Sibling Connections: An Exploration of Adopted People's Birth and Adoptive Sibling Relationships Across the Life-Span

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Abstract

This thesis presents a qualitative exploratory study of adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span. Very little is known at present about the longitudinal experience and meaning of these relationships. This study therefore seeks to increase knowledge about how these relationships are developed, maintained and practiced across the life-span from the adopted person's perspective. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty adopted adults, all of whom had knowledge of at least one birth sibling. Ten participants also had adoptive siblings, who were unrelated and also adopted into the family, or were the birth children of their adoptive parents. Two participants grew up together with one birth sibling and apart from others. Almost three-quarters of the sample who had been reunited with at least one birth sibling had been in contact with them for over 6 years.

Adoptive sibling relationships were generally viewed as stable and permanent, with many similarities present to siblings who grow up together in intact families. However, the experience of being adopted, and relationship dynamics within the adoptive family, was influential with regard to how these relationships were thought about and practiced across time. Developing and maintaining relationships with birth siblings was complex, particularly as they usually met as strangers in adulthood. Four 'tasks' were associated with the process of relationship development; making sense of birth family culture, negotiating the relationship, building emotional connections and integrating the past, past and future. A psycho-social model is presented which aims to provide a 'cultural map' illustrating how birth and adoptive sibling relationships are navigated in adoption. It encompasses four domains; thinking about self, others and adoption; relating to others; cultural and personal meanings of kinship and 'family'; and contextual factors (e.g. class, gender). The insights gained from this study are used to suggest improvements in adoption social work practice with sibling groups.

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Introduction

The focus of this thesis is a qualitative study exploring the experience and meaning of adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span. Very little is known at present about adopted people's life-long experiences of their sibling relationships. In-depth interviews were carried out between 2009-2011with twenty adopted adults in the UK who had a range of experiences with birth and adoptive siblings. This chapter will firstly outline the definition of 'sibling' used in the study before moving on to outline the background and context of sibling relationships in adoption. The objectives and research questions will then be considered. Finally, the structure of the thesis will be presented through a short summary of each chapter and their main themes.

Defining 'sibling'

One of the difficulties in researching sibling relationships is the problem of how to define the term 'sibling'. Siblings can be related through share genes (full or half siblings), legally (adoptive siblings) or through affinity (step-siblings, foster siblings). Further, when children are asked who they define as their brothers and sisters, they can also include cousins and best friends (Edwards et al, 2006). Most research studies rely on biological connections to identify who is a sibling, which is unsurprising given the cultural dominance of the blood tie in defining who 'kin' is (Modell, 1994). However, this is fraught with difficulty methodologically because who 'counts' as a sibling differs even when considering blood ties alone, making it complex to compare sibling studies. For example, children have been included if, for example, they are 'biologically related' (Rushton et al, 2001), if they are full siblings or maternal half-siblings who have lived together (Drapeau et al, 2000), or children who share at least one parent and have lived together (Maclean, 1991; Kosonen, 1996). Some studies include no definition of 'sibling' (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992).

One of the challenges for this study therefore was to define what the term 'sibling' meant. Focusing on close biological connectedness alone would ignore how the sibling relationship was socially constructed and maintained within adoptive and birth families (Elgar and Head, 1999), and may not have reflected who the participants themselves

'counted' as a brother and sister. The definition of 'sibling' for this study was therefore flexible, and encompassed who the participants themselves defined as a sibling, which is explored further in Chapter 7.

Background to the study

Most of us have brothers and sisters, and adopted people are no exception. It is estimated that 80% of the general population have siblings, and this is reported to be mirrored for those who are adopted (Kosonen, 1996; Rushton et al, 2001). For siblings brought up together, the relationship with a brother or sister is likely to be one of the most enduring and lifelong relationships, and one that usually lasts longer than the relationship with parents, partners and children given its roots in childhood (Cicirelli, 1995). Siblings are also developmentally significant relationships given their proximity to and influence over one another in childhood, within the wider context of family life (Dunn, 1988; Dunn and Munn, 1987). Further, it is also very unusual for siblings to lose touch with one another completely. Even with considerable hostility present in the relationship, brothers and sisters tend to see sibling ties as ones that 'bind' them together for life, even if they only meet at family occasions or send one another birthday and Christmas cards (Ross and Milgram, 1982).

The profile of children in the UK requiring adoptive placements today has changed significantly over the last forty years, from the relinquishment of (usually) newborn babies from unmarried mothers, to children (often in sibling groups) who have experienced significant abuse and neglect. Most children who are adopted today live apart from at least one of their siblings, and this is particularly so if they are part of a large sibling group (Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). Other factors, such as having a large age difference between the siblings, the timing of entry into care (including children being born subsequently), and the children's individual needs have all been identified as factors which affect whether children are placed together or apart in adoptive placements (Drapeau et al, 2000; Leathers, 2005; Shlonsky et al, 2003; Staff and Fein, 1992; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005). Direct contact with brothers and sisters post-placement also continues to be the exception rather than the norm (Neil et al, 2010), with in-direct letter-box contact being used most frequently so that children can know about the progress of their brothers and sisters, albeit at a distance. Adoption therefore alters sibling relationships for life, whether they are placed together in an adoptive

family, or separated. For example, new relationships can develop with adoptive siblings, and birth siblings placed together have to adjust to new family relationships within the adoptive kinship network. Separated siblings will see or hear about each other much less often, whether or not they maintain direct contact. Those who do maintain a relationship have to do this in the context of the wider adoptive kinship network where differences may be present regarding the meaning and value of sibling relationships (Neil et al, 2010).

The experience of adopted adults in relation to search and reunion with birth parents has been widely researched, and the relevance of this to adopted people understanding who they are and why they were adopted is widely accepted (Howe and Feast, 2000; Raynor, 1980; Triseliotis, 1973; Modell, 1997; Carsten, 2000 and Passmore and Feaney, 2009). However, little is known at present about adopted people's longitudinal experience of birth and adoptive sibling relationships, particularly in adulthood. This is a significant gap in the research literature, given the potential longevity of the birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span, which this study seeks to address.

It could be argued that a retrospective study focusing on adults who were usually adopted under very different circumstances to children being adopted today will have limited relevance to contemporary social work practice. However, today most children who are adopted continue to be separated from some or all of their siblings. Further, current adoption practice tends to take a 'here and now' approach to assessment and decision-making about siblings, primarily focusing on the current relationship and its history. Social workers are legally required to consider the life-long implications of adoption (Adoption and Children Act, 2002), but in practice this is very difficult to do. Many of the consequences of adoption do not become clear until many years after children are placed with their adoptive families. Exploring how adopted adults experience their birth sibling relationships across the life-span and what these relationships mean can therefore potentially assist social workers today to understand more about some of these life-long consequences and plan for the future more effectively.

Aims and objectives

The aims of this study were to increase knowledge about the longitudinal experience and meaning of adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships through hearing from the adopted people themselves, and to apply this knowledge to social work practice with siblings in adoption. The thesis therefore sought to explore the different factors that influenced the development, maintenance, practice and meaning of birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span. By taking this approach, it was aimed to provide a rounded and nuanced picture of the processes that are present in these relationships, and how the different factors that were present interacted with one another.

The study's objectives were as follows:

(1) Explore adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships from childhood and throughout adulthood in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences and the meanings they derive from these relationships.

(2) Consider a range of conceptual frameworks within which to understand adopted people's sibling relationships across the life-span, sourced via a broad range of existing literature.

(3) Identify practice and policy issues relevant to contemporary social work practice with siblings in adoption.

(4) Develop a framework from which to understand the processes and practice of birth and adoptive sibling relationships in order to assist social workers in their day-to-day practice.

Research questions

The objectives outlined above were explored through the following overarching research question: 'How do adopted people experience and make sense of their birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span?' In order to answer this broad question three specific research questions were developed, which are outlined below alongside the areas of inquiry within each question:

(1) How do adopted people perceive and experience family life in their adoptive families from childhood to the present day? Given that sibling relationships do not exist in isolation, it was important to consider the broader context of the adoption experience when exploring birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span. Areas of inquiry included issues such as the participants' perceptions of belonging and difference in their adoptive family, relationship quality, everyday life within the adoptive family (including communication about adoption), and the participants' meanings of 'family'.

(2) How do adopted people experience and make sense of their adoptive sibling relationships from childhood to the present day? Areas of inquiry included issues such as the everyday experience of adoptive sibling relationships in childhood and adulthood, relationship quality over time and the factors that affected this, definitions and meanings of 'sibling', and communication about adoption.

(3) How do adopted people experience and make sense of their birth sibling relationships from childhood to the present day? Areas of inquiry within this question acknowledged the relevance of considering the wider birth family as part of the adoptive kinship network, alongside birth siblings. They included knowledge of and curiosity about birth siblings over time, their motivation to search for birth family members, the process of search and reunion, the everyday practice of birth sibling relationships and the factors that influenced this, and communication about adoption between siblings and the wider birth family.

Structure of the thesis

The thesis is structured in two parts. Part 1 includes the first four chapters and constitutes a wide-ranging literature review. The key sources for this literature review were empirical research and theory from the UK and internationally, and relevant historical and contemporary legislation, policy and practice documents which focused on siblings and siblinghood, adoption and fostering and theories of kinship and the family.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the key phases and influences that were present in the development of contemporary adoption legislation, policy and practice in relation to siblings. Research studies which were particularly influential have been included in order to provide a rounded picture. Themes of permanency and increased 'openness' in adoption are drawn upon, alongside the sometimes conflicting notions of needs and rights when considering adopted people and their adoptive kinship networks.

Chapter 2 considers siblings and siblinghood from the perspective of children who remain in their families of origin. The complexity of defining 'who' is a sibling is explored, alongside the developmental trajectories and experience of sibling relationships from childhood to old age. The chapter identifies several key themes that influence the experience of sibling relationships in childhood; namely birth order, gender, adversity and placing the relationship in the context of family dynamics. In adulthood, the everyday practice of sibling relationships is considered, including the factors that influence the quality of the relationship. The importance of seeing children and adults as social actors who actively construct their own meanings and reality is emphasised in this chapter, and assisted in the development of the ontological and epistemological positioning of the study. Further, the reality of the significance and longevity of sibling relationships across the life-span was influential conceptually.

Chapter 3 explores children's birth and adoptive sibling relationships in the context of family placement for siblings who cannot remain living with their birth families. Key themes with regard to sibling relationships in adoption are considered, including assessment and decision-making processes, outcomes for sibling groups in foster care and adoption, the value of adoption support and the importance of listening to children's voices. Literature pertaining to fostering is included because many early decisions about sibling groups are made at the time of becoming looked-after.

Chapter 4 continues the life-span focus through considering adopted adults' relationships within the adoptive kinship network and the factors which influence these relationships. This chapter provides the contextual framework for the thesis in its psycho-social exploration of adopted adults' kinship ties. The concepts of family practices (Morgan 1996, 2011) and 'display' (Finch 2007, 2011) are introduced as particularly helpful frameworks through which to examine adopted people's sibling relationships across the life-span, alongside more traditional psychological approaches.

Part 2 of the thesis begins with chapter 5, which outlines the methodological framework for this qualitative exploratory study. Theoretical considerations in relation to the research design are discussed, alongside the sampling framework and research methodology. The choices made with regard to research design and the process of analysis is transparent, justified and reflexive, which addresses issues of accountability and the 'trustworthiness' of the research. Ethical considerations are fully addressed. This chapter aims to present a clear and coherent account of the research process, in order to set the scene for the following four empirical chapters.

Chapter 6 provides a brief profile of the participants' demographic characteristics, their birth and adoptive sibling relationships and their evaluation of their adoption experience in order to set the context for the following three chapters. The sources for recruitment to the study are also considered.

Chapter 7 explores the different factors that were drawn from the interviews in defining 'who' the adopted people defined as a brother and sister. A distinction is made between the participants' physical definition of who 'counted' as a sibling but who also 'felt' like a sibling, and why. In making this distinction different aspects of biological and social connectedness are explored.

Chapter 8 considers the participants' adoptive sibling relationships from childhood to the present day. Key themes emerged which highlighted the stability and permanence of these relationships for many, as well as how factors particularly relate to adoption influenced them. The role of adoptive siblings in integrating the past, present and future in explored. Using the concepts of 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996) and 'display' (Finch, 2007) provided a useful conceptual framework from which to explore these relationships across the life-span, as well as considering how the adopted people thought about their adoptive siblings and the meanings they derived from these relationships. This conceptual framework was also used in the following chapter to explore birth sibling relationships over time.

Chapter 9 explores the participants' birth sibling relationships across the life-span. A chronological approach was used which tracked how the participants thought about their birth families and birth siblings in childhood (and also saw them where relevant). Their motivation to search for birth family (and birth siblings) was considered, with the lack of knowledge about birth siblings being raised as a particular issue. The

participants' search and reunion experiences are considered, as well as their on-going relationships with birth siblings and the adoptive kinship network. Four 'tasks' were identified as being present which influenced the development, maintenance and practice of birth sibling relationships.

Chapter 10 concludes the thesis. A psycho-social model is presented which seeks to explore how adopted people navigate their birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span. Each element of the model is discussed, and explanations provided regarding how the different elements interact with one another. Following on from this, a typology of birth sibling relationships in adulthood is advanced. This illustrates how the different factors of the psycho-social model interact to produce different relationship patterns with different birth siblings, often in the same sibling group. Implications for social work practice are discussed, as well as the limitations of the study and the scope for further research.

Chapter 1: The legal, policy and research context of adoption - implications for sibling relationships and sibling placements

Introduction

Adoption is legally defined today as the 'transfer of parenthood and parental responsibility by court order from the birth family to the adoptive family' (Bevan et al, 2007: 3). The legal and policy context of adoption has changed considerably since the first Adoption Act was introduced in 1926, which largely provided more security to previously informal adoption arrangements and placed the issue of adoption as a state rather than a private matter. This chapter will consider the legal and policy context of adoption from the late 1800s until the present day, exploring the effects on and consequences for sibling relationships across the life-span as a result of successive law and policy, and the research that has influenced it..

Legislation has, it could be argued, developed from being adoptive parent-centred (with its emphasis on anonymity and secrecy for adoptive parents – Adoption of Children Act, 1926) to increasingly child-centred, particularly with the emphasis on openness regarding birth origins and maintaining links post-adoption, and placement-centred, with the current emphasis on adoption as the placement of choice for babies and young children who cannot remain living with their birth families (Adoption and Children Act, 2002). However, it is clear that whilst early legislation benefited adoptive parents in relation to ensuring their anonymity, it was also seen as being in the best interests of children to have a 'fresh start'. Current policy (see Department for Education's 'Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay', 2012) also emphasises that adoption is one permanence option which has the potential to meet children's needs, particularly those of young children. However, this can often have a consequence of separating sibling groups. These potential contradictions and paradoxes will be explored further throughout the chapter, particularly in relation to the consequences of adoption for sibling groups.

Adoption law and policy has gradually moved from a predominantly 'closed' model where secrecy regarding birth origins was the norm, to a gradual increase in openness in adoption arrangements and contact post-adoption. The issue of increased openness in

adoption is an important consideration here because changing policy over time has, as will be shown, meant that sibling relationships have slowly been given increasing recognition within the context of planning for permanence. A useful definition of 'openness' in adoption is provided by Triseliotis et al (1997: 79), who state that 'openness' is:

> 'an umbrella term used to cover a variety of patterns and scenarios. Patterns of openness range from the most minimal sharing of information to continued visits between birth and adoptive families. Not only are there possibilities for infinite variations along this continuum, but the patterns may change during the life of the adoption as the needs and wishes of the two families and the child change'.

The reference to 'families' rather than 'parents' in the above quote is suggestive of including other birth relatives such as siblings and grandparents, rather than considering birth parents only in relation to issues such as contact post-adoption, as was once the case. Triseliotis et al's (1997) definition of 'openness' does not, however, distinguish between openness of attitude and openness of action in relation to adoption, concentrating rather on the latter. However, as Neil (2006) illustrates, an openness of attitude in relation to all parties involved in the adoption process can also lead to an increased openness in action. Issues of communication about adoption within adoptive kinship networks will be discussed further in chapter 3.

It is of interest to note that there remains no legal definition of 'sibling', which adds an additional complication in relation to recognising and planning for sibling placements, given the complexity of sibling relationships today that combine biological relationships and those of affinity. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) defines 'relative' as someone who is related to the adoptive person by 'blood', including full and half blood relatives (s 81(2)). This definition is potentially problematic, particularly in relation to the entitlement of relatives by affinity searching for their adopted siblings (and vice versa). It is also in contrast to the Children Act (1989), which highlights the importance of understanding who is important to the child, both through blood ties and through affinity.

The development of adoption as a state matter

Adoption has been legislated for in the United Kingdom since the Adoption of Children Act (1926). However, informal / private adoptions were present long before this, and it is of note that these arrangements were generally not secret, or 'closed', with a free sharing of information usually the norm between birth and adoptive families (Cretney and Masson, 1997).

During the First World War there were pragmatic reasons for the development of adoption societies: a combination of bereaved parents, childless couples, spinsters and widows wishing for companionship, alongside orphaned, unwanted and illegitimate children (Keating, 2009). The context in which these adoptions took place was one of secrecy and discretion, as a result of the influence of the Poor Law (1834). Impoverished birth families were not seen as a good influence on their children, who would have been separated from their parents in the workhouse. Mothers were banned from approaching one of the two early adoption agencies if they became pregnant again, and as children were seen as individuals rather than part of a family group, this meant that birth siblings would potentially never know about one another.

Adoption developed a higher profile after the First World War, for those interested in child welfare, as a result of the publicity the new adoption agencies were getting and concerns about their rapid growth and practices. People began to press for adoption to become a state matter through legislation and regulation, and the Hopkinson Report (1921) was commissioned by the Conservative Government (Keating, 2009; Carp, 2009). However, at the time there was no broad support for adoption as a concept, but more concern about legitimising the children of unmarried mothers (which also had the unintended consequence of keeping sibling groups together), and providing care and support for the orphans of the First World War. It was also felt that adoption was not something that would affect many children; therefore, legislation was not passed at this time.

When the Labour Government came to power in 1924, the numbers of adoptions were rising significantly and pressure was placed on the Government to offer some kind of legislation / regulation (Keating, 2009). The Tomlin Report (1925) was commissioned, and its recommendations were translated into law through the Adoption of Children

Act (1926). Adoption became a judicial procedure and was irrevocable – unlike previously, when birth parents could reclaim their children at any point. However, inheritance rights were preserved with the birth family.

The journey from secrecy to increased openness in adoption

Following the provision of adoption as a state matter in 1926, the next major piece of legislation in relation to adoption was the Adoption of Children Act (1949). This legitimated secrecy and anonymity for adoptive parents by the provision of serial numbers on adoption application forms for adoptive parents, so that birth parents could not know the identity of those who were adopting their child. There was no mention of siblings in any of the early adoption legislation, which is perhaps unsurprising given the over-riding emphasis on children requiring a 'clean break' from their past. However, this meant that a perhaps unintended consequence of this approach was that children were permanently separated from all current and future birth siblings, and at that time did not have a facility for knowing about them in the future.

The requirement to put the welfare of the child as the paramount consideration first appeared in law in the Guardianship of Infants Act (1925), although it did not apply to adoption law until 1975. However, the main concern originally was to allow children to have a 'fresh start', free from the label of illegitimacy.

The 'need' for secrecy in adoption was first given theoretical legitimacy through Bowlby's (1951) work on maternal deprivation, in which he stated that children need to have a constant mother attachment that was not disturbed or interrupted. This suggested that any 'disruption' through on-going contact with the birth family would jeopardise the placement. He further stated that secrecy in adoption matters is vital and 'is essential if the adoption is not to be jeopardised' (1951: 106). Thus, the need for a 'clean break' from the birth family was legally mandated and given psychological justification at that time. However, Bowlby had the foresight to also note that children needed to grow up with an awareness of their adoptive status, and be told of this as soon as possible. He did not cite reasons for this other than 'sooner or later the truth will be known ... [and] there need be no great difficulty in bringing the child up from the earliest years in the knowledge that he has been adopted' (1951: 106). Whilst Bowlby's

early work has been substantially developed over the years to include a range of attachment relationships as children develop, his early theories were extremely influential for many years and were used to legitimate secrecy in adoption matters.

