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## **LAST VERSION OF SUBMITTED PAPER - TITLE: Openness in adoption: challenging the narrative of historical progress**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One significant change in adoption practice that has occurred over the last four decades is the shift away from an expectation of confidentiality towards an expectation of openness in adoption. Openness is typically conceived in terms of the level of contact between adoptive and birth families following adoption or the extent to which adoption is openly discussed within the adoptive family. While these shifts in practice have generated controversy, they are largely supported by research evidence and have become a feature of contemporary adoptive family life. As a result, the narrative that has emerged in relation to openness in adoption is one of historical progress. In this paper I argue that the lived reality of adoption is less straightforward than this narrative suggests. An analysis of the social and cultural context in which adoption operates suggests instead that the persistent feature of adoption throughout this historical period of increasing openness can be more accurately described as a state of enduring ambiguity regarding the nature of post-adoption relationships. The paper highlights the potentially damaging consequences of overlooking this aspect of adoptive family life and comments on the role of policy in shaping openness in adoption.

### **KEY WORDS**

**ADOPTION, OPENNESS, CONTACT, ADOPTIVE KINSHIP**

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the most significant, and perhaps most controversial, developments to have emerged in adoption in the UK and USA over the last four decades is the concept of 'openness' in adoption. The term is equated with two key practices, namely, ongoing contact between adoptive families and birth relatives following the adoption of a child and the open sharing of information with adopted children about their history and origins. This change in practice has, in part at least, resulted from a growing awareness of the potentially damaging consequences of secrecy inherent in the traditional model of 'confidential adoption'. Such secrecy was intended 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*". Over time, it became apparent, through research with adopted adults (Triseliotis, 1973), and reports of clinical practice (Baran *et al.*, 1977; Pannor & Baran, 1984) that adoption rarely represents a 'clean break and fresh start' and instead origins, identity and heredity continue to be important (Howe & Feast, 2003). The changing

needs of children requiring adoptive placements have also contributed to a shift in practice as more older children with established relationships with birth relatives have been adopted through the care system and ongoing contact has been seen as desirable.

This paper reviews existing academic literature relating to openness in adoption with the aim of examining the relevance of the concept for adoptive families, social policy and welfare practices. The review uses a narrative approach to explore the phenomenon of openness and its historical development. The specific focus of the review is domestic adoption. Particular attention is given to UK and US literature given some of the similarities between the systems of domestic adoption within these countries. The paper challenges the dominant narrative of progress in relation to openness in adoption. It suggests that greater account needs to be taken of the cultural context in which openness in adoption operates in order to understand the challenges of adoptive family life and the support needs of families. Finally, the paper comments on the implications of this analysis for an adoption policy agenda.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF OPENNESS**

The term ‘openness’ has come to encompass a range of practices including disclosure of adoptive status to the adoptee, adoption-related conversations within the adoptive family, a one-off meeting between adopters and the child’s birth mother, an annual exchange of written information between the adoptive and birth family via a third party (known as indirect or letterbox contact) and ongoing face-to-face meetings between birth and adoptive parents and the adopted child (known as direct contact). 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. 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) and 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 & Rosenberg, 1991).

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 suggests that openness in adoption is a much broader construct that describes an openness of attitude on the part of the adoptive parents, 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’. 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.

## **EVIDENCE RELATING TO OPENNESS IN ADOPTION**

There is a growing body of empirical evidence, developed particularly in the UK and USA, relating to openness in adoption. This can be broadly categorised as research that focuses on the outcomes of communicative openness and research that focuses on the outcomes of structural openness. Within the category of structural openness I include work relating specifically to search and reunions between adult adoptees and birth family members following confidential adoptions.

In relation to communicative openness, the limited research that has been undertaken has shown an association between communicative openness within an adoptive family and the wellbeing or adjustment of the child (Brodzinsky, 2006; Hawkins *et al.*, 2008), the development of a positive identity as an adopted person (Hawkins *et al.*, 2008; Howe & Feast, 2003) and higher levels of satisfaction with the adoption expressed by the adoptee in adulthood (Howe & Feast, 2003; Raynor, 1980).

