and acted on gaols to meet needs
  – Wove complex family relationships into everyday life
  – Used conversation to guide identity development
Exploring identity in interviews

• **Depth** = ability to think about or actively engage in seeking information *(Low depth = Story that is ‘stuck’, unexplored)*

• **Consistency** = how well does the ‘theory of self’ fit together? Statements synthesise and pull the theory together. *(Lack of consistency = story that has contradictions, does not ‘make sense’).*

• **Flexibility** = ability to see things as others might see them. *(Inflexibility = rigid story, only seen from participant’s perspective)*
Adoptive identity

Cohesive

Who am I? Why was I adopted?

Developing

Unexplored

Fragmented
Unexplored adoptive identity (n=5)

• very simple accounts of why they were adopted (low exploration)
• ‘at ease’; their story made sense for them
• saw adoption entirely as a positive experience
• unquestioning acceptance of adoptive parents
• views of birth relatives unquestioning

I just know that she couldn’t look after me, that’s about it. [And any idea why she couldn’t look after you?] I don’t know really.
Cohesive identity (n=16)

- Why? Concise stories that had been ‘worked on’, supported by examples and told from multiple perspectives
- Strong identity as member of adoptive family
- Reflective about role of birth family
- Adoption seen as a ‘better life’
- Not tormented by information gaps
All I know is when my birth mum was born, her mum didn’t have a very good upbringing so didn’t really know how to look after her...so when it came to having kids she didn’t know how to bring us up...she mixed with the wrong people and with drugs ...it was safer for us to be adopted. [Meeting my birth mum], it just kind of made me understand in a way why she did it and that ...even though she’s part of my life, she’s not a big part of my life.
To be honest I think there is an element of my identity that I don’t really know about, but it doesn't really bother me that that is the case. I personally think anyone who is adopted is, to an extent, going to feel like a jigsaw with the missing piece. It is something major in your life that has happened and you can never change that. But for me the piece that is missing isn't a part that matters, my jigsaw looks fine without it. I believe everyone is different... To me being different is normal.
Developing identity (n=5)

• Questions about adoption not fully resolved - unanswered questions, partial explanations and feelings of being uninformed: “there’s got to be more to it”

• Feelings of wanting and needing to find out more

• Uncertain, unsettled or contradictory feelings about the birth family

• Adoptive families clearly seen as “my family”
I have sometimes been asleep. I’ve actually woken up or sort of cried in my sleep and I do imagine my dad in my mind...it’s really upset me because of the fact that he’s not living...I know he wouldn’t have been able to look after me because of his mental health issue, but I have occasionally been pretty upset about it ... I keep wanting to ask ‘how did my dad die?’ or so many things like that or ‘am I able to get in contact with my birth mum?’ or ‘how would I go about doing that?’ I do tend to ask these questions again because I just like to reminisce on those thoughts.
Fragmented identity (n=6)

- narratives lacked coherence and were often rigid, ‘stuck’ or ‘going round in circles’
- some people avoided exploration of adoption
- strong presence of negative feelings such as anger, sadness or loss - at life in general, or specifically about adoption
- two young people had a shaky sense of belonging in adoptive family
- ambivalent feelings about birth family
- being adopted a source of stigma or emotional turbulence
I have no idea [why I was adopted], it could be completely different. That’s the story that I’ve been told, but I have no idea. It’s that uncertainty which hurts.

What does adoption mean to you?
I would say um just the word, not necessarily my opinion; I would say ‘I was taken away from my birth parents to have a better life’. It doesn’t necessarily mean that’s how it happened or that’s what happened...I don’t know if you understand the degree that it bothers me...and it can bother me daily, even now, its like a burn
Was openness linked to young people’s identity development?

• 84% of those with ‘cohesive’ identity were having birth family contact (versus 44% of others)

• Levels of adoptive parent adoption communication openness higher for those in ‘cohesive identity’ group, and lowest in ‘fragmented’ group.

• Key role of adoptive parents in facilitating identity development though communication and contact
Say I was in the car with my mum going shopping, it might pop into my head and I'd be like “what is it that my birth mum has?” And she'd say "schizophrenia" and I'd ask "so why couldn't she look after me?" And it would go on from there.
What other factors might affect identity development?

• Overall development
• Cognitive development
• Gender
• Young person’s level of interest/curiosity
• Young person’s attitude to life
• Pre-placement history
• Age
Key suggestions for practice

• Ensure realistic background information is available to child and adoptive parents.
• Support for adoptive parents in talking about difficult topics.
• Help people to use contact as way to achieve effective information exchange.
• Support adoptive parents in using contact as a communication opportunity rather than just a meeting or letter.
• Support for birth relatives in answering children’s questions; help with knowing what to say in contact letters, meetings and letters for later life; help for grandparents in talking with child about problems of birth parents.