Less well known is Bowlby's (1951) comments on sibling groups who required alternative care provision. He highlighted that if siblings remained together they could potentially provide comfort and support to one another. He noted that 'nothing is more tragic and destructive of mental health than the system, still all too frequent, which divides children by age and sex and thus splits up families of brothers and sisters' (1951: 130). At the time he was writing, Bowlby's primary concern was the effects of maternal deprivation on children's health and development. He viewed residential nursery provision for infants and toddlers as very harmful, due to the lack of consistent care figures, and he called for it to be abolished. Bowlby also emphasised the importance of group home living with parental figures for older children who could not live with their families, rather than living in large institutions, segregated by gender, with no consistency of care; and saw this as a way for sibling groups to remain together. His work therefore contains an early important message about sibling relationships and the potential protective factors they can provide.

Triseliotis et al (1997) cited Bowlby's early work as being very influential in relation to the continuation of secrecy and the 'clean break' approach to adoption. The work of Goldstein and colleagues (1973), through their clinical observations and using a psychoanalytic approach, came to the conclusion that children would not be able to form attachments to their adoptive parents if they continued to have contact with their birth relatives. They stated that children needed to have 'unbroken continuity of affectionate and stimulating relationships with an adult' (1973: 6), and that 'only a child who has at least one person whom he can love, and who also feels loved, valued, and wanted by that person, will develop a healthy self-esteem' (1973: 20). They called this relationship 'psychological parenting', where parents are personally and emotionally involved with the children and not just meeting their immediate physical needs. This is arguably not of itself incompatible with continuity of contact with birth family members following adoption; but the authors expressed the view that it was fundamental for the adopted child's emotional well-being that a bond is allowed to develop between the

child and their adoptive mother which would not be 'interrupted' by contact with their birth family.

The theories of Goldstein and colleagues (1973, 1986) were based on their clinical experience alone and so had no empirical research base, but were nevertheless extremely influential. The authors highlighted the importance of continuity of relationships in adoption, but emphasised this in the context of the 'unbroken' continuity of the adoptive, or 'psychological' parents. In the case of custody during divorce proceedings, the authors went so far as to say that due to the non-custodial parent not being constantly available, they had 'little chance to serve as a true object for love, trust and identification, since this role is based on being available on an uninterrupted day-to-day basis' (1973: 38).

The authors viewed their work as being very child-oriented, rather than adult-oriented. It highlighted the need to minimise delay, put children's needs as the paramount concern in any decisions relating to their welfare and raised the need for children to have 'psychological parents'. They also stated that 'a child's placement should rest entirely on consideration for the child's own inner situation and developmental needs' (1973: 106). However, the authors' own claim regarding the over-riding importance of the need for children to have 'psychological parents' meant that the importance of continuity in relation to birth family relationships, and how this can potentially assist adopted children to maintain and develop their adoptive identity and therefore their welfare in general was not considered. For example, the authors noted the 'devastating' consequences of the loss of adoptive siblings to their adoptive brothers and sisters, but links back to the birth family, and birth siblings, in terms of the importance of continuity of relationships for the adopted child's welfare, were not considered.

For the time it was written, this was very progressive work that highlighted the need for children's own interests to be paramount. However, it also gave continuing legitimacy to secrecy and the 'clean break' model of adoption, by stating that children could not develop a sense of permanence in their adoptive families by continuing to have links with their past, because they would not be able to develop secure attachments to their adoptive parents. Paradoxically, this attitude aimed to have children's interests as

paramount, but actually meant that children lost their sense of identity with their birth family – something which began to be understood more in later years.

This American perspective was in contrast to Triseliotis's work (published in 1973 – the same year as Goldstein's) in the UK on the importance of adopted people being enabled to understand their birth origins in order to assist their identity development. Triseliotis emphasised the importance of adopted people having the appropriate knowledge about the circumstances of their adoption. He did not advocate continuing contact, but he took the work in this area forward.

Adoption placements reached their peak in 1968 with 26,986 adoption orders made in that year (Home Office, 1972). The number of orders declined rapidly after this, following significant social changes in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s (discussed below). The Houghton Committee was appointed by the Government in 1969 to consider the law, policy and procedure in relation to adoption, and part of their brief was to consider the links between adopted people and their birth families. The committee's interim working paper (Home Department, 1970) strongly supported continuing secrecy and anonymity for adopters and birth parents, on the basis of protecting adopters from 'interference' or fear of interference from birth parents, and in order to prevent birth parents from the 'temptation' to watch their child's progress (paragraph 231). Their view was that abolition of this anonymity could threaten the security of the child's adoptive placement, and distress could be caused to birth parents if their children tried to trace them in later years. However, the committee also acknowledged that birth mothers felt less of a need to conceal that they had had an illegitimate child due to the changing social climate. In considering greater openness, the interim working paper stated that this did not necessarily have to entail the adopted person knowing the names of their birth parents, but they should have access to more generalised and non-identifying information. The committee also advocated extending the use of serial numbers to birth parents, in order to preserve their anonymity if they so wished, but this was not implemented.

The language used in this interim working paper, describing birth parents as potentially 'interfering' or being 'tempted' to watch their child's progress, suggests that their role, the loss they suffered, and their needs were given less priority than the needs of the

adoptive parents and children for security and stability in the adoptive placement, although concern was expressed about the wish to minimise distress to birth parents by children trying to trace them in later years.

As part of their review of adoption law, the Houghton Committee commissioned research (Triseliotis, 1973) into the use of birth records and the extent to which birth family members were traced in Scotland, since their right to access their original birth records from 17 years of age had been enshrined in legislation since the Adoption of Children (Scotland) Act (1930). The interim report expressed grave reservations about this practice, and at that point wished to consider revoking this right in line with English / Welsh legislation at that time, which allowed access to birth records only with permission of the court via an order. No mention is made of birth siblings in either the interim working paper or the final report, with the emphasis solely being solely on birth parents. However, the implication in their interim proposals suggests that it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for adopted children placed away from any siblings (or who had full / half siblings born in their birth family later) to find out about them in adulthood.

The Houghton Committee was strongly influenced by Triseliotis's (1973) study into adopted people's search for their origins. Triseliotis noted how important it was for the adopted adults interviewed in his study to find out about their birth origin and identity, and concluded that this would help them better understand themselves and their own life history. He emphasised that no adopted people should have to be cut off from their birth origins on a permanent basis. The Houghton Committee therefore reversed its original view, despite considerable opposition, and recommended that all adopted adults should have the right to access their original birth records from the age of eighteen, following compulsory counselling (for pre-1975 adoptions), so that they might not be precluded from finding out the information they needed in relation to their birth origins. This recommendation was translated into law in the Children Act (1975), consolidated by the Adoption Act (1976), and placed a duty on local authorities and independent adoption agencies to provide this service.

The Children Act (1975) moved to a model of adoption that began to become slightly more 'open', with recognition of the importance of birth origins to adopted people, and

that the welfare of the child should be the paramount consideration. However, whilst granting access to birth records was a radical step at the time, and a definite move towards greater openness in relation to birth origins, it was nevertheless limited. There was no consideration of greater openness in relation to, for example, adopted children being given a greater understanding of their life history on an on-going basis, or of the possibility of birth family contact post-placement, and adoption was still fundamentally based on the concept of 'rescuing' a child from their birth family situation and giving them a 'fresh start' (Fratter, 1996).

Significant social policy shifts within British society during the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in relation to divorce, single parenthood, the legalisation of abortion and improved birth control, alongside greater material resources being present through the welfare state to support lone parents, meant that far fewer babies were given up for adoption. Research was also carried out at that time which considered sibling placement, and Rowe and Lambert's (1973) seminal study, which focused on 2,812 children waiting for permanent substitute families, found that almost without exception social workers aimed to keep sibling groups together. In the climate of adoption at that time, the authors noted that sibling groups were seen to be largely unadoptable as they were not single children, and were usually placed in residential establishments. This meant that whilst most were placed together (84% in this study), they were not afforded the opportunity of a permanent family placement through adoption elsewhere, even though 41% of the children had no contact whatsoever with their birth parents. This highlights the importance of tracking the choices and decisions that have been taken, and are being taken, regarding children's placements (for example, residential provision / fostering, adoption / fostering), and the life-long implications for adopted people of these choices, particularly in relation to placing sibling groups together or apart, and the provision of contact when sibling groups are separated.

More attention was therefore given to children who had previously been considered 'hard to place' or 'unadoptable', including older children, sibling groups, those who had disabilities and children from minority ethnic groups (Triseliotis et al, 1997; Thoburn et al, 1986). These children were often older and, given their age, more likely to have relationships with their birth family (including siblings) that they could remember, a clearer understanding of their identity, and perhaps a sense of 'belonging', or loyalty to

their birth family. In addition, growing numbers of children who had experienced abuse or neglect in their birth families were requiring permanent substitute placements. For example, Thoburn and Rowe (1988) noted in their survey of 1,100 'special needs' children placed for adoption by voluntary adoption agencies that 58% of the children had a history of deprivation or abuse.

Research conducted in the 1980s in relation to these 'hard to place' groups, who were usually placed in foster or residential care, began to highlight that the maintenance of links for these children with their birth families (including siblings) was an important stabilising factor in these placements, and that the children's emotional health could suffer if these links were not supported (see Rowe et al, 1984; Milham et al 1986; Barth and Berry, 1988; Haimes and Timms, 1985). Some of these studies were published by the Department of Health and Social Security in 1985, and could arguably be seen to have influenced the development of the Children Act (1989), with its clear emphasis on the importance of maintaining family links for children in care.

However, Thoburn (1996) noted that despite a lack of empirical support, social work practice in adoption in the UK during the 1980s and early 1990s continued to emphasise the 'clean break' model of adoption, with the need for children to sever all ties with their birth families in order to develop positive attachments to their adoptive family. Hence contact post-adoption was seen as disruptive and not given positive consideration, unless (usually) older children were seen to have significant ties with their birth family. The implication here is that when children were not placed together for adoption, they could also lose all contact with siblings as well as their birth parents, and hence lose what could be a potential life-long relationship. Maluccio et al (1986: 201) comment that for these children contact could be maintained simply as a way of reducing fantasies about reunion, and of 'maintain[ing] a sense of reality about the problems that caused the separation'. This was a rather negative approach to continuing contact, but could be seen to be based primarily on the concerns about continuing contact with birth parents rather than siblings, given the emphasis on reinforcing the reasons for adoption.

Social work practice in the UK continued to be influenced by the values and practices of the adoption aspects of the 'permanence movement' in the United States of America (Thoburn, 1991). Maluccio and Fein (1983: 197) defined 'permanency planning' as:

> 'the systematic process of carrying out, within a brief time-limited period, a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish life-time relationships'.

The development of the permanency movement in the US was a response to the perceived failure of the previous emphasis in the 1960s and early 1970s on preventative and rehabilitative social work with children and their families (PIU, 2000). It aimed to prevent drift for children who were in living arrangements that were temporary, such as foster homes or residential care, or 'precarious', (Maluccio et al, 1986: 3) such as living in birth families where there were concerns about parenting or with relatives where there was no legal security. The premise here was where possible to enable children to remain living with their birth families. However, where this was assessed as not being in their best interests, then following clear assessments and care planning within a relatively short time period, a permanent substitute placement should be found in order for children's lives to be predictable and have the continuity and attachment relationships they require in order to maximise their chances of positive development.

Maluccio et al (1986: 164) highlighted the importance of birth family contact during the period when assessments and planning are underway, stating that 'even when children cannot live with their biological parents, they continue to belong to them ... Regardless of outcome, their sense of roots and heritage should be theirs to keep.' However, their views of a child 'belonging' to their adoptive family rather than their birth family after adoption are underlined when, having made permanent plans for adoption, they state that 'at that point, visits with the biological parents should focus on the termination of that relationship, so the child can be prepared to become engaged with new parents' (Maluccio et al, 1986: 166). Thus, when adoption became the plan, a 'clean break' was required in order for new attachments to be able to form. A sense of a child's roots and heritage was encouraged for most through the provision of life story work, rather than continuing contact.

Social work consideration of contact post-adoption has changed and developed significantly over the last twenty years. There has been the recognition that 'closed' adoptions do not help children and young people to resolve identity concerns (Triseliotis, 1973; Haimes and Timms, 1985); that older children often have significant ties with birth family members that they do not wish to sever (Fratter et al, 1991; Quinton et al, 1998); and that rather than preventing new attachments developing, contact may assist stability in the new placement (Barth and Berry, 1988; Fratter, 1996; Lowe et al, 1999; Neil, 2004). Fratter's (1991) study reported on a large number of children who had been placed for adoption or who were in foster care in the 1980s. She noted that at that time thirty per cent of the children had on-going contact plans with their relatives. However, these were usually older children, and she also noted that only eight per cent of the children who were placed under five years of age had any contact with their birth families. However, more recent studies have indicated that some form of contact post-placement (either direct or indirect) is now much more usual (see Lowe et al, 1999 (discussed below) and Neil and Howe, 2004). The Prime Minister's Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) indicated that at least 70% of adopted children and young people had some form of on-going contact with some of their birth relatives (3.141), although this is predominantly indirect, 'letterbox' contact, with direct contact happening much less frequently (approximately 30% of the cases looked at by Neil, 2004).

The introduction of the Children Act (1989) marked a significant legal and policy shift towards greater openness in care arrangements for children, and away from the child 'rescue' focus of the 1975 Children Act (Fratter, 1996). It made explicit the need to place the best interests of children as paramount in any consideration of their welfare; that partnership working with birth families should be present; that children should be brought up within their own birth families where possible; and that where this is not possible, children should maintain contact with their birth families, where this is in their best interests. The 1989 Act also emphasised the duty on local authorities to place a child with his or her siblings (if they also require placement away from home), insofar as this is 'reasonably practical and consistent with his welfare' (s 23(7)(b)). The guidance that accompanied this Act further underlined the importance of contact being maintained between siblings if they are not able to be placed together, providing it is in their best interests (Schedule 15(1)(c)).

The recognition of the significance of sibling relationships in the Children Act (1989) and current statutory guidance on care planning and adoption (HM Government, 2010; Department for Education, 2011) demonstrates an increasing awareness of the importance of birth family relationships for children and young people. However, the extent to which it has been followed through in practice is open to debate, given the significant number of children who continue to be separated from their siblings through adoption, and the difficulty of establishing and maintaining sibling contact post-adoption (Kosonen, 1996; Ivaldi, 2000; Rushton et al, 2001; Neil, 2004), particularly when issues that would mitigate against children being placed together or not having contact, such as sibling abuse and strong preferences by the child not to have on-going contact, are not present . These issues will be considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

A number of studies, some of which are discussed below, have explored the separate but linked issues of placement with siblings and contact post-placement. They highlighted some important areas for consideration regarding increased openness in adoption and siblings, which the Government considered during the long development of the Adoption and Children Act (2002) (DOH, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1996 and 2000). Wedge and Mantle's (1991) seminal study explored siblings referred for permanent placements (n = 160, in 71 sibling groups), and found that decisions were most often made in relation to placing siblings together on the basis of whether or not they had a 'strong bond'. However, they also found that social workers found it almost impossible to articulate what a 'strong bond' meant; there was a lack of information about sibling interactions on file; and that the decision to split / not split, and the placement success was not based on the presence or absence of positive / negative feelings between the siblings. They concluded that since the siblings' feelings towards each other were not a factor in the overall success of placements, this should not be given the weight it had been in placement decisions, particularly in the light of the lack of research literature and guidance at that time on the relative importance of sibling relationships in general.

A complicating factor within adoption law was that the Adoption Act (1975) neither prohibited nor encouraged contact for children with their birth families (Neil, 2000). A local authority circular 'Adoption – achieving the right balance' published in 1998 (LAC (98) 20) highlighted the importance of sibling placement and contact by stating:

'In the exceptional case where siblings cannot be placed together with the same family, it is important for agencies to ensure that contact arrangements with other siblings are given very careful attention and plans for maintaining contact are robust'. (paragraph 58)

However, there is no evidence to date that sibling groups being placed apart is viewed as 'exceptional', but rather it is more exceptional when they are placed together (see chapter 3). Furthermore, the same document also conveys what could be interpreted as a somewhat tentative attitude to on-going contact with birth relatives post-adoption by stating that 'for some children, contact may provide a positive aid to a successful placement with their new family' (paragraph 57), and that it should not be used as a 'bargaining tool' to obtain parental consent to adoption (paragraph 56). Further, it remained difficult to ensure that contact plans were legally robust, because children's needs for contact with their siblings and other birth family members need to be flexible in order to change and develop over time according to their needs, which cannot easily be reflected in law.

Following the implementation of the Children Act (1989) in October 2001, it was recognised that adoption policy and practice as enshrined in the 1975 Adoption Act had moved on, with an emphasis, among other issues, on greater openness in arrangements than was envisaged by the 1975 Act (Fratter, 1996). The Government commissioned an Inter-Departmental Working Group in 1989 to consider the way forward in relation to adoption. Following the publication of several background and discussion papers in 1990–1992, the Review was published as a consultation document (DOH, 1992). The Review provided cautious support for increased openness in adoption arrangements, but stated that the possibility of contact or no contact does not automatically follow from the severance of legal ties:

'Although adoption involves the severance of all legal ties with one's birth family, there is no inherent reason why this should preclude the possibility of some contact being maintained, nor should it preclude the possibility that there is no contact at all'.

The Review was also considered to have a greater child focus than the previous legislation, in line with the requirements of the Children Act (1989) (Fratter, 1996). However, when the White Paper 'Adoption: The Future' was published in 1993, it emphasised that contact post-placement 'must often be balanced with the need to avoid

undermining the full development and stability of the child's relationship with the new legal parents, or the reasonable wishes and feelings of the adoptive parents themselves' (paragraph 4.17). This therefore continued to give priority to the child's relationship with their adoptive parents, and did not fully consider how contact with birth siblings, which arguably would not have the same threat of undermining a placement, could be promoted as a distinct form of contact.

The 1992 Review also recommended extending the adoption contact register to a two-way passing of information when birth families requested information about an adopted relative, provided the adopted person agreed (Recommendation 30). However, this was not considered in the White Paper or the subsequent draft Adoption Bill (1996). The Review also considered in some detail the provision of post-adoption services to all parties affected by adoption, but in the White Paper and subsequent draft Adoption Bill (1996), reference is made to local authorities not incurring additional costs to provide this service, and clarity is not provided about what type of support should be given, to whom or for how long. However, the Bill was not presented to Parliament, and it was not until 2000 that adoption began to be given a higher profile following the 'Quality Protects' agenda and the Prime Minister's personal interest in adoption (Ball, 2002).

The current picture

Since 2001, adoption law has been radically overhauled to bring it in line with the Children Act (1989) and current practice. The length of time this has taken perhaps reflects the range of complexities and dilemmas present in adoption law, policy and practice, particularly given the significant change in the profile of children adopted today, who have predominantly suffered significant abuse and neglect within their birth families.

The Labour Government's 'Quality Protects' agenda following the 1997 general election identified that there should be an increased use of adoption for children in care who cannot return home to their birth families, and the Department of Health (1999) decided to make this a performance indicator of good practice (Ball, 2002). In 2000 the Prime Minister commissioned a Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000), which acknowledged that since the previous legislation was passed in 1975, the landscape of adoption had changed significantly. Most children being adopted were now in the public care system

(aside from step-parent and inter-country adoptions), were older, often had siblings and had usually suffered some form of abuse and neglect. In 1998/9 2,200 looked-after children were adopted from a total of 55,300 in the care system (4%) (PIU, 2000: paragraph 2.4). The 2000 Review also highlighted that 80% of the children adopted from care had one or more siblings, but only 37% were placed with at least one of them (PIU, 2000; from Ivaldi, 2000). Several relevant recommendations were made as a result of this Review, including targets for adopter recruitment for the most needed groups, including sibling groups (Recommendation 10), reviewing adoption allowances (Recommendations 18–24), clarifying the requirements of post-adoption support (Recommendations 26–39), and contact (Recommendations 46–46).