Empirical evidence relating to structural openness and the impact of post adoption contact on outcomes for adopted children suggests a range of possible benefits. There is some evidence that structural openness can lead to improved communication and relationships between adoptive parents and adopted children (Berge *et al.*, 2006; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Ryburn, 1995) and increased understanding and empathy between adoptive parents and birth families (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Neil, 2003; Silverstein & Demick, 1994). Studies have also indicated that contact can aid grief resolution for some birth parents (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Neil, 2007). A concern raised in relation to contact when the practice was developing was that contact would interfere with attachment between the adoptee and adopter and, therefore, placement stability would be threatened (Kraft *et al.*, 1985). However, early studies found no evidence of placement instability (Barth & Berry, 1988; Borland *et al.*, 1991) and instead there was an indication that contact could be a protective factor (Fratter *et al.*, 1991). It has also been found that contact can promote a sense of entitlement to parent and more secure attachment to the child for adopters when compared to confidential arrangements (Fratter, 1996; Logan & Smith, 2005; Neil, 2003; Siegel, 1993; Silverstein & Demick, 1994).

With regards to reunions between adults adopted as infants and birth family members, many of those reunited maintain long-term contact. 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. Often initial contact between adoptees and birth families is more frequent initially but then settles to monthly, bimonthly or contact at holiday times (Pacheco & Eme, 1993). From the perspective of adoptees and birth relatives it appears that success is not judged on the basis of whether or not contact is maintained but whether expectations of the relationship are met, and, if not, whether the parties are able to negotiate a way of relating to each other (Affleck & Steed, 2001).

There has been limited research that has directly sought the views of adopted children who have experienced face-to-face contact with birth relatives. Where children's views have been sought they have reported general satisfaction and a wish to continue contact (Adoption Policy Review Group, 2005; Logan & Smith, 2005; Neil, 2004b; Thomas *et al.*, 1999). This does not mean, however, that contact is not challenging for these children. Children and young people describe a complex mixture of feelings in relation to contact with birth relatives including positive

feelings of happiness and excitement at the same time as more negative feelings of anxiety (Macaskill, 2002; Neil, 2004b). From the child's perspective, the benefits of contact include continuing a relationship with a birth relative to whom the child is emotionally attached, knowing that a birth relative is safe, increasing a child's understanding of a birth parent's difficulties and, therefore, reducing self-blame, assisting with identity issues, particularly when placements are transracial and gaining knowledge about why they were adopted, hearing and discussing their life story firsthand and learning about inherited traits (Fratter, 1996; Macaskill, 2002).

The support for structural openness does not amount to a call for the practice to be universal. Some children with no contact express satisfaction with such an arrangement and a small proportion are adamantly opposed to contact (Thoburn *et al.*, 2000; Thomas *et al.*, 1999). There is evidence that post-adoption contact between adopted children who have experienced neglect or abuse and birth relatives can present a complex set of benefits and risks and individual circumstances must be taken into account (Macaskill, 2002; Sinclair *et al.*, 2005). Challenges include situations where a birth parent denies past abuse or avoids children's questions about the past, where birth relatives arrive late for contact, where siblings are unable to resolve feelings of guilt or anger relating to past abusive behaviours towards each other or where sibling contact exposes children to negative behaviours or sexual abuse (Macaskill, 2002). Children also find contact very challenging when tensions between adults are apparent and where these remain unresolved (Fratter, 1996; Macaskill, 2002). Overall, children feel strongly that they should be listened to and fully involved in decisions relating to contact (Adoption Policy Review Group, 2005; Fratter, 1996). Accounts of adopters and birth relatives involved in direct contact also describe the great challenges of openness as well as the benefits (Logan & Smith, 2005; Neil *et al.*, 2011; Siegel, 1993).

While the empirical evidence in relation to communicative and structural openness remains underdeveloped and such research is methodologically challenging (Neil & Howe, 2004; Quinton *et al.*, 1997), increasingly the evidence suggests that there are potential benefits to be gained from such openness for adoptees, adopters and birth relatives where risks are managed. Benefits of openness have been indicated in a range of circumstances including historic adoptions and contemporary adoptions, adoption of infants and adoptions of older children from care.