Following consultation, the Department of Health published the White Paper 'Adoption: A New Approach' (2000), which took forward recommendations from the Review of Adoption (2000), including highlighting the need to develop National Adoption Standards in the UK, given the variation in practice between adoption agencies and the level of delay in decision-making that is sometimes present for children. It also highlighted the need for further legislation which would bring adoption practice in line with the Human Rights Act (1998). Article 8 of the Human Rights Act (1998) regards the respect for privacy in family life as particularly relevant in matters of post-adoption contact, and supports the view that siblings living together should not be separated. The 2000 White Paper also proposed placing the following duties upon adoption agencies that are relevant in the consideration of birth siblings and separation / contact:

(1)   to make the paramount importance of a child's needs absolutely central to any decision-making regarding adoption (in line with the Children Act (1989));

(2)   to provide comprehensive adoption support services for adopted children, adoptive families and birth families 'for as long as it is needed' (and the right for adoptive families to request an assessment for such services);

(3)   to provide adopted people with consistency of access to information about their family history and their adoption.

The subsequent Adoption and Children Act (2002), which was implemented in 2005, also emphasises the importance of giving full consideration to a child's birth family relationships and identity needs with the requirement to give consideration to the 'the likely effect on the child (throughout his life) of having ceased to be a member of the original family and become an adopted person' (s 1(4)(c)), and to consider 'the relationship which the child has with relatives, and with any other person in relation to whom the court or agency considers the relationship to be relevant' (s 1(4)(f)). In relation to sibling placement, the National Minimum Standards, set out in the Care Standards Act (2000) and amended in 2011, emphasise that, where possible, children should live with their brothers and sisters if this is their assessed need (s 2.2); that birth families (including siblings) receive the required support before and after placement (s 9.1); and that adoptive parents are supported when needed to enable the placement to be successful (Standard 6).

However, underlying these provisions is the concept of placing siblings together 'where practicable' (Children Act, 1989; Adoption and Children Act, 2002). New care planning guidance (HM Government, 2010) provides some clarification on the definition of 'practicable' by stating that:

> 'Local authorities should not assume, for instance, that it is 'not reasonably practicable' to secure appropriate accommodation because it is difficult to do so or because there is a lack of resources' (3.181: 78).

As will be explored in chapter 3, the practical difficulties of securing placements for sibling groups in terms of resources, alongside organisational pessimism about the likelihood, and wisdom, of placing siblings together does impact on sibling placements (Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). Hollows and Nelson (2006: 312) underline this point by stating that 'practicableness becomes subsumed with pragmatism' in relation to sibling placements. However, the guidance is very clear that these issues cannot be accepted as 'practicable'.

One of the main issues given consideration during this process of adoption reform was adoption support services, which have now been given the regulatory framework that was lacking previously. The new system encompasses the needs of birth families, adopted people and adoptive families, and places a duty on adoption agencies to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the need for adoption support services, if this

is requested. Support services are defined broadly, and can include issues such as financial support; assistance with direct and indirect contact arrangements (including sibling contact); preparing, linking and matching adopters, children and birth families prior to adoption; therapeutic support; birth records information for adopted adults and their birth families; supporting / reviewing placement disruptions; and the provision of support groups for those affected by adoption.

However, whilst the Adoption and Children Act (2002) makes post-adoption support services a requirement for all adoption agencies, it only places a duty on them to assess families for support. The Government's view in the Review and the White Paper was that many of the support services required by adopters are already present through existing services, and that part of the work of the assessment would be to identify needs and how they could be met. Research has recently been undertaken which has assessed how effective different types of adoption support are (see Rushton and Monck, 2009; Dance et al, 2010; Neil et al, 2010), and this will be discussed further in Chapter 3. However, whilst the Act recognises the significance of birth family relationships, including sibling relationships, it will not necessarily change the face of adoption in relation to the active maintenance of links / contact with siblings, particularly given the relatively small number of adoptions where direct contact is maintained with them, as discussed above.

A new provision was enshrined in this Act which, for the first time, permits birth relatives to trace their adoptive relatives via an intermediary service. Whilst the provision of an Adoption Contact Register has been present in legislation since the Adoption Act (1975), this was not enacted until 1992, and allowed for adopted people only to make the first approach. Increased understanding of the needs of birth families to find out what has happened to their relatives and to deal with their experiences of loss (see Winkler and Van Keppel, 1984; Rockel and Ryburn, 1988; Pavlovic and Mullender, 1999), alongside the lobbying of agencies such as NORCAP in the UK (Hodgkins, 1999), has led to the provision of the two-way register. Further research is needed to examine how this operates in practice and who within the birth family chooses to use it.

The issue of how to assess whether placement and / or contact with siblings is consistent with their welfare and in their best interests remains complex and difficult. It could be argued that the provisions in the Children Act (1989) and the Adoption and Children Act (2002) show some ambivalence about contact post-adoption with all members of the birth family. Sibling relationships, in particular, are unique, extremely difficult to understand, and often have periods of time from childhood to old age where there are high levels of hostility and rivalry, alongside periods of warmth and mutual support (this is explored further in Chapter 2). There has also been an emphasis on exploring the *attachment* relationships of siblings (see Lord and Borthwick, 2008). This could, arguably, have some relevance where older siblings act as care-givers for their younger brothers and sisters. However, given that attachment is fundamentally about care-givers providing a secure base from which to explore the world (Fahlberg, 1981), it is perhaps more appropriate to look at the *relationship quality* between siblings rather than use the term 'attachment'.

There is also a significant dilemma regarding siblings in terms of two principles enshrined in the Children Act (1989) and the Adoption and Children Act (2002): that of keeping siblings together, but also achieving permanency. As Rushton et al (2001) note, this can often lead to the two principles being in conflict with one another, particularly when maintenance of the sibling group could mean one or more of the siblings leaving positive carer attachment relationships in order to live with brother and sisters.

There is no straightforward answer to this dilemma, and a greater understanding of sibling relationships over the life course is required through further research into the sibling relationships of adopted people in order to understand the particular factors that are relevant when considering the placement of sibling groups and contact issues. It may be that when considering children's needs post-placement, one of those needs could be the consideration of how to actively maintain links between siblings, whether placed together or apart and irrespective of their current relationship, in order to allow for the possibility of the sibling relationship developing over time.

The Coalition Government's current focus on adoption emphasises reducing delay in care proceedings (alongside the Family Justice Review's 2011 recommendations), securing permanent adoptive placements for children rapidly from a wider pool of

adopters, and increasing support post-placement. However, the rhetoric present in their action plan (Department for Education, 2012) is in some ways reminiscent of the 'clean break' approach to adoption, where the emphasis is on having a fresh start in a new family. There is little mention of contact needs after adoption, and given the plan to reduce care proceedings to 6 months (Family Justice Review, 2011), there is likely to be an impact on decision-making and planning for sibling groups, which given their complexity can take time to fully consider.

Summary

Adoption law, policy and practice has, over time, increasingly recognised adopted children's dual connection to their birth and adoptive families, and this acceptance has led to an increase of interest in the sibling relationships of adopted people. The recognition regarding the importance of on-going support for adoptive families is also significant, and underlines a major policy shift in recognising not only birth family relationships themselves, but also their complexity for all parties. However, the legal, policy and practice focus on adoption as the dominant permanent placement choice for babies and young children has had the effect of splitting up sibling groups, with the perceive need for a permanent placement often over-riding the desire to keep a sibling group together. In addition, the consideration of contact, and especially sibling contact, how it works in practice, and the complexities it potentially presents, is still under-researched, and the voices of adopted children and adults need to be heard more through further research.

Having considered the legal, policy and research context of adoption and siblings, the focus of the next chapter moves to exploring how sibling relationships are experienced across the life-span for children who grow up in intact families. An understanding of this is important in order to consider the context of the life-long implications of adoption on sibling relationships.

Chapter 2:   Siblings and siblinghood - a life-span perspective

Introduction

Sibling relationships are diverse and unique, and therefore difficult to understand. They have frequently featured in legend, history, film, television and literature – from Cain and Abel, through Hansel and Gretel to Frasier and Alice Walker's 'The Colour Purple'. These stories highlight the full spectrum of emotions present in sibling relationships: from conflict and rivalry, to love and mutual support – often at the same time. It is necessary to review the research literature in relation to siblings in general in order to understand more about these relationships, before focusing in later chapters on how adopted people in particular experience sibling relationships. Most sibling research has predominantly been undertaken with siblings in intact families (including those experiencing adversity) in order to explore this relationship through the life-span, and this will be the focus of this chapter. It is important to consider this research because adoption serves to legally sever the ties between siblings, whether or not they remain in touch throughout childhood, and research into intact families and those experiencing adversity has important messages about the life-course of siblings' relationships in these circumstances. Further research has been undertaken, particularly in relation to children, looking at sibling relationships in adoption and fostering, and this will be the focus of the following chapter.

Who is a sibling?

The issue of who is defined as a sister and brother is complex and many-faceted. Common definitions of 'siblings' assume a shared biological relationship with at least one parent, and the Oxford English Dictionary (2008) uses this definition when describing the words 'brother' and 'sister'. However, as noted earlier, family structures have become more complicated and diverse since the rise of divorce, re-marriage and co-habitation: with full siblings, half siblings, step-siblings and siblings by association becoming increasingly common. Children may live with some or all of their siblings for their entire childhood or part of it; some siblings may live outside their households through being adults and independent, or through being fostered and adopted; and others might never live with or know their siblings.

Focusing on the biological sibling tie (or common genes) alone neglects an essential component of siblinghood: that of shared common history, family values and culture; or how the sibling relationship is socially constructed and maintained within families (Elgar and Head, 1999). Elgar and Head (1999: 21) summarise the diversity of these relationships in the following table, and define 'siblings' as people who either share common genes; share common history, values and culture; and / or have a shared legal status:

Fig 2.1
Types of sibling relationships (from Elgar and Head, 1999)

	Common genes	Common history, family values and culture	Common legal status
Full siblings brought up together	√	√	√
Full siblings brought up apart / separated during childhood	√	*Some*	√
Full siblings, one placed away from another at birth	√	*No*	√ *(unless adopted)*
Half siblings, brought up together	*Some*	√	*No*
Half siblings brought up apart / separated during childhood	*Some*	*Some*	*No*
Half siblings, brought up by one parent, never lived with half siblings	*Some*	*No*	*No*
Adopted children	*No*	*Some*	√
Step-siblings	*No*	*Some*	*No*
Foster children (non-related children)	*No*	*Some*	*No*

A child born into their birth family and subsequently adopted would share common genes with some or all of their birth siblings. Depending on their age at adoption they may also share some common history, culture and family values with them. They may also share this with any foster family they have lived with in the intervening time

between leaving their birth family and moving to their adoptive placement. However, as the chart above shows, they would also share common history, values and culture with any adoptive siblings, alongside a common legal status. Hence, a wider definition of 'sibling', which moves beyond the biological and encompasses the development of identity through common history, values and culture, allows for a greater understanding of the complexity and diversity of this relationship. This is especially relevant for adopted people, for whom the definition of 'sibling' may include those related by genes as well as social factors within their birth family and adoptive family.

These definitions, however, look at sibling relationships from the outside in, and do not generally take direct account of who children and adults define as their brothers and sisters. As Halpern (2009: 3–4) states:

> 'If it feels like a sibling relationship to at least one of the children ... complicated by all the messiness of personal relationships – which will include ambivalence and even some negative emotions such as jealousy –then for all effective purposes, the two people are siblings'.

Edwards et al (2006) carried out two studies, one examining the perspectives of children in middle childhood (7–13 years old) and one with sibling groups aged 5–21 years, regarding their sibling relationships. They used circle maps with the children and young people in order to identify how they defined siblings, friends and family. Edwards et al (2006) found a complex inter-relationship between biological and social ties in relation to defining siblings, with some children emphasising the biological connection, others defining a sibling in terms of their social ties, emotional connection and proximity to one another, and others emphasising both. Proximity was not always found to be a pre-requisite for increasing the feeling of emotional closeness, as some children in their study who knew of siblings (usually step-siblings) but had never met them identified a feeling of emotional closeness when they thought about them. The children were also clear about the difference between a sibling and a friend, although some talked of siblings as 'being like friends', while others spoke of friends as 'like a brother or sister'. This suggests that a sibling relationship was seen as qualitatively different from a friendship, yet aspects of both can and do feature in each relationship. The authors concluded that simplistic definitions of 'sibling', which consider only biological relationships and co-residence, do not fully represent how children socially construct their sibling relationships. They stated that:

'Their understandings encompassed constructions of social as well as biological ties ... and drew attention to the subjective nature of sibling relationships. The quality of relationships with sisters and brothers was important to children and young people, entailing a sense of self that is connected to and separate from others, collectively and individually'. (Edwards et al, 2006: 20)

The studies carried out by Edwards et al (2006) were conducted with children who resided with at least one of their birth parents, but they have an important message for children within the care system who require permanency planning. It is of vital importance that when permanency decisions are made about sibling groups, account is taken not just of siblings with a biological or social connection, but who is important to each of the siblings.

Kosonen (1999) undertook a study with 21 children in foster care in Scotland who were drawn from 11 family groups, looking at who in their family was important to them. She compared their views with their social workers' knowledge of the family composition, and found that a third of the siblings named by the children as important were not known to the social workers. As Herrick and Piccus (2009) note, permanency decisions continue to be made largely by the adults working with children, and the children concerned are still not asked enough about who they feel constitutes a sibling. Permanency planning has life-long consequences for sibling groups, in terms of who they are placed with and with whom they continue to be in contact, either directly or indirectly. Understanding sibling connections through the eyes of the children concerned will assist in the development of permanency plans that more accurately reflect who is important to them, and therefore who it will be important to maintain a connection with, directly or indirectly, in the long term.

The question 'Who am I?' is a fundamental building block of identity which encompass biological and social elements. For adopted people (particularly those who have been separated from their birth siblings with no on-going contact) this question is more complex to answer. Although they share common genes with their birth family, the sharing of common history, values and culture may be very limited. They do not share common genes with their adoptive family, and a coherent life narrative is often difficult to acquire. Furthermore, adoptive identity encompasses the shared history, values and culture of the adoptive family (including adoptive siblings), alongside the legal status of being a full member of the adoptive family. Very little is known at present about how adopted adults experience and understand their sibling relationships, but research is

clear that sibling relationships impact on identity development through the life-span (Dunn, 2008; Cicirelli, 1995).

Siblings and sibling relationships through the life-span

There has been considerable research into childhood sibling relationships, but fewer studies have explored this into adulthood and old age. However, from the work that has been completed to date, it is possible to have a framework of understanding regarding how sibling relationships develop over the life course and the factors which influence them.

Sibling relationships also need to be understood in relation to the cultural context within which they exist, which includes diversity between ethnic groups in the same country and social class differences (Sanders, 2004). Cicirelli's (1994) seminal work on siblings compared sibling groups from industrialised and non-industrialised countries. He found that sibling relationships were seen as obligatory in non-industrialised contexts, and were extremely important in relation to marital arrangements and economic activities. In industrialised societies he concluded that sibling relationships were seen as discretionary, and assumed less importance through life. However, given the durability and longevity of most sibling relationships in the western world, as outlined in the section on old age, this appears to be an over-simplification, and there are more subtle underlying factors, such as kinship connection and feelings of closeness which keep sibling relationships active and meaningful until well into old age.

It is important to note that what may be considered perfectly normal in one cultural context may be seen as abusive or unhelpful in another. For example, in industrialised nations the concept of older sibling care-giving for younger brothers and sisters can be seen to be harmful to older siblings in terms of them 'losing their childhood', and for younger siblings in relation to receiving a lesser quality of care. It can also be raised as an issue of concern when considering the placement of sibling groups, in order to relieve older children of their care-giving responsibilities. However, within other cultures, where sibling care-giving is accepted and necessary in order to support the family, siblings have been found to be competent care-givers (Mavise, 2011). Their role can be seen as a preparation for adult-hood; it raises self-esteem by providing vital support to the family; and promotes inter-dependence – something valued in many non-industrialised contexts. It is also important to remember that sibling care-giving

practices are not uniform and vary from family to family, as well as across cultures. There are, of course, consequences to sibling care-giving in both industrialised and non-industrialised countries, such as forfeiting education and having less autonomy. However, when considering sibling roles and relationships, it is important to understand the cultural context within which sibling groups are studied, alongside looking at both the positives and negatives, and the views of the siblings themselves.

Whilst there has been considerable psychological research carried out into parent and child relationships (often only mother and child), until the 1970s–1980s the psychological study of sibling relationships was predominantly cross-sectional and focused primarily on variables such as gender, age and birth order. Whilst helpful this did not reflect the complex and life-long nature of these relationships and the many other variables that impact on them (Sanders, 2004). The rigorous and systematic study of sibling relationships that has been undertaken since, largely by developmental psychologists, has usually focused on understanding the developmental pathways and characteristics of sibling relationships, the quality of these relationships and the factors within families that influence them, which can include factors such as gender and birth order. Some of this work has also been longitudinal, which provides an opportunity to assess the same sibling relationships over time rather than having a brief, cross-sectional 'snapshot'. However, the longitudinal studies have tended to focus on childhood through to adolescence; or on adult sibling relationships over time; or on exploring relationships retrospectively, with adults recalling their sibling experiences as children. To date, no longitudinal research has been carried out following the same groups of siblings from childhood and through adulthood.

The research that has been completed over the last 20–30 years has opened a window of understanding which is crucial for social workers working with sibling groups to understand and use in their practice, but can be limited at times in its applicability. For example, much of this work has looked at sibling pairs living with two parents, and does not consider the wider diversity and greater number of siblings which are often present today. It is also only very recently that sociological research has begun to examine the wider social construction of sibling relationships within our diverse society, and how contexts outside the family (such as peers, school, the local community) can shape and influence these relationships within the family (Edwards et al, 2006; Punch, 2008).

Childhood and adolescence

When considering sibling relationships in childhood, the seminal longitudinal work of Dunn and colleagues in particular (see, for example, Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn and Munn, 1987; Dunn, 1988; Dunn and Plomin, 1990; Dunn, 1992) has led to significant advances in our understanding of the factors that influence the quality and meaning of these relationships over time. She notes that 'the relationship between young siblings is distinctive in its emotional power and intimacy, its qualities of competitiveness, ambivalence, and of emotional understanding that can be used to provoke or support' (1988: 199). Two elements of the childhood and adolescent sibling relationship are important to consider:

(1)   the nature of the sibling relationship; and
(2)   the influence of sibling relationships on socialisation.

The nature of the sibling relationship

In early childhood (pre-school), brothers and sisters will normally spend more time together than with their parents or peers by virtue of their immediate proximity to one another (McHale and Crouter, 1996). They therefore know each other very well, so the relationship has the potential to have a powerful intensity which can be expressed (often in a very uninhibited manner) through emotions such as conflict, co-operation, teasing, bullying and affection, often at the same time. Dunn and Kendrick's (1982) observational study of siblings in early childhood found that, contrary to popular belief at that time, young siblings had a sophisticated understanding of one another. They stated that: 'our observations showed there was a wide range and complexity of feelings expressed, and considerable pragmatic understanding of how to annoy and how to console the other' (1982: 42).

However, siblings within the same families can have very different experiences of that family life, and of being a sibling, even when variables such as family membership, schools and the local community remain constant, and children who grow up together are often very different people. This is a complex area, and the research outlined below considers the impact of the non-shared and shared environments within families and

how this contributes to the development both of the sibling relationship and of the individual.

Birth order and age gap

Psychological research which has considered the effect of birth order and age gap on siblings has tended to focus on the roles and expectations which arise from the order in which siblings are born (Boer and Dunn, 1992; Mcguire et al, 2000). Dunn (2008) in her overview of sibling research also notes that the quality of the relationship between sibling pairs is more associated with the older sibling's affection, interest or hostility than the second-born's feelings, and longitudinal research carried out by Dunn and Kendrick (1982) showed that this reaction of the older sibling is linked over time to the quality of the siblings' mutual relationship and behaviour with one another.

However, this research tends to view birth order as an ascribed position that is fixed and therefore not flexible. Recent sociological research carried out by Punch (2008) in Scotland explored children's social construction of their sibling relationship and the effect of birth order through semi-structured individual interviews with sibling groups of three (aged 5–17 years) in thirty families, and focus group interviews with the sibling triads. The research highlighted children's own agency in their negotiations with their siblings, and how hierarchical power relationships within the sibling triads are both accepted and resisted. For example, older siblings recognised the power they potentially have over the younger brothers and sisters (which was also recognised by the younger siblings), particularly physical power, the capacity to 'boss' their younger siblings and greater freedom and autonomy. Some older siblings also perceived their oldest status and therefore wider knowledge of the world as giving them the ability to teach their younger siblings. However, being the oldest also brought greater responsibilities for the care of younger siblings and being expected to set a good example, both of which were sometimes resisted.

Some psychological research sees the middle birth order position as the most difficult to negotiate, due to perceived lack of attention from the parents, and not being the first or last to do things (Leaman, 2002; Conley, 2004). But Punch's research showed that middle siblings often felt they had the best of both worlds rather than the worst, although they did experience a greater range of benefits and limitations in this position. The children were able to recognise that they experience being a younger and older

sibling, and they appreciated this flexibility; for example, in being taught by older siblings and having the experience of teaching younger ones too, and engaging in activities with both of them. However, they did state that they did not like not being the first or last to do things, and reported getting less attention from their parents. One participant stated that: 'Being in the middle is the worst because ... you're getting annoyed and bullied at the same time' (boy, aged 9: Punch 2008: 47). The youngest siblings reported that they had less power and autonomy than their older siblings, but also had less responsibility and received more attention, and could compensate for their lack of power by calling on their parents' support, particularly at times when they fell out with their older siblings.

Punch's study found that whilst birth order is important and does shape children's experiences of their sibling relationships in both enabling and constraining ways, the sibling hierarchies are both flexible and dynamic, with the flow of power being negotiated and managed on a daily basis. How one sibling perceives the birth order may be different from how another in the sibling triad sees it; and the level of typical characteristics which emerge are often influenced by the children's own level of competence, the bargaining resources that are available and the level of parental intervention.

The study looked at children who are full siblings in primarily two-parent households, and it would be useful to explore whether the same characteristics of power, flexibility and negotiation are present within other groupings of siblings (such as half siblings, step-siblings and combinations of birth and adoptive sibling groups). Nevertheless, the research has important messages both for permanency planning for sibling groups and in considering the social construction of sibling relationships.

Gender

Studies which have considered the influence of gender on sibling relationships have noted that gender differences begin to become apparent in middle childhood (Buhrmester, 1992), although this is not consistent. Buhrmester (1992) stated that by middle to late childhood, older sisters tend to have closer, confiding relationships with their younger siblings than older brothers. Dunn's (1992) study reported, however, that it was not until children had reached 12–13 years old that gender differences became

apparent, with male older siblings reporting less warmth and intimacy with their younger siblings than older girls.

Like birth order and age gap, the consideration of gender relationships in childhood needs to be looked at from a wider perspective, which takes account of the social construction of gender in order to understand its influence. Gender roles are not fixed or ascribed, but are influenced by other factors including parental views on gender and that of the wider cultural perspective within which the child lives. So, rather than looking at a causal relationship between gender and the sibling relationship, it is arguably more relevant to consider how roles of masculinity and femininity are experienced and played out by sibling groups. Edwards et al (2005) explored gender in children's sibling relationships through interviews with 58 children aged eight to twelve years who lived in forty-six households with 1–3+ siblings. They reported a fairly even split between genders, with half the sample being full siblings living with both biological parents, a quarter living in step-families and a quarter living in single-parent households with their biological mother.

The authors concentrated on everyday life as experienced by siblings, rather than using clinical populations, where significant issues could be present in the sibling relationship. Using a grounded theory approach, they found that 'children's common-place sibling relationship practices emerge as a significant form of gendered social learning' (2005: 14), and demonstrated how gender identity is significant in their levels or closeness or distance. They found that, in general, relationships between sisters expressed their connection through 'talk', while close relationships between brothers was expressed through doing activities together. Brother-sister relationships were largely played out on the male terms through doing things together rather than talking, and in all these different permutations the researchers found that gendered representations of masculinity and femininity were present. The authors noted that the sibling relationships were not static and changed over time, but the ways in which the children dealt with this, particularly in relation to older siblings leaving home, was often expressed in gendered ways. For example, many of the girls in the sample were able to maintain close relationships with their female siblings through actively keeping in touch by phone etc. The boys, whose focus on expressing their closeness was primarily through activities, often found it difficult, particularly when geography was an issue.

Therefore, the previous psychological research referred to earlier which looked at verbal expressions of closeness in order to quantify whether gender has an impact on relationship quality has missed out a crucial element, as observed by Edwards et al (2005): that of the different, gendered ways in which children express closeness to their siblings. For social workers working with sibling groups, it is very important to take this into account when assessing the quality of the relationship, because a child's gender does appear to influence how these relationships are expressed.

Relationships within the family

Other relationships within the family have been shown to have an influence on the nature of the sibling relationship. As Brody and Stoneman (1988: 119–120) note:

> 'Rarely can we conclude from the research that there is evidence of sibling influence that is clearly independent of other family factors, since differences in sibling relationships are closely linked to differences in other family relationships, and to the emotional climate of the family'.

For example, the arrival of a younger sibling has been shown to affect the mother-older sibling relationship prior to the birth, and particularly in the first few months afterwards. Touris et al (1995) examined children's attachments using Ainsworth's Strange Situation before and after the birth of a new sibling and found that attachments can be quite unstable during this period, but that children generally become more secure once again after the birth. The authors attributed this change to mothers putting all their time and psychological energy into preparing for the birth of the child. However, the study did not consider the quality of the child's attachment to their mother for a significant period before or after the birth, so it is difficult to properly assess these changes in attachment behaviour.

Other studies have also considered the impact on older siblings following the birth of a brother or sister. Dunn and Kendrick (1982) found that the relationship between mothers and older children following the birth of a new child saw an increase in confrontations and less time for the older child; an increase in sleep and feeding problems; and raised levels of anxiety and withdrawal. Although the direct effects on the older child have been shown to be temporary (Sanders, 2004), Dunn (2008) notes that the maternal older sibling relationship did not regain the levels of love and attention that it had prior to the birth of the new sibling. This will, of course, potentially

affect the relationship between the sibling pair, with jealousy and conflict often being by-products of such experiences. Sanders (2004) notes that they key here is how the older child is prepared for the birth of the sibling, and how parents include them at an early stage in their new sibling's life.

Attachment relationships within the family are also an important consideration here. Research has shown that children who have secure attachments to and a positive relationship with their parents will normally develop more positive, pro-social sibling relationships than those who have insecure attachments (Volling and Belsky, 1992; Brody et al, 1992). Parenting which is very punitive, over-controlling and negative has also been associated with sibling relationships which are hostile and aggressive (Dunn, 1988). However, these relationships are very complex, and it is difficult to establish the direction of causal influence.

The relationship between parents is an important factor when considering siblings, as this has been shown to have an impact on the sibling relationship. Positive spousal relationships have been linked to positive sibling relationships (Brody et al, 1992; Dunn et al, 1999), both in terms of the direct influence of the spousal relationship on the siblings and indirectly in the parent-child relationship. Spousal conflict and disharmony have been associated with more hostile and aggressive sibling relationships (Jenkins, 1992); but, conversely, it has also been found that a close sibling relationship can act as a buffer to hostile parental relationships (Brody and Stoneman, 1996).

However, hypotheses about sibling relationships being either congruent with parental relationship dynamics or compensating for them have been seen as independent from one another in the early studies noted above. Sheehan et al (2004) carried out a mixed methods study on a sample of 137 children and young people in Australia whose parents were in the process of divorcing, and compared the experiences of their sibling relationships to a sample of 165 children and young people who were living in intact families with no experience of divorce. They wanted to test whether congruent and compensating behaviours were simultaneously combined in sibling relationships rather than being mutually exclusive, and whether there were any differences between the two sample groups.

The study found that high levels of positivity and hostility co-existed as different dimensions of the sibling relationship, rather than being mutually exclusive, for both

sets of children and young people in the sample. However, for the children and young people whose parents were divorcing there were two differences. Firstly, there were increased levels of hostility present in the sibling relationships of divorcing families, which the authors claimed could be a result of increased parental conflict in the home and the impact this had on parenting. This is consistent with other research carried out on divorcing families (Jenkins, 1992; Hetherington, 1988). Secondly, siblings in divorcing families were over-represented in the 'affect-intense' group; that is, where high levels of conflict and high levels of warmth are present. Older siblings in this group provided significant nurture and support of their younger siblings, but this was not always well received. The older siblings' efforts were often perceived to be controlling and dominating by the younger siblings, and were perhaps reflective of the conflict in the home or parental parenting style. These findings are important when considering the sibling relationships of children requiring adoption, who may well live in families characterise by conflict, disharmony and parental neglect. It provides a window of understanding about how sibling relationships operate in adversity, and that the wider context of these relationships needs to be taken into account.

Sibling relationships and socialisation

As noted earlier, siblings provide a rich source of learning through the time they spend with each other due to their physical proximity and the play they undertake together, which is qualitatively different from the play which occurs with parents. As Dale (1989: 756) noted in her observational study: 'one type (without replica objects, and involving pretending with role identities / enactment, locations and psychological states) only appeared in games with the sibling'. This avenue of play provides a rich source of socialisation for children, particularly in their play with older siblings who can take on the role of teacher / mentor. Dunn and her colleagues have carried out considerable research (both observational and through interviews) into the role siblings play in socialisation (see, for example, Dunn and Munn 1987; Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, Brown and Bearsall, 1991; Brown and Dunn, 1996), and they have noted that co-operative relationships between older and younger siblings were associated with better social understanding for the younger siblings. For example, in one longitudinal study that followed children from 40 months to 6 years (Brown and Dunn, 1996) it was found that children who had a positive relationship with their older siblings at two years of age, and engaged in co-operative play together, were better at understanding emotion

over the following years, and that this was independent of other contributory factors. In addition, in Dunn and Munn's study (1987) they found that by the age of three years, children with older siblings usually had a good understanding of social rules and consequences, and could justify their position in any disputes. This suggests that having siblings, with their proximity and intense relationship, can play an important part in developing an early understanding of the mind and emotions of others.

There has also been research undertaken in relation to how siblings influence behavioural adjustment in one another. Dunn's (1988) Cambridge study followed sibling pairs from pre-school to adolescence, using unstructured observation and interviews. They found a link between older siblings' negative and hostile behaviour and younger siblings' development of aggression and style of conflict behaviour, even when the mother's level of irritability was controlled for. Conversely, positive sibling relationships based on co-operation to resolve conflict led to the younger sibling having greater pro-social and mediation skills as a teenager.

In childhood, there are therefore many influences within the family which are both shared and not shared between siblings, which have an impact both on the sibling relationship and on the development of the self. The patterns laid down in childhood and adolescence between siblings are clearly important and have the potential to influence how siblings relate throughout the rest of their lives. In adolescence, siblings typically begin to spend more time away from the family home with their friends, and these relationships grow in importance, as would be expected developmentally (Dunn, 1988). However, as Dunn (1988) found, whilst siblings may spend less time together during this time, there is considerable stability in terms of levels of warmth and hostility. This is also borne out in research regarding siblings in adulthood and old age, as the following sections discuss.

Sibling relationships in adulthood

While considerable research has been undertaken in relation to sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence, by comparison there has been very little research into sibling relationships in adulthood, particularly early and middle adulthood. The research which has been undertaken has largely been cross-sectional or retrospective (e.g. Ross and Milgram, 1982; Cicirelli, 1982), with, understandably, very little longitudinal research

given the challenges of researching over a long time period. Longitudinal research has been very limited, and often over a relatively short time span with a large age range of participants, in order to demonstrate the experience of the sibling relationship across a wide time-span (e.g. Cicirelli, 1992; White, 2001; Goetting, 1986).

Sibling research in adulthood has attempted to explore and explain how this relationship develops throughout the adult life-span and is maintained (or not). Several researchers highlight that in theory this relationship is discretionary in adulthood, with one having the choice whether or not to maintain these ties (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Connidis, 1992; Goetting, 1986). However, the reality is much more complex, as most people with siblings continue to have an active relationship (both positive and negative) with them throughout the course of their life, although this varies depending on the life stage of the siblings. Why this is so remains unclear, although the research outlined throughout this section provides clues regarding the nature and significance of sibling ties in adulthood and old age.

Early and middle adulthood

Early and middle adulthood is usually characterised by the development of increased individuation through establishing a life with greater independence from the family of origin (White, 2001) by, for example, leaving home, establishing a career, living with a spouse / partner and having children. Siblings are therefore removed from the intense proximity of childhood and adolescence, and their relationship usually changes and develops alongside this. However, as Dunn (2008) notes, the way in which siblings respond to different life events, particularly crises such as divorce, ill health or the death of elderly parents, is affected by the quality of the siblings' relationship, particularly their feelings of closeness to one another.

Early studies focused on sibling closeness and rivalry and the factors which influence this (Cicirelli, 1982; Ross and Milgram, 1982) as a way of understanding the sibling relationship in adulthood; and later studies (Gold, 1989; Connidis, 1992; Lee et al, 1990) have, by and large, replicated these early findings. Ross and Milgram's (1982) seminal study explored three dimensions of the adult sibling relationship: closeness; sibling rivalry; and how various critical incidents (such as marriage, and the death of parents) influenced the sibling relationships. They used focus groups with a total of 75 adults aged 22 to 93 years who had a range of 1 to 17 siblings, and interviewed a smaller sub-

sample in depth. Their findings were significant in terms of increasing the understanding of the dynamic nature of sibling relationships through the life course, and the factors which influence this.

All participants in the study found it very difficult to quantify the concept of 'closeness' in sibling relationships, particularly as it is an abstract concept; and most defined their closeness to siblings in relation to the closeness to the family as a whole. The authors found that closeness to family was more prominent in childhood and old age. In early / middle adulthood, more focus was given to spouses and children. Closeness to siblings showed variants over time, but a complete lack of closeness was rare, and participants in early adulthood often expressed their sibling relationships in terms such as friends, mentors, advisors or peers – as well as 'kin'.

When looking at the origins of 'closeness' to siblings, most participants drew on their shared experiences in childhood as being the most powerful contributory factor. Authors also noted that if there was a large age gap between siblings, if they had been separated when younger, or if parents were perceived as treating other siblings with favouritism, they may not have had the opportunity to grow close when young. However, other participants reported that the age gap promoted 'surrogate parenting' (p 228), which promoted closeness for them.

Participants who reported closeness also reported that they generally grew up in families where harmonious relationships were encouraged through a recognition of individual talents, an absence of favouritism, positive parental teaching strategies for getting along together and resolving conflict and shared family activities. Shared activities with siblings were also seen as important, such as study and recreational activities; and this was enhanced by a close physical proximity, for example sharing a room and living in geographically isolated areas. Groupings within siblings can have positive and negative effects: some groupings – such as 'the boys' and 'the girls' – promoted close bonding which continued throughout adulthood, while others reported they felt this led to differential treatment by parents which continued to be unresolved throughout adulthood.

As siblings went from childhood to adolescence, some participants reported that their shared history in childhood, alongside shared values and shared or complementary interests, increased bonding and led to close friendships developing between siblings

which lasted throughout adulthood. Closeness rarely originated in adulthood, however, although some who were not close in age forged closer ties when they lived near to one another in adulthood. More frequently, closeness increased with the benefit of greater age, understanding and tolerance for one another, and through resolving earlier differences, which suggests that sibling relationships can be dynamic and open to change.

An important factor which impacted on sibling relationships in early / middle adulthood was the marriage of siblings. Closeness was increased when siblings liked one another's spouses and shared similar values to the family. Closeness decreased when one sibling who had been very close to another married and the other felt rejected and resentful or when one sibling married someone from a different social class or ethnic group, or who did not share common family values. The change in closeness sometimes lasted a lifetime; for others, divorce provided an opportunity to rekindle closer sibling ties. These findings have been replicated by Bedford (1992), Connidis (1992), Cicirelli (1995) and White (2001).

A number of studies (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Goetting, 1986; Connidis, 1992) have found that when children are born to siblings this often has the effect of 'opening up' family ties again in positive ways, through shared concern and mutual support during child-rearing, where previously the sibling who had married had been primarily focused on their new spouse. As Connidis (1992: 980) notes, 'one of the developmental tasks of sibship in middle age may indeed be the support of one another's families, assisting in the success of the next generation, *not* of each family of procreation, but rather of the family of origin', highlighting the continued importance of kinship ties throughout adulthood.

Geographical moves were the most frequently occurring event at typical points in life, such as going to college, or getting married, and most were moves away from rather than closer to siblings. Geographical distance was perceived as reducing contact and feelings of closeness, particularly if the distance was maintained over a long period of time. Geographical distance was also used by some participants as a way of legitimising the emotional distance they felt with siblings or wider family, for example if they felt constrained by them or very conflicted. Age spacing also affected geographical moves, because some much older siblings had left home before they had a chance to develop

close relationships with younger siblings. Moves closer to siblings usually increased communication and feelings of closeness, and those who did not know each other well in childhood had the opportunity to do so later in life.

These findings in relation to geography are similar to other studies looking at sibling bonds in adulthood (Cicirelli, 1995; Connidis, 1992; White, 2001), which used geographical proximity and regularity of contact as measures of sibling closeness or distance. However, Ross and Milgram (1982) highlighted that whilst close physical proximity clearly played an important role in the development of closeness for their participants, both physical proximity and distance emerged as contributing towards feelings of closeness. They concluded that feelings of rivalry may also mean that geographical distance, where you don't have to see the other person too often, could actually result in greater feelings of closeness. This highlights the complex nature of the sibling relationship, and that measures such as geographical distance and levels of contact may not properly represent the feelings of closeness and 'kinship' between siblings.

In middle adulthood, parental illness and death has been identified as a significant life event within sibling relationships, where people move from 'socialising agents' to 'helping agents' (Cicirelli, 1995), and sibling relationships which may have been less important can become re-activated (Goetting, 1986). However, it has also been noted that siblings' response to the amount of care-giving expected of and received by them, and the levels of closeness or conflict which result from this and from parental death, are usually influenced by the sibling relationship prior to this event (Goetting, 1986; Cicirelli, 1995). So, whilst the relationship is no less dynamic, it would be rare for previously hostile siblings to become very close.

Old age

Within the research literature, old age has been almost universally defined as 'the post-retirement years' (aged 65+), where children have grown up and left the family home and the adults are no longer economically active.

In old age, mutual sibling support appears to be major task at this life stage (Cicirelli, 1995; Ross and Milgram, 1982; Goetting, 1986), with the frequency and regularity of

contact assuming greater importance in the maintenance of closeness. This may become more important in old age because people's own social networks decrease and siblings assume greater importance (Cicirelli, 1979). The type of mutual support offered to siblings in old age varies, but studies have typically found that physical, emotional, psychological and sometimes financial support is provided (Goetting, 1986; Cicirelli, 1995; White; 2001). Research also reports higher levels of closeness in old age than in earlier adulthood (Scott, 1983; Cicirelli, 1985), with earlier conflicts being sought to be resolved. As Ross and Milgram (1982: 232) note, the sibling relationship in old age can therefore feed into the 'function of affirming each other as objects of affection and care'.

Shared reminiscence has been shown to be at least as important in maintaining closeness as social network functions, and Ross et al (1981) suggested that dealing with memories may be a way of addressing Erickson's (1963) late developmental task regarding identity. This is illustrated by the following finding from Ross and Milgram's (1982: 233) research, which states that for their participants:

> 'Sharing recollections of happy childhood experiences and co-operative and rewarding interactions in adulthood appeared to be a major source of comfort and pride. Being able to do so seemed to confer a sense of integrity – one had lived one's life in harmony with the family and one's own values. Not being able to do so appeared to be a cause of discomfort, anguish and even despair'.

Given the levels of closeness and conflict within normal sibling relationships, this relationship is clearly durable and significant across the life-span, particularly given the high levels of individuals with a living sibling who remain in some form of contact until very late in life: Cicirelli (1979) reported 78% and Shanas (1968) reported 93% – although the former sample had an older sample, which could have affected the results.

Summary

In looking at the development of the sibling relationship from childhood to old age, the levels of closeness and rivalry that symbolise it across the life-span and the many factors which influence this, researchers have sought to understand what it is about this relationship which lends itself to being one of the most durable and stable life relationships. However, this is extremely complex, and much work still needs to be undertaken to understand the essence of why it is that, for example, even very

conflicted siblings tend not to lose touch over the life-span. Cicirelli (1996) describes sibling relationships in western cultures as optional, because they are not based on economic need in the same way as non-industrialised countries. This appears to be an over-simplification, however, which is illustrated by Ross and Milgram's (1982: 231) study when they asked conflicted siblings why they did not simply opt out of the relationship. They noted that:

> 'our participants were stunned. Most seemed to assume that sibling relationships are permanent. Some tried to explain, but did not get far beyond blood ties and family bonds. Very few, almost wistfully, realised that the question implied a choice – but the reality did not. When referring to 'the family' the participants' voices sounded as if they described an invisible space that enveloped the siblings, a space that protected but also confined'.