### **AN EMERGING NARRATIVE OF HISTORICAL PROGRESS**

Within the UK more specifically, the dominant academic and professional narrative to emerge in relation to openness in adoption is one of historical progress. The old practices of confidential or closed adoption are associated with an undesirable past and contemporary practices of communicative and structural openness are promoted as good practice. As part of the preparation and assessment process adopters are routinely encouraged to expect that openness will be a feature of adoptive family life (Logan, 2010; Lowe *et al.*, 1999). Historical progress, therefore, is defined both in terms of the increasing ubiquity of openness and the growing evidence base to support such practices. A closer look at the evidence, however, suggests that this narrative of progress is problematic.

Although no comprehensive data exist, it is widely accepted that ongoing contact between adopters and birth relatives became more commonplace from the 1980s onwards (Parker, 1999). In the absence of national statistical data, the figure that is widely quoted is that 70% of children adopted from care in the UK today are likely

to have some form of contact with their birth family, whether direct or indirect (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000). The headline figure of 70%, at first sight, appears to uphold the narrative of progress and suggests that openness has become the norm. However, on closer examination of the detail of contact, progress can, at best, be described as modest.

Rates of direct contact following the adoption of children from care reported from empirical research vary from study to study. Lowe et al (1999) found that around 39% of children adopted over the age of five had direct contact with an adult birth family member. Neil's (2002a) study of children aged four and under found that 17% of children had a plan for direct contact. However, Neil also reported that rates of direct contact varied from agency to agency, the lowest rate being 0% and the highest 25%. Taken together, these figures suggest that perhaps as few as one in five children adopted from public care or more optimistically one in three children have the opportunity for face-to-face contact with birth relatives, such as birth parents, grandparents, siblings and extended family members following their legal adoption. As many as two thirds or perhaps even four fifths do not. Direct contact appears to be more common for the minority of children adopted at an older age. Selwyn et al's (2006) study reported rates of direct contact at 55% for a group of children adopted at a mean age of seven years and five months. Recent figures, though, indicate that around three quarters of children are between age one and four when adopted (Department for Education, 2012b).

Where a post-adoption direct contact arrangement is in place, this typically involves a one or two hour meeting once or twice a year (Neil *et al.*, 2011). Questions have been raised about the quality of such contacts. Where contact is positive and trust develops between families contact may be extended and become more open (Neil, 2004b). However there is also evidence that the frequency of contact can decrease over time in some situations (Neil, 2004b; Neil *et al.*, 2011; Selwyn, 2004). Neil's (2004b) research found at wave two that 21% of contact arrangements had ceased and 9% were erratic. This was more common where contact was with a birth parent. This may in part be explained by difficulties experienced by birth parents such as mental illness and drug and alcohol related issues (Neil, 2004b) but also raises questions about the adequacy of the support available to birth relatives involved in contact arrangements (Neil *et al.*, 2011). Studies have revealed much lower levels of contact with birth fathers and extended family members (Neil, 2004b; Selwyn *et al.*, 2006).

Reunions also continue to be a challenging aspect of adoptive family life. Several studies have revealed that adoptees' loyalty to adoptive parents, fear of hurting them and fear of losing them deter them from searching (Howe & Feast, 2003; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Roche & Perlesz, 2000; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). Adopters fear that search and reunion will have a negative effect on the adoptee, it will negatively affect the relationship between adopter and adoptee and the birth family may threaten the adoptive family (Pacheco & Eme, 1993). While these fears are not borne out by evidence, they continue to influence behaviour. The Adoption Contact Register was established in 1989 to enable adopted adults and birth parents to register their willingness for contact the adoption contact register. In the period between its introduction on 1st May 1991 and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2001 20,000 adoptees and 8,500 birth relatives joined the register. In that same period, however, only 539 links were made. It is notable that much larger numbers of adoptees have registered than have birth relatives (Office for National Statistics, 2001).

Indirect contact is more common than direct contact and can be said to have become the standard plan for children adopted from care (Neil, 2004a). Reported rates of indirect contact following adoption have varied between 56% (Selwyn *et al.*, 2006) and 77% (Lowe *et al.*, 1999). Neil (2002b) reported that letterbox contact was planned for 86% of children placed for adoption although the actual figure following legal adoption is not known. The typical expectation is that indirect contact will involve an exchange of letters, cards or gifts between adoptive and birth families through a professional agency. Some concerns have been raised about the quality of indirect contact arrangements for some families. Neil and colleagues (Neil, 2004a; Young & Neil, 2004) identified a number of potential issues including a lack of involvement of the child in such contact arrangements and variations in the efficiency and appropriateness of procedures used by agencies. Also, despite a stated goal of indirect contact being information exchange often the communication is one-way, from adopter to birth relatives. Birth relatives have reported difficulties writing contact letters due to uncertainty about what to write and overwhelming emotions. Indirect or letterbox contact is assumed by professionals to be less contentious and, therefore, easier to manage than direct contact. However, research suggests that it can be complex and it requires careful planning and support and this may not always be provided (Neil, 2004a; Selwyn, 2004; Young & Neil, 2004).

With regards to communicative openness, the evidence suggests that some adoptive parents and their adopted children struggle to achieve the level of communicative openness to which they and professionals aspire (Howe & Feast, 2003; Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005). Both adopters and adoptees commonly report discomfort discussing adoption (Hawkins *et al.*, 2008; Howe & Feast, 2003)(AUTHOR 2008) and adoption-related conversations can be infrequent (Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005).

### **PROBLEMATIZING THE NARRATIVE OF PROGRESS**

It appears that some progress can be claimed in terms of the growing evidence base for openness and the increased frequency of such practices. Given the widespread academic and professional support for openness in adoption, however, a question remains – why has progress not been greater? One possible explanation is the increasingly complex needs of adopted children and their birth relatives. However, this explanation does not stand up to scrutiny as previous research has found little relationship between the needs of the child and the plan for contact (Neil, 2004b). I suggest that a more persuasive explanation relates to the social and cultural context within which adoption operates. In particular, I wish to focus on the ways in which openness challenges deeply held cultural beliefs regarding the nature of kinship within western societies. Two social anthropologists have been at the forefront of developing a cultural analysis of post adoption relationships within the context of increasing openness, namely, Judith Modell, and Janet Carsten. Modell and Carsten developed analyses of the confidential model of infant adoption and the experiences of adult adoptees and birth mothers of post-adoption reunions.

Modell (1994) undertook extensive fieldwork interviewing adult adoptees, adoptive parents and birth family members in the 1980s and 1990s. She examined the operation of what she calls the ‘as if’ principle within confidential adoptions. This refers to the requirement that adoptees act ‘as if’ born to adoptive parents, adoptive parents act ‘as if’ biologically related to the adoptee, and birth parents act ‘as if’ childless. Within this model of adoption the adoptive family is intended to substitute

the birth family totally and permanently. Her research 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, their pregnancy being concealed or made invisible, their experience of labour and birth not being recognised or discussed and feeling infantilised by parents and professionals. Adopters highlighted the difficulties of the adoption application process as an alternative transition into parenthood. Adoptees spoke about the contradictions within the 'chosen child' story commonly told to adoptees by adoptive parents. These stories routinely excluded birth parents in an effort to avoid the painful contradiction of having to be given up to be chosen.

Modell's analysis suggested that the 'as if' model of adoption was unsustainable for members of the adoption triad. Instead confidential adoption was characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity regarding family relationships. Modell's research also suggested that this ambiguity was not eased following reunions between adult adoptees and birth parents. While reunions were experienced positively by those involved, both adoptees and birth parents spoke of their confusion about the status they should have and the role they should play in each other's lives. Should they be friends, part of the extended family, social or biological parents and whichever role they took on, how should they then act? Modell's analysis suggested that relationships that were based on biology alone were flimsy. For birth parents, reunions exposed the importance of doing family together 'over the years' in order to achieve a sense of kinship.