This implies that sibling relationships are not simply about need or choice, but something much more intangible, which involves blood ties, shared common experiences, obligation and emotional connection. It is therefore extremely difficult to quantify, and more detailed longitudinal research, which attempts to tease out these elements regarding kinship, is required in order to increase our understanding of this complex relationship.

Chapter 3: Sibling placement in foster care and adoption

Introduction

The previous chapters have examined the legal and policy context of adoption and what we know about siblings who grow up together. This chapter will therefore consider the literature in the context of sibling placement in adoption and fostering, in order to understand more about their experiences and outcomes. In considering these issues, studies that focus on siblings in foster care, kinship care and adoption have been reviewed. The rationale behind this is that children who are adopted today will usually have experienced a period in foster care, where crucial decisions regarding the placement of any siblings together or apart will have been made. In addition, whilst some members of a sibling group may be adopted, others may remain within the foster care system or living at home with their birth family, or indeed not have been born at the time decisions are made. There is very little adoption research literature that focuses solely on the experiences of siblings, so research that also examines foster placements and kinship care gives important insights into the world of children who live away from their birth parents, and the patterns, experiences and outcomes of sibling relationships. It is also important to highlight that very little is known about the experiences of adopted children and their adoptive siblings; the literature reviewed in this respect is very limited.

Methodological issues

There are significant methodological issues in researching sibling placements in foster care and adoption. The definition of 'who is a sibling?' is problematic, as previously discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Schlonsky et al (2005) have noted that when the study definition of 'sibling' is defined purely on biological or legal ties, this can preclude those relationships by affinity (for example step-siblings or foster siblings) where a strong emotional tie may be present. Failure to include these types of sibling relationships may mean that greater understanding of the meaning of sibling relationships, both for siblings in intact groups and those who are separated by foster care or adoption, is not being examined. Staff et al (1993) note that for children in care this can become very complex. Children may live with several foster families where

other children are placed, have diverse birth family structures where siblings can have a very wide age span, and / or be adopted into families with non-related adoptive siblings. It is therefore important to understand who the children themselves define as a sibling. The work of Elgar and Head (1999), as discussed in Chapter 2, has relevance here in their emphasis on the importance of not ignoring potential siblings who are defined as being important by the children themselves. Further, Leathers (2005) stresses that the child's perceptions about who counts as a sibling will be influenced by their developmental stage, and their own meanings about the relative importance (or not) of particular sibling relationships. Rushton et al (2001) emphasise the importance of having agreement in relation to who is considered a sibling in order for research to be able to be compared effectively.

Measuring placement outcomes for sibling groups is particularly complex. The number of potentially confounding variables means the direction of causality is particularly difficult to determine given the wide number of different factors that can potentially influence placement outcomes for sibling groups. Shlonsky et al (2005) recommend that future studies should control for factors such as gender, age, behavioural problems, sibling group size, timing of entry into care and placement type. Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) argue that using standardised measures of relationship quality alongside more subjective measures of the sibling experience are important. However, given the complexity of sibling relationships, and their diversity both within and between sibling groups, this is particularly challenging. When qualitative methods have been used alongside quantitative methods this had provided some of the rich data that is needed in terms of measuring outcomes an also understanding the children's subjective experiences with their siblings in more depth (see for example Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005).

Decision-making in relation to siblings who cannot stay at home

The placement of sibling groups in the care system and / or for adoption has, as previously discussed in Chapter 1, been legislated for in the Children Act (1989) and the Adoption and Children Act (2002), with a requirement for siblings to be placed together unless it is not practicable or in their best interests. However, making decisions about the placement of sibling groups in adoption and foster care is very challenging. It also

has the potential for life-long consequences for the children concerned in terms of their every-day experience of the sibling relationship, and in many cases the loss of these relationships in childhood. This section will review the literature regarding assessment and decision-making for sibling groups in foster care and adoption, and the factors which affect whether siblings are placed together or apart.

Assessing sibling relationships

Formal assessment of sibling groups when planning for permanence is very limited (Rushton, 2001; Biehal at al, 2010; Dance et al, 2010). Although use is made by some Local Authorities of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and in-house psychologists for advice and support in relation to deciding whether siblings should be placed together or apart (Rushton et al, 2001; Selwyn et al, 2006; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011), formal assessments of sibling groups are rare. Recent research in this field, usually focusing on a small number of clinical case studies, has highlighted the potential of formal assessments in assisting social workers with decision-making about sibling groups in adoption. The importance of formally observing the children in the sibling groups on more than one occasion, both together and alone has been highlighted (Ryan, 2002; Farnfield, 2009), alongside taking comprehensive case histories from those people involved in the children's lives in order to understand the context of the sibling relationships (Ryan, 2002; Hindle, 2007) and listening to children's views (where possible) about the meaning of their sibling relationships (Hindle, 2007). Hindle's (2007) work particularly highlighted that professionals often under-estimated the importance of siblings to one another, which came to light following intensive observation of their relationships through play sessions.

However, the use of these formal assessments seems to take a 'here and now' approach to sibling relationships, with the focus tending to be on the present state of the sibling relationship and its context. There is an emphasis placed on the levels of warmth, rivalry and hostility present in sibling relationships in these assessments as predictors of future functioning (Ryan, 2002; Farnfield, 2009). Whilst this may be useful in terms of providing a 'snapshot' at a fixed point in time, it does not fully allow for how sibling relationships may change and develop over time, nor the potential reparative effects of re-parenting. Rushton et al (2001) noted that high levels of conflict alongside low levels of warmth in sibling relationships could be predictive of on-going difficulties within the

sibling relationship, and one indicator for separation. However, their study only followed up children one year after placement, and this would need to be evaluated on a longitudinal basis to test whether relationship characteristics present in childhood continue on into adulthood, what mitigating factors might be present, and the effect this has on the sibling relationship. As Dunn and colleagues illustrate (Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, 1992), any hostility present needs also to be taken in the context of developmental stages within the sibling relationship.

The sibling assessment framework published by Lord and Borthwick (2008) examines the factors that need to be taken into account when assessing sibling groups in relation to placement planning, and incorporates the sibling relationship checklist (as published by DOH, 1991). The framework includes the importance of understanding and assessing relationship quality within sibling groups and the factors (such as effects of abuse / neglect and parental conflict on the quality of the sibling relationship) that may impinge on them. However, whilst the authors acknowledge that this relationship has the potential to be one of the most long-lasting throughout the children's lives, the assessment framework concentrates on relationships in the 'here and now'. There is little consideration of how sibling relationships change and develop over time, nor acknowledgement that it is very unusual for siblings brought up together to lose contact entirely over their life-times, despite considerable hostility. The importance of children developing secure relationships with adoptive parents appears to be given priority here, which is understandable, but the life-long consequences of these decisions appears to be underplayed, and trying to formally measure these relationships can mean that subtle nuances of sibling relationships, which may be important, can be overlooked (Herrick and Piccus, 2005).

Given the lack of formal assessment of sibling relationships, what do social workers base their assessments on when making decisions about sibling groups? Rushton et al (2001) found that when social workers were considering splitting up some or all of the sibling group, or considering reunification, the social workers were most influenced by the quality of the siblings' relationship and their individual needs. The extent of their shared history was also important, alongside the carers' accounts of the sibling relationships. What is interesting to note is that the children's own wishes and feelings about their siblings were only considered as being important in just under fifty percent

of the cases. Kosonen's (1996) study of one Scottish local authority's decision-making processes in relation to sibling groups requiring foster placements concluded that points of entry into and exit from the care system were key factors, rather than relationship quality. Once placed apart, siblings were generally not reunified, often due to a lack of resources or foster carer attitudes in relation to caring for sibling groups. She concluded that assessments in relation to sibling relationships should be undertaken prior to entry in the care system, and should take account of their needs in the short and long-term, although how this could be achieved was not made clear.

Deciding to place siblings together or apart

The number of children within the care system in the United Kingdom who have siblings is extremely high, with several studies placing this figure between 80 and 90% (Bilson and Barker, 1992/3; Kosonen, 1996; Rushton et al, 2001). However, the number of these children placed with siblings in adoption is correspondingly low, and it is of importance to attempt to understand why this is. Ivaldi (2000) noted in his survey study of three-quarters of Local Authorities in England and Wales that only 37% of those placed for adoption were placed with siblings. Rushton et al (2001) found that 80% of the children they studied who were in late permanent placements (predominantly adoptive placements) had at least one sibling living elsewhere. However, more positively they also found that half of the sibling groups who had been placed together included all siblings who were in care (although there were some siblings who remained at home or were living independently). More recently, Selwyn et al (2006) noted that 29% of the children with siblings in their sample (a total of 69 children) were separated from all their siblings and 54% were placed with some or all of their siblings. It would however have been helpful for this group to be sub-divided as it is not clear how many were placed with all their siblings.

Factors which have been highlighted as affecting whether siblings are placed separately within the care system include coming from a large and diverse sibling group (including wide age range, different genders and differing needs), coming into care at different points in time, having special needs, a placement with a sibling that had disrupted, or there a lack of an appropriate sibling placement (Staff and Fein, 1992; Kosonen, 1996; Drapeau et al, 2000; Shlonsky et al, 2003; Leathers, 2005; Sinclair et al, 2005; Wulczyn and Zimmerman, 2005). It is very difficult to untangle which of these factors are most

significant in the placement of siblings groups either together or apart, and the role that each plays in decision-making for sibling groups. Different studies often emphasise different factors as being of greater significance. For example, Boer et al (1995) found that behaviour problems within the sibling group were most closely associated with decisions to place separately. However, Drapeau et al's (2000) study of 150 sibling groups in Canada found that behaviour problems were not related to the decision to place siblings together or apart in foster care. These studies also highlighted that many of the children they looked at also had siblings who continued to live at home and older adult siblings who lived independently. Further, Selwyn et al (2006) noted that thirty percent of the children in their sample had siblings born following their 'adoption in best interests' decision but before being placed for adoption.

There is some agreement that the date of entry into the care system is one of the most influential factors in placing siblings together or apart. Shlonsky et al's (2003) study of children entering foster care in California found that entering care at the same time, or within 30 days of one another, was the most significant predictive factor of shared sibling placement. Wulczyn and Zimmerman's (2005) longitudinal study examined the placement patterns of 168,000 children in the foster care system in New York over a period of fifteen years. They found that if sibling groups came into care on the same day 78% were placed together and generally remained together. However, only 43% of siblings entered care on the same day, with another ten per cent entering the care system within thirty days. Of the remaining 47% of siblings who entered care more than a month later, two-thirds were initially placed apart. Follow-up four years later showed that 73% of the partially intact siblings groups at the time of entry into care remained partially or completely separated. Some of the reasons identified for the separate sibling placements in this study were a lack of placement resources for sibling groups, diverse ages and needs of the siblings, and organisational barriers including attitudes of social workers to sibling placements.

The issue of organisational barriers to sibling placement in adoption has been identified as being of significance in a number of recent studies in the UK. Saunders and Selwyn (2011) found that although there was a general willingness and commitment from local authorities to try and keep sibling groups together, several barriers were present. These included a shortage of adopters willing to take large sibling groups, financial issues arising from having to pay an inter-agency fee for placements made outside the local

Consortia and feelings of pessimism from social workers and children's guardians at the prospect of being able to place large sibling groups together. Biehal et al (2010) underlined the lack of expertise from children's social workers when planning for adoption. In particular, they found that staff lacked the necessary knowledge and training. They needed help in thinking through and planning for the life-long consequences of adoption, in particular the impact on siblings who were not being adopted, and specialist adoption teams were heavily relied upon.

Local authority policies and the values and beliefs of individual social workers towards sibling groups and have also been cited as influential in decisions about sibling placement (Rushton et al; 2001; Biehal et al, 2010; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). Saunders and Selwyn (2011) highlighted that there was a wide variation in practice between the five adoption agencies they studied, with some being much more proactive and positive about the value of sibling placements than others. For example, some agencies and individual social workers felt that placing three or more siblings together may destabilise the whole adoptive placement, while others were more positive and offered significantly more financial an emotional support to adoptive parents. Individual social worker beliefs about the relative value of placing siblings together has also been shown to be influential (Rushton et al, 2001), and Saunders and Selwyn (2011) highlighted that half sibling relationships appeared to be less valued than full sibling relationships.

More research is needed in order to gain a greater understanding of the factors that are most significant in relation to placing siblings together or apart in foster care or adoption, and the relationship between the individual characteristics and behaviour of children and the organisational factors that are present. Addressing these issues should provide a clearer framework for service planning and delivery for sibling groups.

Outcomes in relation to sibling placements

Research studies that consider outcomes in relation to sibling groups and adoptive / fostering placements fall broadly into two dimensions; that of placement stability, and the influence of sibling relationships on children's well-being. Studies that have explored these issues in adoption have attempted to evaluate whether placing siblings together or apart affects these outcomes, but they are often part of wider studies, and have not been exploring the sibling relationship exclusively (see for example Thoburn and Rowe, 1988;

Triseliotis and Russell, 1984; Barth and Berry, 1988; Fratter et al, 1991). Three exceptions to this are Wedge and Mantle's (1991) seminal study of sibling groups and permanent placement, Rushton et al's (2001) study of siblings in late permanent placement and Saunders and Selwyn's (2011) study of the placement of large sibling groups.

Placement stability

Studies that have focused on the outcomes of sibling placements have largely focused on how 'stable' they are in terms of whether the placements are maintained or disrupt, and whether being placed together or apart makes a difference to this (see for example Barth and Berry, 1988; Wedge and Mantle, 1991; Boer et al, 1995; Rushton et al, 2001). The issue of placement stability, or which placements disrupt and why, appears, on the surface, to be straightforward to evaluate. However, this is a somewhat crude measure that does not easily take into account the potentially numerous confounding variables that are present here. For example, in considering sibling placements, it is relatively straightforward to ascertain the numbers of placements that continue over a period of time and those that break down. However, in order to isolate the influence of sibling factors alone numerous factors have to be controlled for including previous life experiences in the children's birth family, age at placement, level of behavioural / psychological difficulty and number of previous placements, to name but a few. This is immensely challenging methodologically, and to date studies have managed this with varying levels of success, as outlined below. In addition, using placement disruptions as an outcome measure does not consider those placements that are maintained but have significant problems, and the factors that influence this.

Early studies showed little agreement in relation to whether siblings did better placed together or apart, with Parker (1966) concluding that there was no relationship between disruption and sibling placement, and Trasler (1966) stating that placing children together increased stability. More recent studies that have tried to take into account some of the methodological issues outlined above have suggested that placing siblings together does tend to increase positive outcomes, either in relation to the stability of foster and adoptive placements, in lowering the rates of children's emotional and behavioural problems, or in increasing the levels of adoptive parent satisfaction with the

placement (see Berridge and Cleaver, 1987; Barth and Berry, 1988; Quinton et al, 1998; Neil, 1999; Rushton et al, 2001).

Due to the complex number of factors that need to be taken account of when examining sibling relationships and placement stability, causality is very difficult to establish. For example, children placed apart from their sibling group may be older and / or have more significant individual needs, which could have more of an impact on their ability to sustain an adoptive placement than the fact of being placed apart from their siblings (Shlonsky et al, 2005).

Festinger's (1986) study of disruption rates in adoptive placements in New York examined 897 children aged six years + who were placed for adoption. The study compared 482 children placed alone and 415 children who were placed in sibling groups. She found that children placed alone had a significantly higher adoption disruption rate (10.7%) than those placed in sibling groups (5.6%). However, it is not made clear whether the children placed alone were only children, or had siblings who may be placed elsewhere or living at home, and this could be a significant factor in understanding the results of this study. Festinger (1986) also noted that the adoptive placements which disrupted were generally those of older children who had also experienced more moves within the care system prior to their adoptive placement and had more emotional, cognitive or physical problems. She concluded that the combination of their past experiences, difficulties attaching to new carers and closer links to birth families were key factors in making these placements more difficult to sustain. Therefore, whilst the rate of adoption placement breakdown in this study is less for those placed with some or all of their sibling group, the relative influence of this factor alone is impossible to ascertain due to the lack of controls for age, placement moves and the psychological / behavioural issues present for the children in the sample.

Wedge and Mantle's (1991) study found that there was no significant difference between siblings placed together or apart, finding that each had a disruption rate of 21%. This concurred with Thoburn's (1991) large-scale study of the outcomes for 1,165 children with special needs who had been referred for placements, where the general disruption rate was 21.5%. However, Berridge and Cleaver's (1987) study of foster placement breakdown reported much higher rates of placement breakdown for those

children placed apart from their siblings (50%) than together with them. Berridge and Cleaver (1987) concluded that the presence of a sibling may have helped to alleviate the stress of living apart from their birth family. However, as Rushton et al (2001) note, the study did not control for children's behavioural difficulties or past living experiences.

The 'siblings in late permanent placement' study carried out by Rushton et al (2001) found that at one year after placement, of the 72 placements evaluated seven had disrupted (five singly-placed children and two sibling groups). They found that there was a 'small advantage in favour of sibling placement, although this was not unequivocal' (2001: 153). They highlighted that the characteristics of children being placed singly away from their birth family needs to be examined further in order to understand more about their poorer outcomes, but a rejection from the birth family did increase the risk of poor placement stability as the children often had difficulty interacting with their new parents. Where siblings placed together had been scape-goated or rejected by their birth family, they did not show the same difficulties interacting with their new parents, and the authors concluded that the *shared* experience of leaving the birth family may have helped to mitigate these effects. This finding was replicated in Leather's (2005) study of adolescents in long-term foster placements in the USA, who found that being placed with a consistent number of siblings while in foster care gave the young people a greater sense of integration and belonging with their foster families than those who were separated from their siblings, and that this reduced the risk of placement disruption. However, as Leathers (2005) notes, the underlying processes which could further explain these findings are not yet known and need to be explored further.

The issue of placement stability, while a relatively crude measure that does have significant difficulties methodologically, is clearly important when considering the needs and experiences of children who are part of sibling groups. Tentative conclusions are being reached today that placing siblings together where possible does lead to a slight increase in stability, but considerable further work needs to be completed in order to more clearly isolate the influence of the sibling relationship from other variables present.

Sibling placement and children's well-being

Within the general adoption population there has been considerable debate regarding the influence of adoption on psycho-social outcomes, particularly given the over-representation of children and adolescents within mental health settings. Initial conclusions were drawn that there were psycho-social risks in adoption, although it was also acknowledged that adoptive parents tended to use mental health out-patient services more readily than the general population when there were low levels of emotional and behavioural problems (Warren, 1992; Brodzinsky et al, 1998). Further research, which moved away from studying clinical populations and compared community-based samples of adopted children with their non-adopted peers (e.g. Wirezbicki, 1992; Sharma et al, 1995; Brand and Brinich, 1999), found that the differences between these two groups was much smaller. However, as Brand and Brinich (1999) noted, there was a small yet significant group of adopted children and young people who were particularly troubled and who may eventually access clinical services. They concluded that:

> 'We believe it would be an error to interpret the differences we report here as suggesting that adoption per se puts children at risk for behavioural problems, since the vast majority of adopted children show patterns of behaviour problems that are very similar to those of non-adopted children' (1999: 1127).

Most studies which consider outcomes in relation to adoption use comparisons between those who are adopted and those who are raised by their birth families. However, as Brodzinsky et al (1998) and Maughan and Pickles (1990) point out, it is also helpful to compare adopted people with those who come from similar backgrounds and remain within their birth families or with foster carers or in institutional care. Both studies concluded that adopted children / adolescents do significantly better, and Fergusson et al (1995) argue that one reason for this is that adopted children are given access to more material and emotional resources, and greater stability.

Research that has been carried out in the general population, largely in the child development field, has shown that sibling relationships are developmentally significant, particularly in relation to the significance of their proximity to one another and the influence therefore on values, attitudes and behaviour (see Dunn 1992; Dunn 2008). They can also be a valuable source of emotional support throughout life, particularly in

relation to adapting to stressful situations (Connidis, 1992; Cicirelli, 1996; Brody and Stoneman, 1996). The influence of sibling placement on children's well-being is complex given the number of different variables present. For example, children adopted as part of a sibling group tend to be older on average, and may therefore have experienced sustained abuse and/ or neglect in their birth families. Age at placement has therefore been identified as particularly important in predicting placement outcomes (Sellick et al, 2004), and may impact on their well-being more significantly than the presence or absence of a sibling.