The starting point for Carsten's research was the conceptualisation of adoption, within social anthropology, as 'fictive kinship' (Carsten, 2004). The term 'fictive' has a range of meanings including *fictitious*, *pretend* and *sham* as well as *fashioned* or *made*. The term recognises the possibility of social kinship, however, it also suggests that such kinship is inferior to biological relatedness. Like Modell, Carsten's research focused on the experiences of adults adopted in infancy and later reunited with birth relatives. The narratives of adoptees both confirmed and challenged the assertion that biological connectedness is given primacy within Western cultures (Carsten, 2000). Carsten observed that adoptees had gone to considerable lengths to trace birth relatives and placed importance on seeking out physical family resemblances and information about genetic inheritance. 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. 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 subsequently reunited birth parents. 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.

Building on Modell and Carsten's cultural analyses AUTHOR AND AUTHOR (2008, 2011, 2012) have focussed on both confidential adoptions in the 1970s and 80s and contemporary adoptions of older children from care. Their research has suggested an inherent fragility within post-adoptive relationships, regardless of the model of adoption and level of post-adoption contact. The main source of fragility appears to be the ambiguous social status of such relationships (AUTHORS 2012).



While family relationships between adopted children and adoptive parents are legally sanctioned, day-to-day social encounters often reinforce the fictive nature and, therefore, perceived inferiority of these relationships when compared to biological kinship. AUTHORS (2008) report that several adoptive parents described 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, with biological kinship as their model, proved difficult and sometimes painful for children with gaps in knowledge about their background and origins. This included children adopted as infants decades ago and children adopted at older ages from care more recently. Teachers were often unaware of the potential impact of such assignments for adopted children and they often led to adoptees spontaneously revealing their adoptive status to classmates which in turn led to classmates asking rather blunt questions about the reasons for the child's adoption. Adopters also spoke of bullying of adopted children and taunts such "*you've got a fake family*". (AUTHORS 2011)

The ambiguous status of relationships was not just experienced by adoptive families, however. There was evidence of equal uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of biological kinship following adoption. It appeared that contact between adoptive families and birth relatives, although assumed to maintain post adoption relationships, often exposed the disconnections within relationships. Occasional direct contact between adopted children and birth relatives often served to highlight a loss of day-to-day intimacy between the parties (AUTHORS 2011). In addition, indirect contact appeared to accentuate the loss of current and intimate knowledge of family members following adoption. For example, adopted children received gifts from birth parents with whom they had no direct contact that did not reflect a child's interests and were not always age appropriate. Such gifts, therefore, undermined the cultural belief that biological connectedness is stronger and more enduring than social kinship (AUTHOR 2012).

What begins to emerge from these analyses is an alternative narrative told from the perspective of members of the adoption triad. These accounts reframe openness – not as post-adoption contact or communication – but as a radical challenge to the dominant model of kinship within western societies. From this alternative position the current narrative of progress appears somewhat overstated. Instead I suggest that the persistent feature of adoption throughout this historical period, can be more accurately described as a state of enduring ambiguity regarding the nature of post adoption relationships. This appears to persist regardless of the level or type of contact (AUTHOR 2011). It is also noteworthy that this has endured across an historical period which has seen great changes in adoption practice in terms of the needs of children requiring adoptive families and the needs of birth parents and more widespread social shifts in terms of changing family structures and increased family diversity.

This reformulation of adoption openness clearly has significant implications for adoptive family life. Kirk (1964) described adoptive parents as pioneers of parenting. The work of Carsten, Modell and AUTHORS suggests that this requirement to innovate persists for adoptive parents despite the social context being somewhat different from that of Kirk's time. In addition, the analysis developed here suggests that openness places demands not just on adoptive parents but on all members of the adoption triad to forge new ways of doing adoptive kinship. Questions remain, however, about the role of policy in promoting, regulating and supporting openness

in adoption and the role of practitioners in supporting members of the adoption triad in this task.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR OPENNESS IN ADOPTION?**

It is apparent from what I have suggested above that progress with regards to openness in adoption does not rely on doing more of the same but instead requires a more critical engagement with openness as a culturally specific and potentially problematic social process. I further suggest that uncertainty regarding the nature of post adoption relationships persists not only in the minds of adopters, adoptees and birth relatives but also within the minds of adoption practitioners and policy makers. The final section of this paper considers the implications of the analysis developed here for adoption policy.