Studies which have attempted to formally measure children's well-being in fostering or adoptive placements rarely measure the influence of the sibling relationship alone (whether placed together or apart), but use this measure as part of a wider focus, although some studies have solely focused on sibling placements (see for example Rushton et al, 2001; Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). Outcome measures include the emotional health of the children, their education and behavioural outcomes, identity development, their sense of belonging with their adoptive or foster families and adoptive parent/ carer satisfaction (Boer et al, 1995; Rushton et al, 2001; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005; Selwyn et al, 2006; Biehal, 2010; Hegar and Rosenthal, 2011; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). The use of standardised assessments such as the Child Behaviour Checklist and the Strengths and Differences Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997) are common in larger scale studies, while a qualitative approach adds rich detail about carer and children's experiences that can be missing from large scale surveys (Sanders, 2004). Tentative conclusions have been drawn, outlined below, which indicate that placing siblings together can lead to improved well-being. However, there are methodological problems in many studies in terms of a lack of specificity and / or a lack of controlling for the children's and their carers' specific characteristics (Sellick et al 2004), or past experiences (Rushton et al, 2001).

In terms of emotional and behavioural adjustment to foster care or adoption, there is evidence that children placed with some or all siblings show better emotional adjustment than those who are separated from their brothers and sisters (Rushton et al, 2001; Leathers, 2005; Courtney et al, 2005; Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005), particularly if there is a positive pre-existing relationship between the siblings. Conversely, other studies have found little or no difference when controlling for sibling

placement (Brodzinsky and Brozinsky, 1992; Hegar and Rosenthal, 2009). However, as Rushton et al (2001) note, comparing singly placed children with those placed with siblings may not be possible or relevant, as the reasons for being placed alone need to be taken into consideration, such as the level of individual needs and previous experiences. For example, they found that children who had experienced rejection in their family of origin and were placed singly showed greater difficulty in their emotional interactions with their adoptive parents, which in turn affected the levels of adoptive parent satisfaction.

Brothers and sisters have been identified as potentially important people in one another's lives in terms of providing emotional support in times of shared adversity (Bank and Kahn, 1982; Hegar, 1988; Kosonen, 1994; Mullender, 1999). Being placed together in fostering or adoptive placements can also facilitate a sense of stability (Elgar and Head, 1999) which may not be present if they were placed apart, although they can also be very challenging to parent, with significant emotional and behavioural difficulties (Logan et al, 1998; Rushton et al, 2001; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). Siblings placed together can have a role for one another in terms of identity development through maintaining a 'positive sense of identity and knowledge of their cultural, personal and family histories' (Livingston-Smith, 2009: 20). As Sanders (2004) notes, placing siblings together in adoption and fostering has many advantages, but this can also mean that parents and carers have to meet many challenges and understand the long-term benefits of siblings remaining together.

The educational outcomes of adopted and fostered children have been considered in the light of sibling relationships. Van IJzendoorn et al's (2005) meta-analysis of 62 studies of adopted children found that in terms of IQ, adopted children performed better than their siblings who were in residential care or remained with their birth families. However, adopted children were more likely to have learning problems than the birth children of their adoptive parents, and performed less well at school than their non-related adoptive siblings.

However, the literature also emphasises that siblings can have hostile and abusive relationships, and in those cases being placed together or seeing one another may raise feelings of instability, bring back memories of past abuse, and can lead to increased

difficulties in parenting these children (Drapeau et al, 2000; Bank, 1992; Rushton et al, 2001). Pavao et al (2007) emphasise caution in making placement decisions solely on the quality of the current sibling relationship, as hostile and abusive behaviour may be reflective of the siblings' previous living environment within their birth family. They advocate the importance of on-going targeted support in relation to siblings placed together and apart, with therapeutic input where necessary for adoptive family members to support positive relationship development.

The issue of gender also appears to be relevant. Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell (2005) found that girls living with at least one of their siblings had better mental health than girls who were separated from their brothers and sisters. There was however no significant difference between boys placed together or apart and their mental health. It may be that girls and boys 'do' their relationships differently, as suggested by Edwards et al's (2005) research discussed in the previous chapter. If girls have a relationship based on 'talk' with their sisters and brothers, it may be that this would be one of the explanations for this finding, although further research needs to be undertaken to explore this.

Adoption can create new sibling relationships for children, with the birth children of their adoptive parents or through unrelated children being adopted into the family. Studies that explore these relationships specifically are usually part of wider studies into adoptive family functioning or sibling adjustment post-adoption, but very little is known about how these relationships are experienced longitudinally (Wedge and Mantle, 1991; Beckett et al, 1998; Rushton et al, 2001; Selwyn et al, 2006; Beckett et al, 2008; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). The presence of birth children in adoptive families has been highlighted as a risk factor when placing children for adoption (Wedge and Mantle, 1991; Barth and Brooks, 1997). In particular, Wedge and Mantle (1991) found that there were significantly higher disruption rates when children were placed with resident children who were less than three years apart in age, and this approach has been widely adopted by adoption agencies. However, Rushton et al (2001) found that while a smaller age gap between children had some effect, it was not a central factor, and placements made with small age gaps had progressed well, while some with the recommended minimum age difference had great difficulties. Their sample of resident children was small (twenty-eight children), and the authors cautioned against generalising from this

sample. They concluded that guidance which recommended a minimum three year age gap between children was helpful, but that problems could still arise in relation to other factors. Beckett et al (1999) found in their sample of English and Romanian adoptees that adopting children close in age to their birth children made no difference in terms of parental satisfaction.

However, the presence of birth children in the adoptive family can lead to adoptive parents favouring the birth child over the adopted child, which can have a subsequent impact on the sibling relationship (Glover et al, 2010; Loehlin et al, 2010). Selwyn et al (2006) examined adoptive parents' perceptions of their birth and non-related adopted children's adjustment to the placement of new siblings. They found that for stranger adopters only a third of the pre-resident children were happy with the arrival of their new brother or sister during the first year of placement, and twenty-two percent actively disliked them or felt pushed out. This was particularly so for adopted children with learning disabilities or conduct problems. At the time of follow-up, when the children had been placed on average for seven years, a third of the pre-resident children had developed good relationships with their adoptive siblings, although there was conflict in forty per cent of the relationships, with mixed feelings being shown in twenty-two percent of cases. Many of the adopted children who were disliked had learning disabilities, and in some cases the pre-resident child was worried about who would care for them later in life. In only five per cent of cases did adoptive parents think the presence of the adoptive sibling had had no impact on the pre—resident child. The voices of pre-resident children are clearly a priority in terms of future research, as adoptive parents may not fully understand their complex feelings about their adoptive siblings.

In contrast, and within the US context of relinquished children, Berge et al (2006) carried out a study looking at adopted children's kinship networks. They found that birth and adoptive family members often included the non-biologically related siblings within their own kinship networks during contacts and significant events such as birthdays and Christmas. Furthermore, the children concerned were often clear that their adopted siblings' own birth siblings were included within their adoption kinship network. This highlights a more positive experience of adoptive sibling relationships within their kinship networks, but the context of these adoptions, where the children

were normally adopted as babies without experiencing trauma or abuse, needs to be taken into account.

Sibling relationships post-adoption

With the increasing shift towards greater openness in adoption over the last thirty years, more attention is now being paid to the complex network of kinship relationships which adopted people have, and how these relationships are identified and maintained. In the USA, Grotevant and colleagues (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; Wroebel et al, 2004; Loehlin et al, 2009; Grotevant, 2009) have undertaken considerable longitudinal research into this area through the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project. They have found that, largely within the US context of relinquished babies, adoptive and birth families can and do actively maintain their adoptive kinship networks. These networks encompass a wide range of complex relationships including birth relatives (parents, siblings, grandparents etc), adoptive family members and sometimes the relations of other adopted children within the family. In order to understand more about sibling relationships in adoption, it is essential to explore the influence of the adoptive kinship network on their development and maintenance, and the factors that influence birth and adoptive sibling relationships.

Having explored the assessment and decision-making process for siblings in fostering and adoption, and some of the outcomes of these placements in terms of stability and well-being, this section will consider how birth and adoptive sibling relationships are experienced post-adoption. In particular, birth sibling contact post-adoption will be considered, alongside the influence of communication about adoption within the adoptive kinship network, and the post-adoption support needs of adoptive parents in relation to sibling groups.

Sibling contact in adoption

On-going contact with birth relatives post-adoption (either face to face or indirectly through letterbox contact) has been identified as being important in terms of children's identity development, providing reassurance about the welfare of children and their birth relatives, and assisting adoptive parents to feel confident in their parenting (Logan and Smith, 2005). Most studies that consider children's contact with birth relatives post-adoption primarily focus on contact with birth parents or grand-parents, and debates

within the literature about the merits of post-adoption contact have held this as a central focus (see Quinton et al, 1997, 1999; Ryburn, 1995, 1996 1998,1999). On-going contact (either direct or indirect) with birth siblings post-adoption has received much less attention, which is surprising given the frequency of these contact arrangements cited in research studies (see Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; Logan and Smith, 2005; Neil et al, 2010).

Legislation and care planning guidance is very clear that where siblings are placed separately through adoption, robust planning must take place to ensure that some form of contact (either direct or indirect) is maintained, unless it is deemed not to be practicable or in the children's best interests. Clearly, sibling contact following permanent placement can be challenging, complex and time-consuming to support. Children can also have powerful and changing views about contact with birth family members (Thomas et al, 1999; Selwyn et al, 2006; Neil et al, 2010), which emphasises the need for a life-span perspective in understanding the impact of post-adoption contact in the longer term.

Direct contact with birth siblings, while more frequent than with birth parents, usually continues to be the exception rather than the norm. Research demonstrates that in many cases face-to-face sibling contact following permanent placement is either not established, is difficult to maintain, or dwindles over time in a significant number of cases (Neil, 1999; Lowe et al, 1999; Selwyn et al, 2006; Pavao et al, 2007; James et al, 2008; Neil et al, 2010). For example, Lowe et al (1999) studied 226 adoptive families, and found that 49% of the adopted children who had siblings had contact planned during the first year post-placement; either direct or in-direct contact. This contact was usually with other siblings in the care system, and the rate of contact with siblings remaining in the family home was eighteen per cent. They commented that contact with siblings who remained living with birth family helped to reassure the adopted child that their siblings were safe. However, many adopted children resisted contact because they felt rejected as their sibling was able to live at home. Neil (1999) in her study of children adopted aged under four concurred with Lowe's findings that most contact was with siblings who remained within the care system. She also noted that in many cases no arrangements were made for contact with siblings after adoption, and that relationships with paternal siblings were particularly likely to be lost.

More recently, Selwyn et al (2006) found that during the first year of adoption 90% of the adopted children had face-to-face contact with some of their siblings at least once, although the status of the siblings' living situations was not clear. However, after an average of seven years post-placement, this number had almost halved to 55% having face-to-face contact with siblings in the last year. Mostly, the contact had not formally stopped, it had just 'not happened' (2006: 121). The authors reported that this could simply be a reflection of the young people's developmental stage. Many were adolescents, and their lives were very busy with friends. They kept in contact with their siblings, but this was often through e-mail or mobile phone contact rather than in person. Furthermore, 90% of the young people reported their contact with their birth siblings as being positive, which is suggestive of contact adapting over the years in order to meet their changing needs. The study sample here was relatively small (69 children who had siblings), and the number of children having face-to-face contact with siblings was higher than other studies. Face-to-face contact happened much less frequently with birth relatives in the stranger adoptions (22% with birth parents; no figures available for birth siblings) than in adoptions by kin or foster carer adoptions. These high figures for face-to-face sibling contact must therefore be viewed with caution, as it is likely that direct contact with birth siblings following stranger adoptions was less frequent.

The lived experience of sibling contact post-adoption was considered by Neil et al (2010). They found that on-going contact with siblings assisted the adopted children to be reassured about their birth siblings' welfare, promoted identity and belonging, and in some cases provided a positive model of parenting for older siblings. However, it also raised issues for the adopted children about why they were separated from their brothers and sisters and the reasons for their levels of contact with them. Adoptive parents were concerned about risk to their child in a small minority of cases where a sibling had previously abused them.

Communication about adoption in the adoptive kinship network

The move from a 'clean break' approach in adoption to one that is progressively more 'open' recognises that retaining links to adopted children's birth family members assists in their identity development and promotes a continuous life narrative (Grotevant, 1997). Studies that talked to adopted adults about their experiences of the 'clean break'

approach highlighted that understanding who they were and why they were adopted was central to healthy identity development (Triseliotis, 1973; Howe and Feast, 2000).

Adoptive parents today have a challenging task; that of promoting secure attachment relationships with their adopted children alongside retaining connections to the child's birth family; through different types of contact and in holding the birth family 'in mind'. Adoptive parents who are more communicatively open (Brodzinsky, 2006) tend to be empathic in attitude towards birth family members, more open to talking positively with their children about their birth origins, and less defensive about their position as primary parents (Neil, 2009b; Neil et al, 2010). Furthermore, studies have suggested that communicative openness has been linked to more positive adjustment (Kohler et al, 2002; Brodzinsky, 2005, 2006; Hawkins et al, 2008). Communicative openness can be defined as adoptive parents being 'comfortable with their own feelings in relation to adoption, emotionally attuned to their child's issues as an adopted individual, and empathic towards birth family members' (Neil, 2012).

Very little research has been conducted in relation to the impact of communicative openness on sibling relationships. However, two studies have been carried out that provide useful insights into this. Beckett et al's (2008) longitudinal study of English and Romanian adoptions highlighted that the presence of non-related adoptive siblings, who were all in the Romanian sample and also adopted internationally, tended to make it easier for them to talk about their adoptions. The authors noted that the children may have had more interest in talking about their shared backgrounds (both were usually adopted from Romania) and therefore their adoptions. The study focused on the ease or difficulty with which the children at aged eleven and their parents talked about adoption, and highlighted that communication about adopted was a dynamic process that was influenced by adoptive parents and their children. It would however have been useful to know whether the adoptive siblings in the study were a direct resource for one another to talk about adoption, rather than their parents, given their developmental stage, and this could usefully be a focus for further research.

Neil et al's (2010) examined the experiences of contact with birth relatives, including birth siblings, from all perspectives, and the factors that affected contact. They highlighted that particular challenges arose for all members of the adoptive kinship

network when perceptions of family boundaries differed; for example when one set of carers valued the continuation of a sibling relationship less than other. The importance of communicating and negotiating these boundaries over time was highlighted.

Post-adoption support

The Adoption and Children Act (2002) strengthened the provision of post-adoption support services for all members of the adoption kinship network. However, one of the aims of the legislation was to encourage adoptive parents to make use of existing services (such as CAMHS), and whilst a right to an assessment was placed on a statutory basis, this did not automatically lead to a right to receive specialist post-adoption support. This was left at the discretion of the individual adoption agencies. The Coalition Government's 'Action Plan for Adoption' (2012) highlights the need for on-going support, but it remains unclear at this time how this will be achieved.

Several of the studies undertaken as part of the Labour Government's Adoption Research Initiative (Rushton and Monck, 2009; Biehal et al, 2010; Neil et al, 2010) considered the support needs of adoptive and birth families post-adoption. In addition, Saunders and Selwyn's (2011) study of large sibling groups being placed for adoption considered adoptive parents' on-going support needs in detail. Several themes arose from these studies. Firstly, it was often assumed that adoptive parents could negotiate and manage on-going sibling contact where adoptive or foster carers were the primary carers for other siblings (Neil et al, 2010; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). However, this contact could be difficult to negotiate, particularly if the carers had differing views on the relative importance of contact. There were practical difficulties associated with sibling contact, particularly if the siblings lived a long way apart. Neil et al (2010) also found that adoptive parents needed help to support their children manage the role change that occurred within the sibling group.

Children's views

Studies that examine sibling relationships in foster care and adoption have more usually relied on agency records, interviews with parents / carers and interviews with social work staff than observing children's behaviour or interviewing them directly. For example, Hegar's (2005) review of sibling placements in foster care and adoption found that of the eighteen studies reviewed only two had involved measures that directly

included the children concerned. The voices of those who are directly affected by adoption and fostering in relation to their siblings are therefore important, not least because their views about their siblings and the meaning of these relationships are fundamental to considering the factors that are important to understand when assessing sibling relationships, and the role siblings play in their lives.

Adopted children were asked directly about contact with their siblings post-adoption in Thomas et al's (1999) study, which was part of the wider study by Lowe et al (1999). They found that of the forty one children interviewed, twenty-seven had siblings from whom they were separated, and seventeen of these had some form of contact with their siblings (two had indirect contact only). When talking about their siblings, the children expressed a range of views, including sadness and loss and a wish to know about their pasts. Some were content with current contact arrangements, others were mystified about the lack of contact or that it was limited, and others wanted immediate changes in order to see their siblings more often. The researchers also noted that at the time of the interviews some of the children had a clear need to talk about contact, and recommended that opportunities should be created by adoptive parents and social workers for open communication about contact with birth family members, including siblings.

Summary

Most children who are adopted or in care have siblings, and it is more common for them to be placed apart from one another than placed together. Approaches to assessment and decision-making for sibling groups reveal that very little formal assessment is undertaken, and when this does take place there tends to be a 'here and now' approach to the sibling relationship, rather than a longitudinal perspective. Studies indicate that placing siblings together can promote placement stability and psychological well-being, but they can be challenging to parent. Adoptive families, including adoptive siblings, have distinct support needs that encompass emotional and practical support, and it would be beneficial for more focus to be placed on communicative openness within adoptive kinship networks. The following chapter continues the life-span focus, and considers adopted adults and their relationships with their adoptive kinship networks, with a particular focus on adoptive and birth sibling relationships.

Chapter 4: Understanding adopted adults and their kinship relationships

Introduction

In order to place the sibling relationships of adopted adults in context, the wider issues of adoption legislation and policy, sibling relationships across the life-span for those reared in intact families and the experiences and outcomes of adopted children in relation to their siblings have already been considered in the previous chapters. Within this chapter, the focus moves to adopted adults and their relationships with their birth and adoptive families – their adoptive kinship network. These complex relationships are interwoven with concepts of biological and social kinship, shared meanings and difference, and the processes that are present when negotiating how to maintain, develop and / or cease these relationships. The experiences of adopted adults have primarily been considered within the search and reunion literature (see Triseliotis, 1973; Modell, 1997; Carsten, 2000; Howe and Feast, 2000; Logan and Smith, 2005; Triseliotis et al, 2005). These studies have predominantly focused on the search for and reunion with birth parents, usually birth mothers. Experiences of reunions with birth siblings are mentioned within this body of literature, and it is acknowledged that these relationships are often significant, but they have not been considered in any depth. In order to explore these relationships further it was necessary to draw upon a wide range of literature that encompasses psychology, sociology and anthropology, in order to provide a broad conceptual framework within which to understand adopted people's kinship relationships with their birth and adoptive siblings.

Little work has been completed to date in relation to the adoptive kinship networks of adopted adults, but the concept provides a useful framework for approaching how birth and adoptive sibling kinship relationships in adulthood may be better understood. In considering the role of kinship networks in adoption, particularly in relation to siblings, it is necessary to first look wider than research which concentrates solely on adoption in order to understand what 'kinship' is and how it works. Notions of 'kinship' and the family feature significantly in sociological and anthropological literature, and have some significance in increasing our understanding of the sibling relationships of adopted people.

Understanding 'kinship'

Central to an understanding of kinship within the anthropological tradition has been an analysis not only of genetic relatedness, but also about how people understand and demonstrate their connections with one another, and how these perceptions reflect how people view their world (Speirs, 2008). Early anthropological studies (e.g. Morgan, 1870; Westermarck, 1891) focused on biological connectedness and kinship through marriage, and much of this work was undertaken in non-western societies. Schneider's (1980) seminal study of American kinship argued that American society defined kinship as a privileged system confined to those related by blood or marriage, with kinship ties through adoption being seen as 'fictive', or a legal fiction.