Current UK legislation neither promotes nor discourages contact between adoptive and birth families allowing arrangements to be led by individual circumstances. However, a recent consultation released by the Westminster government on post adoption contact signalled a desire to restrict post-adoption contact arrangements where this is considered to be in a child's best interests (Department for Education, 2012a). Proposals within the document included introducing the possibility of a 'no contact' order granted alongside an adoption order and creating a more demanding 'permission filter' where a birth parent wishes to apply for a contact order. In the introduction to the consultation paper regarding contact the government's adoption advisor Sir Martin Narey stated:

*...the more I have read the extensive research which is available, the more I have become concerned that, although it is invariably well intentioned, contact harms children too often...*

*... I believe that contact should happen much less frequently by the time a child receives a Placement Order. At this point, reunification with the birth family is only a remote possibility. Contact should happen only when it is, demonstrably, in the child's interests. And after adoption, birth family contact, including letterbox contact, should only take place when the adoptive parents are satisfied that it continues to be in the interests of their child.*

Sir Martin's statement rightly foregrounds the best interests of the child but treats this concept as unproblematic. It takes little account of evidence regarding the complex interplay of risks and benefits of contact, the individual circumstances of children and families or the changing needs of individuals across the lifecourse. Sir Martin also implies that the value of contact is questionable where reunification with the birth family is unlikely. The model of adoption implicit within his statement is one of family substitution. He has in the past expressed this view more explicitly stating that adopters should be regarded as the "real and only" parents (Narey, 2011). Such a conceptualisation of adoption is at odds with the notion of dual connection to both the adoptive and birth family (Brodzinsky, 2005). Instead it implies a shift back towards an 'as if' model of adoption (Modell, 1994). I argue that a shift back towards a model of adoption as 'family substitution' would do little to address the contradictions of adoptive kinship highlighted by Modell, Carsten and AUTHORS that are experienced by members of the adoption triad involved in both historical and contemporary adoptions. Instances of the 'as if' model of adoption within policy proposals should instead be challenged and resisted.

Further evidence of the government's acceptance of an 'as if' model of adoption is apparent from the relative absence of birth relatives' concerns within current adoption reforms (Kirton, 2013). Recent policy agendas have focused on the experiences of adoptive parents in relation to assessment, advice and information, matching and post-adoption support. There has been little attention to the long-term needs of birth relatives following adoption. The invisibility of birth parents in the adoption process is apparent in the Evidence Pack produced in relation to the Children and Families Bill which reports statistics relating to the characteristics of adopters and adoptees and then states:

“The Department for Education does not collect any information on the characteristics of the birth parents of adopted children.” (Department for Education, 2013, p. 10)

This is particularly concerning given the evidence that the needs of birth relatives can be significant and that post-adoption contact relies heavily on the quality of the relationships between the adults involved in such arrangements (Neil *et al.*, 2011). I suggest that much greater attention is needed to the development of sensitive support and interventions for *all* members of the adoption triad engaged in the process of remodelling family relationships. While there can be no prescriptions around openness (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998), more emphasis is needed on the quality of such experiences, the meaning of adoption for those involved and the development of imaginative new forms of relatedness.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper I have argued that claims of progress with regards to openness in adoption have been somewhat overstated. Evidence suggests that adoptive families continue to struggle with the challenges of communicative and structural openness and significant numbers of children have no contact or limited contact with birth relatives following adoption. Where contact does take place, the quality of these arrangements is sometimes questionable and support can be inadequate. Adoption is increasingly being promoted as a means of meeting the needs of vulnerable children who can no longer live within their biological family. Much of the policy emphasis has been on avoiding delays to secure a stable loving home for children at the earliest opportunity. I suggest that current government reforms do little to address the contradictions of adoptive kinship faced by members of the adoption triad and are likely to threaten rather than promote further progress regarding openness in adoption. In order for adoption to be experienced positively and to be adequately supported, policy makers must be prepared to engage more critically with the historical legacy of confidential adoption and the sensitivities associated with openness.

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