More recently, anthropologists have also considered the social elements of kinship and relatedness alongside the biological concepts of kinship (see Edwards, 2000; Lambert, 2000; Carsten, 2004). Edwards (2000) carried out an ethnographic study in Bacup, England, focusing on individual and community perceptions of kinship. She found that participants had various 'strands of connectedness' (2000: 248) that they identified as defining kinship: blood, genes, care and love. Kinship ties through blood and marriage were very evident, and other social relationships (such as with friends and neighbours) were also identified as being 'kin' 'through intimacies of care and effort' (2000: 27), and in people's connections with one another. This suggests that kinship is not a passive process which relies solely on relatedness through blood and marriage, but that people are active social actors within their own lives, and in how they define and live their relationships with others. This implies the importance of considering not only the biological and social aspects of kinship, but also their inter-relatedness, which is particularly relevant when considering adoption due to the combination of biological, legal and social relationships present and how they relate to one another within adoption kinship networks.

Kirk's seminal work (1964, 1983) emphasised the impact of the dominant discourse of the family for adopters where kinship ties are defined by biological ties alone, and its potential for what he describes as 'role handicap' for adoptive parents where they are normally coping with infertility, are dependent on others to acquire a child, and often have uncertainty about the meaning of their status as adoptive parents, since this is a minority status. He also noted that this role handicap can be reinforced by the attitudes

and behaviours of others, whose response to those adopting a child is often not equivalent to having a child born biologically within the family. In order to cope with this situation, Kirk (1964) argued that adoptive parents either reject the notion that their parenting is any different to biological parenting, or acknowledge the differences which are inherent. For those who reject any possibility of difference, Kirk (1964) argued that whilst this may serve to reduce the adoptive parents' feelings of being role handicapped, it did not assist in the adoptive family's sense of integration or the child's 'genealogical bewilderment', as levels of communication about the child's birth family and empathy towards them would be limited. This is in contrast to those adoptive parents who acknowledge the differences between biological and adoptive parenting, where levels of communication about and empathy with the birth family are likely to be higher, and this increased empathy facilitates positive communication with their adopted child about their origins, thus providing more stability in their bonding . However, Kirk's work has been criticised for his insistence about difference in adoptive parenting.

Kirk's (1964, 1981) work is however relevant when considering adopted adults. First, the cultural issues he highlights regarding wider society's view of biological and adoptive kinship ties equally apply to adopted adults and their perceptions of their adoption. Secondly, the quality of their relationship with their adoptive parents, which includes communication about and empathy with birth family, has been shown to be influential in terms of how well adjusted they are as children and adults (Brodzinsky, 2006; Hawkins et al, 2008), and their feelings about whether or not to search for their birth family (Howe and Feast, 2000). Further research needs to be undertaken which encompasses consideration of birth and adoptive sibling relationships within this wider cultural (macro) context, and within the micro context of the adoptive and birth family, in order to explore the relevance both of the impact of cultural notions of siblinghood on birth and adoptive sibling relationships, and how communication about, and empathy with birth family affects sibling relationships within adoptive families across the life-span.

Within the sociological tradition, research has focused on how family lives have changed over the last fifty years, with relationships now being more fluid and negotiated, and an emphasis being placed on the pursuit of increased democracy in our kin relationships: one that is distinctly different from the normative nuclear family, where power relationships are emphasised (see Williams, 2004; Pahl and Spencer, 2004).

Williams argues that the process of how we act towards those we love and care for is influenced by social norms and our position as a 'moral actor' in weighing up the 'proper thing to do' (2004: 17). She notes that:

> 'When faced with dilemmas, people draw on repertoires of values about care and commitment in order to work out what, in practice, would be the 'proper thing to do'. This involves complex negotiations and accommodations which are worked out in and through their relationships with others, but also influenced by the opportunities and constraints provided by who and what they are and where they live' (2004: 41–42).

This is helpful when considering how adopted people may manage their own kinship networks, and the complexities of what could be perceived as the competing needs of others within the adoption kinship network, particularly as there is an absence of a script for 'being' family within this context.

There has also been a shift from trying to understand what kinship and family 'is', to the lived experiences of family lives through family practices (Morgan, 1996). Williams notes that family practices 'registers the ways in which our networks of affection are not simply given by virtue of blood or marriage but are negotiated and shaped by us, over time and place' (2004: 17), which echoes the anthropological work outlined above. It highlights how sociological analysis has therefore 'moved away from 'family' as a structure to which individuals in some sense belong, towards understanding families as sets of activities which take on a particular meaning, associated with family, at a given point in time' (Finch, 2007: 66). The concept of family practices is about 'doing' family rather than 'being' family, and that by understanding how people 'do' family we understand more about this area of social life as something that is outside of a fixed social institution.

Finch's (2007) work on 'display' in families builds on the concept of family practices. She argues, through reviewing the work of other sociological researchers within the field of the family, that the process of display involves the conveyance of certain actions to others as 'doing family things' (2007: 67) in order to confirm that these are family relationships, rather than other types of relationships. She argues that this is necessary because all relationships (such as parent-child and couple relationships) require an element of display in order to confirm their social meaning as kinship relationships. She

also notes that as family life has become more fluid, it is now less easy to immediately identify who 'family' is, as a result of changing social norms such as divorce and re-marriage, the increase in families of 'choice' (for example same-sex relationships) and friendships as kin relationships. Display also builds on and confirms a sense of identity and belonging within the family or kinship network. As a result, displaying behaviour that clearly communicates which relationships have the characteristic of family relationships is important. Finch and Mason (1993) also stress that it is not family membership per se that is of paramount importance, but the quality of that relationship and how it is expressed, or 'displayed' practically.

The act of display, Finch (2007) argues, conveys social meanings of family and kinship through social interaction, and she highlights two possible methods through which display takes place: that of the use of artefacts (such as letters, photographs and keepsakes) and through narrative. Weeks et al (2001) note that 'through narratives individuals give meaning to their lives, and affirm their identities and present relationships as viable and valid' (2001: 11), and Finch (2007) states that through stories 'people attempt to connect their own experiences, and their understanding of those experiences, to a more generalized pattern of social meanings about kinship' (2007: 78). The use of 'display' as an analytical concept is in its infancy, and Finch (2007) acknowledges that this concept needs to be further refined and explored within a variety of contexts. Its use in understanding the sibling relationships of adopted people could potentially be helpful in furthering our understanding of how adopted people 'display' their sibling relationships, and the social meanings about family and kinship which are conveyed as a result of this display.

Carsten's (2000) anthropological research in Scotland regarding the kinship narratives of adoption reunions illustrates well the ideas of 'display'. She interviewed thirteen adopted people who had all experienced a reunion with birth family members, in order to explore notions of biological and social kinship in relation to the adoption experience. Within this, she noted the considerable use of artefacts and the search for a life narrative which would appear to 'display' the adopted person's social meanings of kinship and family. Carsten observed that many of the adopted people kept artefacts about their adoption, such as birth certificates and photographs, in special boxes or files, and that these artefacts held a particular significance to the participants in describing their own adoption stories. Carsten also argued that by searching for birth

relatives, the participants were constructing their own narrative about their lives, which had been interrupted through their adoption. She stated that 'those who seek out their birth kin are both asserting their own agency and engaged in constructing continuities of identity which can link together their past, present and future' (2001: 700). This echoes the considerable body of research engaged in adopted people and identity (see, for example, Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2005; Grotevant and McRoy, 1998), and the concept of 'display' could be helpful in understanding how adopted people build narratives about their adoption and their lives and how these narratives are used.

One study which has considered the role of family practices and display in adoption is Jones and Hackett's (2010) research on how these processes contribute to building adoptive family kinship post-adoption. They interviewed eleven sets of adoptive parents who had adopted children between 1977 and 2001. Contact with birth families post-adoption ranged from none to in-direct letterbox contact and direct contact, reflecting in part the changing policy attitudes to adoption over this time span. Jones and Hackett (2010) report that the process of developing adoptive kinship ties is complex, and stated that:

> 'the process involves a complex interplay of agency and structure, of micro systems of intimate relationships and macro systems of culture and discourse, of personal identity and social identity' (2010: 6-7).

They go on to state that adoptive parents reported that undertaking activities as a family contributed to the development of the adoptive family's identity, and those activities which were repeated such as holidays, film nights at home etc went on to become a family ritual that was anticipated, seen positively and assisted in developing and maintaining family relationships . Further, the authors note that these family practices, alongside significant family events such as birthdays, Christmas, family weddings and the birth of grandchildren, were then transformed into family stories which could be told within and outside the family, and were thus 'displaying' the family to others. They argued that by displaying the adoptive family kinship, adoptive parents were confirming the legitimacy of their family relationships against what could be perceived as the dominant cultural discourse of adoptive families as 'fictive', or weak and impermanent (Carsten, 2004). It could also be argued that these elements of family practices and display give adoptive children and adults the opportunity to continually develop their

life narratives post-adoption, which would contribute to the development of a more coherent sense of identity.

Jones and Hackett's (2010) study also considered how adoptive families undertake the task of including birth family members within the adoptive kinship network. They found that irrespective of the level of contact between the adoptive and birth family, adoptive families were aware of the potential significance of biological family ties in how they conducted family life. However, the type of adoption (closed, in-direct contact or direct contact) did not predict the level of inclusion of birth family within adoptive family life (practically and emotionally), but the type of family practices and display around communicative and structural openness which were present gave an indication about this. For example, one adoptive family put all birthday cards from birth family members on a separate shelf away from adoptive family cards, suggesting that the birth family were included, yet separate. Another family, where there was no contact, readily included talk of the birth family in everyday family life, thus making them emotionally present. In addition, even if families had similar practices, the adopted person would not necessarily respond in the same way, indicating that other psycho-social processes regarding biological and social connectedness are present. This finding echoes the work of Brodzinsky (2006) and Neil (2009a, 2009b), who have considered communicative and structural openness in adoptive families where different forms of contact with the adopted child's birth family are present (ranging from 'closed' adoptions to direct contact arrangements). Brodzinsky (2006) found that the attitude of adopters regarding their communicative openness towards birth family was more predictive of the adopted person's adjustment than the type of contact (structural openness) present in the placement.

Jones and Hackett's (2010) study is the first to actively use the conceptual framework of 'doing' and 'displaying' to explore the development and maintenance of kinship ties in adoptive families. Further research will be important in order to take these concepts further and explore how, for example, adopted adults 'do' and 'display' their kinship relationships with birth and adoptive family members, in order to further our understanding of these issues across the life-span. It is aimed that this study of birth and adoptive sibling relationships will contribute to this body of research through the use of family practices and 'display' as conceptual frameworks.

Adoption as a family form has received very little attention within sociological literature. Fisher (2003), who carried out a review of literature on adoption, states that adoption and adoptive family life is worthy of sociological scholarly consideration for the following four reasons:

(1)   There is increasing diversity in family relationships, with a significant shift away from the cultural norm of two heterosexual parents with shared biological children to single-parent households, lesbian and gay families and step-families. This increasing diversity has been the subject of considerable enquiry within the sociological tradition, but adoptive families have received very little attention to date. Fisher argues that adoption, as a unique example of the increasing diversity of family form, should also be given the same attention, particularly as 64% of the American population has a personal experience of adoption through family and / or friendship ties (National Adoption Attitudes Survey, 2002);

(2)   Families are not just identified through blood ties, but are socially constructed. Fisher (2003) highlights Berebitsky's (2000: 172–3) view that 'adoption is at the cutting edge in re-defining kinship', and notes that adoption separates the biological aspects of becoming a parent and parenting from the social aspects of this role. Undertaking sociological research could therefore provide important insights into how adoptive families develop and maintain their kinship relationships, which also has parallels with the anthropological literature reviewed above.

(3)   Adoption raises questions about the influence of issues such as gender, ethnicity and social class on how families form and function. For example, whilst issues such as identity development for trans-racial adoptees have received consideration within psychological literature (Thoburn et al, 2000; Selwyn et al, 2010), sociologists have yet to explore the wider cultural and societal issues this raises; and

(4)   The decisions people make about whether or not to adopt raises potentially important insights in relation to what is important about 'being' a family.

Fisher's (2003) review considers the potential for sociological literature in adoption largely under the auspices of what an adoptive family 'is', rather than what they 'do'. However, given the paucity of sociological literature on adoption and adoptive families, it would seem prudent for both perspectives to be considered, since by understanding what adoptive families 'do', there will arguably be a greater understanding of what the adoptive family 'is' in relation to family and kinship relationships. Increased understanding of the role of adoptive and birth siblings in relation to kin relationships will contribute to this debate.

The concept of friendship as a metaphor for kinship relationships is also important to consider in relation to understanding the kinship relationships of adopted adults. 'Friendship' is often used to talk about the quality of kin relationships – for example, a kin member is 'more like a friend' (and vice versa) – and can be used to illustrate the positive qualities looked for in kin relationships (Williams, 2004). Neale and Smart's (2004) research on post-divorce relationships between kin suggest that a new 'ethic' is emerging in our capacity to sustain relationships. They state that:

> 'The core element would appear to be the extent to which central relationships transcend the formal status of a legal tie ... and move onto terrain more associated with friendship ... liking, respect, mutuality and shared interests'. (In Williams, 2004: 50).

Studies of search and reunion for adopted adults have highlighted that 'friendship' is often used to describe relationships with birth kin, particularly siblings (March, 1997; Modell, 1997; Triseliotis et al, 2005). March (1997) notes in particular that the use of friendship as a model for describing relationships with birth kin can allow adopted people to maintain contact without having too much emotional intensity. This concept needs to be explored further, in order to more fully understand what the metaphor of friendship really means for adopted adults, and whether there are deeper underlying processes present which are evident in studies of sibling relationships for intact families.

The framework of understanding which anthropological and sociological literature affords in relation to concepts of kinship and the family provides potentially important insights to aid in greater understanding of the sibling relationships of adopted people, but has yet to be fully explored within the research literature. In particular, the inter-relatedness of biological, social and legal ties within adoption kinship and how this

works for adopted adults, and the concepts of family practices and display, all appear worthy of further examination to assist understanding the sibling relationships of adopted people through the life-span.

The psychology of adoption

The psychological literature in relation to adoption has predominantly been concerned with children's adjustment to adoption and the factors which influence this; the capacity for children to recover from early adversity (particularly in relation to inter-country adoption from institutional care); and, more recently, the factors and process that underlie differences in their adjustment (Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). Very few studies, apart from those concerning search and reunion issues, have considered adopted adults' adjustment, and those that do tend to focus on early adulthood (see Grotevant, 2009). There is a substantial need for research which considers the psychological outcomes of adopted people throughout their lives, in order for greater understanding to develop of the life-long needs of adopted people and their families. As Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) note, there is a considerable body of research identifying the attachment issues of adopted children, particularly those who have experienced early adversity, but we do not yet understand how these adopted adults parent their own children, and what this can tell us about the long-term consequences of adoption, particularly in relation to mental health and parenting.

Outcomes studies in relation to adoption and the factors which influence children's adjustment have been discussed in the previous chapter, which illustrated that, for most children, adoption is a positive placement choice, and they make considerable psychological, social and educational progress post-placement (Triseliotis and Russell, 1984; Barth and Berry, 1988; Thoburn and Rowe, 1988; Fratter, 1991; Rushton et al, 2001). For children who have experienced early adversity, including abuse / neglect, there are a number of risk factors which can affect their progress, including an older age at placement, a longer period in care, greater emotional and behavioural difficulties and being scape-goated within the birth family (Rushton and Dance, 2004).

In relation to adopted adults, Fisher (2003) notes that outcomes are much more favourable, and the differences noted in middle childhood and adolescence appear to diminish with time. Feigelman (1997) studied American adoptees at two time points: the

first when they were aged 14–21 years and the second when they were 23–30 years, using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth. He found that by comparing adopted people and their non-adopted peers on variables such as employment success, home ownership, educational achievement and marital stability, there was no significant difference between the two groups in adulthood. Haugaards's (1998) review of adoption outcome studies, including those in the United Kingdom and Sweden, reached the same conclusion, noting that any differences between those adopted and those raised in birth families in adolescence were insignificant by early adulthood.

It is important to note that the studies above focused primarily on children who had been relinquished for adoption as babies, and had not experienced the significant adversity which children adopted from care in the UK experience today, who are also usually older at time of placement. It is therefore important that further longitudinal research is undertaken with this group of adopted children and adolescents when they reach adulthood, in order to understand more about outcomes for this group of adopted people.

The studies reviewed in this section will concentrate on three themes which are relevant to adopted adults: identity; coping with loss; and search and reunion issues, which encompass both the search for self and the experience of losing and then finding birth family members. Very little work has been undertaken in relation to adoption and sibling relationships within this body of literature, so where possible links will be made which have relevance to these relationships.

Identity

One of the major developmental tasks for all people, whether adopted or not, is the development of identity, which can be defined as 'a stable sense of knowing who one is and what one values' (Howe and Feast, 2000: 175). Erikson (1959) describes identity development as a life-long process characterised by different psycho-social 'tasks' or 'conflicts' which have to be resolved before the individual can move on to the next stage. For adopted people, identity development is generally accepted to be complex, with certain unique tasks associated with being adopted (Brodzinsky et al, 1998; Grotevant and McRoy, 1998). Howe and Feast (2000) describe these tasks as the search for 'roots' and 'reason', or 'Who am I?' and 'Why was I adopted?'. A central element of knowing who one is is the development of a coherent life narrative, which has

implications when considering adoption kinship. Identity develops within the context of relationships, and the development of a coherent life narrative is not straightforward for many adopted people, because information such as whom one looks like, family membership, where one was born and the circumstances of one's birth may not be straightforwardly answered. In addition, the adopted person also has to make sense of the reasons why they were adopted, and their relationship to their adoptive and birth families. As the search and reunion studies discussed below indicate, development of this narrative is complex and may leave many unanswered questions.

Studies which have considered sibling contact for children post-placement in adoption and foster care have shown that sibling interactions during contact can assist with the development of a coherent life narrative (James et al, 2008; Berge et al, 2006; Kosonen, 1996; Pavao et al, 2007). These studies also noted the importance of adoptive parents, foster carers and professionals in supporting the children to make sense of their life narratives together. For adopted people separated from their siblings through adoption, it is important to understand more about how siblings contribute to the development of identity. Search and reunion studies indicate that when siblings are known about prior to searching, many adopted people have often thought about them throughout their lives and are concerned with where they are and their well-being (Howe and Feast, 2000; Pavlovic and Mullender, 1999). However, the consideration of sibling relationships is usually part of a wider study of search and reunion experiences which primarily focus on birth parent reunions. Therefore, more detailed study of the significance of birth siblings is required, including the impact on identity development in adult life when siblings have been present but not known about prior to searching for birth family.

Adoption and loss

The experience of loss for adopted people needs to be understood in the context both of a physical separation from birth relatives, and the feelings of loss and possible rejection which may be present for adopted people in relation to their birth family. Adopted people's sense of loss in both these domains is very well documented in research in relation to birth parents (Triseliotis, 1973; Howe and Feast, 2000; Lowe et al, 1999; Brodzinsky and Palacios, 2005; Triseliotis et al, 1997). However, the experience of separation from birth siblings and the meaning of these relationships are less well

documented. There is evidence that when siblings are not separated, they can be a source of support throughout the life-span (Tucker et al, 1997; Bigby, 1997; Dolgin and Lindsay, 1999), and that the presence of a sibling can ease a child's adaptation in a number of stressful situations (Lewis, 1995; Caya and Liem, 1998).

Studies which focus on the experiences of adults who have grown up in the care system note that the adults often recalled with sadness the separation from their siblings, and felt this loss keenly. Those who grew up together in care commented on the importance of maintaining their relationship with siblings for comfort and support within the placement (Festinger,1983; Triseliotis, 1980; Triseliotis and Russell, 1984). More work needs to be completed on the experience and meaning of loss, both of an existing sibling relationship and one that is a retrospective loss (i.e. only discovered in adulthood through the search and reunion process), in order to assist our understanding of siblings who are separated through adoption.

Search and reunion

The process of adopted adults searching for and being reunited with birth relatives provides further insights and understanding into the psychological processes of identity development, attachment issues, and loss and grief. Whilst similarities exist for those who have experienced separations from birth relatives through, for example, divorce, there are unique elements present here. Legally, physically and psychologically the aim is for the adopted child to become a full member of their adoptive family, and on-going direct contact with birth relatives, including siblings, continues to be rare (Neil et al, 2010). The process of search and reunion with birth relatives can therefore answer crucial questions for adopted people such as 'Who am I?', and 'Why was I adopted?' (Howe and Feast, 2000), which have the potential to tackle those issues of identity, loss and attachment.

Whilst adoptive families are not 'families of choice' for adopted children, because decisions are made by others, in adulthood the adopted person does have some choice (within cultural and structural constraints) about how much (or little) their birth and adoptive families are present in their lives. The studies of search and reunion discussed below illustrate the complex relationships which are present and how they are managed, both in the short and longer term. Williams's (2004) work on family life, and the

concept of working out the 'proper thing to do' in these relationships is also relevant here, particularly in terms of negotiating the issues of relationship quality, separation and loss within and between adoptive families, and birth families who are reunited with their adopted kin. In these circumstances, a complex interaction needs to take place which considers what could be perceived as the competing needs of the adoption kinship network, with the adopted adult as a 'moral actor', having to work out the 'proper thing to do'. This is worthy of further research, because it could provide insights into how, in practice, adopted people 'do' their birth family relationships post-reunion, and how the needs of all parties are weighed up when negotiating these relationships.

Studies which have explored the search and reunion experiences of adopted adults have primarily focused on the search for and reunion with birth parents, and in particular birth mothers (Triseliotis, 1973; Sorosky, Baran and Pannor, 1974; Haimes and Timms, 1985; Sachdev, 1992; Pacheco and Eme, 1993; Gladstone and Westhuse, 1998). There have been very few studies that explore the outcomes of these reunions in the longer term (Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 2005). Autobiographical accounts of the long-term impact of the search and reunion experience have identified important themes for consideration: how relationships with birth family members change and develop over time; issues of identity; and issues of loss and attachment (Lifton, 1982; Gediman and Brown, 1989). But, as Howe and Feast (2000) note, whilst these accounts raise central issues, it is important to test out the themes within the context of formal research studies.

The reasons for adopted people searching for their birth families have been well documented over time. Early studies of search and reunion explained searching behaviour as a pathological identity crisis (e.g. Triseliotis, 1973), whereas later studies (Haimes and Timms, 1985; Walby and Symons, 1990; Howe and Feast, 2000; Carsten, 2000) explain searching for birth family members as a normal part of understanding self and one's background in order for adopted people to construct a narrative which makes sense of their adoptive status. Search and reunion is also understood under the concept of 'rights', with powerful movements particularly in the USA campaigning for the right for birth records to be unsealed (Carp, 2009).

What is less clear are the reasons why some relationships endure in the long term post-reunion and others do not. Studies indicate (Howe and Feast, 2000; Carsten, 2000;

Modell, 1997; March, 2005; Triseliotis et al, 2005; Passmore and Feeney, 2009) that there is a very complex inter-play of factors present, which include the physical, psychological and social characteristics of the adopted person, their birth family and adoptive family, the feelings of connection / affinity which may or may not be present towards the birth and adoptive family, the time and effort that all parties are willing to commit to the relationship, and wider cultural factors, including the place of birth and adoptive kinship ties and possible feelings of stigma. It is more complex than a straightforward interaction between genes and environment. As Modell (1997: 51) in particular highlights, adopted people who search for their birth families are connected by blood ties, and are 'yet forced to create a relationship, so that it was as fictive as were the links in an adoptive family'. She highlights a dichotomy here, whereby by virtue of a biological connection which has not been nurtured throughout childhood, adopted people often have expectations of feelings of connection or affinity towards people who are, in reality, strangers to them. As Carsten (2000) argues, it takes sustained time and effort to create a present and future with birth family members where the past has not been shared.

Whilst many of the empirical research studies mention the experience of being reunited with birth siblings, this relationship has not been explored in any depth to date. This is surprising, because there is wide agreement across the research studies that relationships with birth siblings post-reunion are often more straightforward than those with birth parents, and they are one of the most enduring relationships (Sachdev, 1992; Pacheco and Eme, 1993; Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 2005). Triseliotis et al (2005) found that for those adopted people in their study who had face-to-face contact with birth siblings (74%), the closest relationship post-reunion was with their birth sibling(s), who were usually half brothers and half sisters. They stated that:

> 'relationships with siblings were particularly valued because they appeared to generate high levels of affinity. Unlike meeting a parent, there was less of a generation gap and a sibling could also tell the adopted person more about the parent. The relationship was also uncomplicated by the baggage of the past' (2005: 168).

These potential reasons for the enduring nature and quality of birth sibling relationships post-reunion have been echoed particularly by Sachdev (1992), who also suggests that birth siblings have more in common with the adopted person, because they are closer in age than the birth parents. Further, Pacheco and Eme (1993) state that sibling

relationships may be more straightforward because the relationship is not accompanied by feelings of anger, loss, rejection or abandonment, which are often present in relation to relationships with birth parents post-reunion.

It is important to note, however, that whilst post-reunion relationships with birth siblings have more often been shown to be stable and fulfilling, difficulties can also be present. Triseliotis (1973) noted that some of the adopted adults he interviewed reported that birth siblings can feel dislodged from their place within the sibling group, particularly if they had previously been the oldest sibling, resulting in jealousy and difficult relationships, and this has been echoed in subsequent studies (Sachdev, 1992; Howe and Feast, 2000). Triseliotis et al (2005) also found that for some adopted people they did not feel any affinity with their birth siblings, and felt they had nothing in common. Carsten (2000) also found this, and commented that it is perhaps not surprising that feelings of affinity or connectedness are not present initially, given the time, care and effort it takes to build up feelings of kinship between people who meet as strangers.

Howe and Feast (2000) argue that the adopted person's evaluation of their adoption experience within the adoptive family is important in deciding whether or not to search for birth family members. They described three different types of adoption experience: integrated (where the adopted person feels they belong in their adoptive family and does not feel different from them); differentiated (where the adopted person feels they belong to the adoptive family but also feels different from them); and alienated (where the adopted person feels they do not belong to the adoptive family and feels different from them). They found that the presence of siblings either born to the adopters or adopted did not increase feelings of difference, but that the higher the number of siblings born to adopters, the greater the increase in feelings of difference. They found this held constant even when age at placement was taken into account. Howe and Feast (2000) tentatively concluded that the presence of siblings born to adopters could slightly increase feelings of difference for adopted people, but this concept will need to be researched further in order to understand more about adopted people's relationships with their adoptive siblings.

The studies discussed above explore reunions that have mostly taken place within the context of children who have been relinquished for adoption, usually as babies. Children adopted today are generally older, will often have experienced significant abuse

/ neglect prior to being adopted, and will often have some memory of their birth family, including their siblings. To date, there have been no studies carried out which consider this perspective, largely due to a cohort issue, because this group of children is only now reaching young adulthood. However, two studies have considered the views of birth siblings searching for their adopted siblings (Pavlovic and Mullender, 1999; Ludvigsen and Parnham, 2004), which potentially provide important insights regarding sibling relationships for those who have memories of a sibling prior to adoption, or who have known about them throughout their lives. Pavlovic and Mullender (1999) conducted telephone interviews with twenty-four adult birth siblings who had registered their interest in their adopted sibling via Part Two of the Adoption Contact Register. Birth siblings represented the second largest group of birth family 'searchers' (after birth mothers), and the aim was to understand more about their experiences. The researchers found that the adult birth siblings experienced a deep sense of loss in relation to their adopted brother or sister, whether or not they had grown up knowing about them or had found out about them in adulthood. They also reported feelings of injustice at their inability to make contact themselves, because at that time they had to wait for the adopted person to register their interest in tracing birth family members.

In contrast, Ludvigsen and Parnham's more recent (2004) study surveyed twenty-eight adult birth siblings who had approached the Barnardo's Family Connections Service. They found less reporting of anger and injustice within this sample; this could be the result of the law change in 2002, which enabled birth relatives (from 2005) to initiate a mediated search for their adopted relatives. They did find that birth brothers and sisters have their own independent need for information about their adopted sibling, and that even when the birth sibling had no memory of their brother or sister they felt very emotionally connected to them, which was expressed in concern about their welfare and well-being, and a strong wish to see the adopted sibling in person. It is important to note that both of these studies concentrated on birth siblings who were actively looking for their adopted brother and sister, and the views of those who do not search are important to explore. Whilst Howe and Feast (2000) undertook this type of research, there was limited space given to sibling relationships, and it will be important to consider these findings within the context of self-selected samples who already feel strongly about their adopted sibling. On the other hand, both these studies provide useful insights into the feelings of birth siblings who either remember or have learnt about their adopted sibling, and it is clear that strong feelings of loss and connection

were present, along with a desire to reunite with their adopted relative. Although a much greater understanding of sibling relationships for adopted people and their birth siblings is required through further research, it is clear that, for the participants in these studies, siblings had an enduring significance which remained over time.

Writing from a sociological perspective, March (1995) explored the use of search and reunion with birth relatives as a mechanism to reduce social stigma. She carried out a qualitative study with 60 adult adoptees who all had 'closed' adoptions and had searched for their birth relatives. March (1995) used Goffman's (1963) paradigm of social stigma, whereby individuals are discriminated against by others on the basis of possessing certain physical or social traits that are outside the 'norm' (in this case, being adopted). In order to gain social acceptance, Goffman (1963) argues that individuals must find ways of dealing with the issues causing them to be stigmatised, in order to fit in with others and be seen as 'normal'.

March (1995) found that although the adoptees did not feel stigmatised themselves by being adopted, they had experienced this stigmatisation from others. A majority of respondents reported that other people's responses (either positive or negative) to a lack of biological ties with their adoptive families made them feel different, and feel that their adoptive family was inferior to other families based solely on biological kinship. They also felt stigmatised through being unable to provide a coherent story about their background and circumstances of adoption to others, which increased their feelings of difference and stigmatisation. For example, one respondent described an uncle stopping the family tree with her adoptive father 'because the blood line ended with him' (March, 1995: 657). Another participant said of people outside her immediate family that 'they never believe your adoptive parents love you like their parents love them. Because you aren't biological' (March, 1995; 656).

March (1995) argued that by not having access to information about their birth family, the adoptees in her study lacked the knowledge to 'establish generational continuity' (March, 1995: 657), which exacerbated their sense of difference and of experiencing social stigma from others. She stated that by searching for and finding birth relatives, the adoptees in her study were able to place themselves within a bio-social context and to remove the secrecy surrounding their adoption. She stated therefore that adoptees 'use reunion as a way to neutralise their social stigma and gain greater acceptability from others' (1995: 654).

Consideration of the broader social and cultural context of search and reunion adds a valuable component to the majority of studies that have been carried out, which primarily consider the psychological processes present when adopted people search for and are reunited with their birth relatives, and it would be helpful if further studies also considered this. As Creedy (2001) argues, in the USA adoption is still seen by society as second best to having your own biological children, and the impact of social and cultural contexts alongside the individual context for search and reunion merits further exploration, particularly within the different social and cultural context of the UK. In addition, whilst March's (1995) study is particularly relevant to those with no background information about their birth relatives, what about those who do have this when growing up? Do they still experience social stigma as a result of others perceiving their adoptive family ties to be inferior to those based on biological kinship? And what about those who choose not to search?

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter underlines the complexity of birth and adoptive kinship relationships for adopted adults, and the biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that interplay when considering the sibling relationships of adopted adults in particular. Although research in this area is limited, there are clear indications that birth sibling relationships are significant, enduring and often more straightforward than relationships with birth parents.

This literature review has focused on providing an overview of the context for this thesis, and highlights that there is a significant gap in our understanding of adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span; particularly in adulthood. This study aimed to explore how these relationships are experienced and 'done' in everyday life, and what they mean to adopted adults. The following chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this study, and describes the process of undertaking this research.

Chapter 5: Research Design and Process

Introduction

This chapter will outline and reflect on the planning, design and implementation of the research process. It is therefore helpful at this point to re-state the purpose of the study, which was to explore adopted adults' experiences of their birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span, and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. The over-arching aims of the study were two-fold: on the one hand, to contribute to knowledge regarding adoption and sibling relationships across the life-span; and, on the other, to develop a framework to assist social work practitioners in their assessment and decision-making processes for sibling groups pre- and post-adoption.

My motivation for undertaking such a study encompassed both a professional and a personal interest. As a qualified and experienced social worker I had worked over many years with children and their families for whom adoption became the eventual plan – often children in sibling groups. I had also experienced sitting on adoption panels where plans for adoption and matching were considered and recommendations made, and where decisions were made regarding prospective adopters' applications. Whilst undertaking this work, I became aware of the dearth of research that looked at sibling relationships in adoption, particularly from a life-span perspective, and that decisions were often made regarding whether to place siblings together or apart based on taking a 'here and now' perspective in relation to the current state of sibling relationships, rather than taking a more longitudinal view. I therefore became curious about adopted people's sibling relationships across the life-span, and what messages might be relevant for social work practice today.

As an adopted person myself (who has birth and adoptive siblings), I have also had a life-long curiosity about adoption, siblings, and the meanings and experiences of those who have been adopted across the life-span. Throughout the planning, design and implementation of this study, I have carefully attended to my own professional and personal perspectives, and will reflect on this further throughout the chapter.

Theoretical considerations

A central component in deciding how to tackle any research problem is firstly to consider the wider paradigm within which the problem in located, in terms of ontological and epistemological positioning. As D'Cruz and Jones (2004:57) state:

> 'The selection of design, methodology, data generation and analysis does not consist of random or ad hoc decisions (or neutral methods or techniques) but in assumptions about reality (ontology) and how this may be known or understood (epistemology)'.

Mason (2002: 19) describes this process as an 'intellectual puzzle', whereby the research question should express the 'essence of your inquiry'. The research question for this study encompassed an exploration of the subjective experiences and meanings of adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationship across time. From an ontological perspective, this suggested taking a social constructionist approach, acknowledging that reality is subjective and 'built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors' (Bryman, 2008: 18). A positivist approach would take the standpoint that an objective reality exists which can be formally measured through the testing of hypotheses (Flick, 2006). My own viewpoint was that there was no single 'truth' being sought in this study; the emphasis was on seeking to interpret the adopted adults' sense of their own reality in relation to their birth siblings through the narratives they provide when being interviewed.

From an epistemological perspective, I then had to consider 'what might represent knowledge or evidence of the social reality that is investigated' (Mason, 2002:16). Given the viewpoint that reality is socially constructed, and the focus on individual meanings and perceptions, this indicated that an interpretive approach was required. Gray (2004: 21) notes that interpretive approaches focus on 'people's practices and lived realities', which provided a good fit for this exploratory study that aimed to examine the 'lived realities' of adopted people's sibling relationships from their perspective. As Hennink et al (2011:9) note: 'the approach allows you to identify issues from the perspective of your study participants, and understand the meanings and interpretations they give to behaviour, events or objects'.

The combination of social constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology suggested that a qualitative approach was the appropriate way forward in terms of the

research design and methods. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 3) state, 'qualitative research is a situational activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible.' Adopting this approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of adopted people's subjective meanings and everyday experiences in relation to their siblings, which generated very rich and detailed data that was also attentive to the participants' social contexts (Mason, 2002). This approach is particularly suited to exploratory studies, where existing knowledge is limited, as it provides the flexibility required to develop lines of inquiry inductively (Charmaz, 2006).

The grounded theory approach

A grounded theory approach was chosen as the most appropriate method of qualitative inquiry to answer the research question. It is an iterative process that aims to construct theory inductively through simultaneous data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

Other approaches were considered during the design phase of this study, particularly narrative analysis. Reissman (1993: 3) identifies personal narratives as 'talk organised around consequential events' and the narrative analysis approach was identified as suitable for this type of life-story, or biographical, research (Flick, 2006). However, as a novice researcher, the grounded theory approach gave me a clear and transparent framework with which to work throughout the entire research process, from sampling and data collection through to analysis and theory-building. Nevertheless, close attention was paid to individual narratives and 'stories' within the research interviews, so that understanding of the individual meanings and experiences was not lost through the 'fracturing' of the data.

There are several different approaches in grounded theory, and I chose to follow Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach. This method approaches data collection and analysis more flexibly than Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original formulation of grounded theory, which took a more positivist stance, treating the phenomenon under inquiry as being largely separate to social conditions (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). Further, Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1998) continued to suggest that researchers should not engage with the literature prior to beginning fieldwork. Charmaz (2006) takes a different view, acknowledging the value of exploring

the literature relating to the phenomenon under investigation, providing that analytic categories are grounded in the data and not 'forced' into categories that have been pre-judged. As Charmaz and Bryant (2011: 292) state:

> 'The purpose of grounded theory is theory construction, rather than description or application of existing theories. Hence, grounded theorists pursue developing their analytical categories and use data in service of constructing these categories'.

Furthermore, a grounded theory approach acknowledges the influence of the researcher on the research process, accepts the notion of multiple realities and emphasises reflexivity (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Research questions

The research questions for this study were outlined in the introduction to the thesis, but will be re-stated here. The over-arching research question for this exploratory study, which focused on adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span was: *How do adopted people experience and make sense of their birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span?'*. In order to answer this broad question, it was broken down into three different parts, each with associated lines of inquiry that have been outlined previously:

(1) How do adopted people perceive and experience family life in their adoptive families from childhood to the present day?

(2) How do adopted people experience and make sense of their adoptive sibling relationships from childhood to the present day?

(3) How do adopted people experience and make sense of their birth sibling relationships from childhood to the present day?

The remainder of this chapter focuses on discussing in detail the research process that was developed to answer these questions.

Defining the participants and gaining access

Sampling in qualitative research focuses on gaining 'a detailed understanding of a certain phenomenon, to identify socially constructed meanings of the phenomenon and the context in which a phenomenon occurs' (Hennink et al, 2011: 84). This indicated that

the sampling strategy appropriate to this research project should focus on in-depth inquiry with participants who were adopted and had direct knowledge and experience of sibling relationships: in broad terms, a non-probability, purposive sampling approach. As Gilbert (2008: 512) notes, purposive sampling in this type of study has the aim of 'gaining insight and understanding by hearing from representatives of the target population. Given the exploratory nature of this research project and the importance of collecting in-depth data that focused on experiences and meanings, a quantitative approach that focused on probabilistic sampling within a general study population was not indicated.

Qualitative sampling approaches have been criticised due to their lack of representativeness, inherent bias, lack of rigour and lack of generalisability (Morse, 2007). However, Mason (2002) emphasises that representative sampling is not particularly effective for qualitative studies. Representativeness may not fully address the research question (through, for example, not providing access to participants whose experiences would be particularly relevant; or as Spradley (1980: 25–26) states, to an 'excellent informant'), and large samples would be required which may result in superficiality in the data: something that negates the aims of qualitative research, which is to explore issues in-depth. In addition, as Morse (2007: 234) highlights, 'excellent qualitative inquiry is inherently biased ... bias is not something that impairs the rigour of the research'. By this she means that through using appropriate and rigorous qualitative sampling frameworks (in this research study the use of purposive sampling), 'the characteristics of the phenomenon or experience we are studying become most clear, and emerge more quickly and cleanly than by using cases in which the concepts and experiences are weak or obscured' (Morse, 2006: 234). Denscombe (2010) emphasises that in qualitative research it is important to consider who would provide the best possible information for the phenomena under investigation. In this way the quality of the sample becomes of over-riding importance, and indicates smaller samples in order to do justice to the large amounts of data qualitative inquiry generates.

In the early stages of this study, the focus was on adopted people's experience of growing up apart from their birth siblings, and how this affected their sibling relationships over the life-span. Construction of the purposive sampling criteria was therefore quite wide initially, focusing on accessing adopted adults who knew they had

birth siblings and had grown up apart from them. Given little is known about adopted people's birth sibling relationships across the life-span, a heterogeneous sample was sought that would provide some comparability across several domains. These included those who had searched for and been reunited with their birth siblings and those who had knowledge of birth siblings but had not searched for them, and those who grew up having contact with birth siblings and those who did not. Given the life-span perspective of this study, I was also keen to find participants across two domains: a wide age-range in adulthood, and variation in the length of time participants had been in touch with their birth siblings. It was felt that finding participants with maximum variation across these domains would potentially provide helpful insights into the development and maintenance of birth sibling relationships and the levels of continuity and change over time.

I aimed for representation from both genders, although acknowledging that other studies have indicated that generally more women than men search for their birth parents (Howe and Feast, 2000). However, I did not wish to over-emphasise traditional sociological concepts such as gender and ethnicity in my initial sampling criteria; I preferred to focus on the more conceptual issues present around adoption and birth siblings. Given the exploratory nature of the study, focusing on issues of gender and ethnicity may have resulted in not finding the most appropriate participants for the research question, and they are arguably more appropriate for hypothetico-deductive research studies (Mason, 2002; Morse, 2007).

Having reviewed the literature in relation to adoption and sibling relationships, and completed three interviews, it became clear that retaining a focus only on adopted people's birth sibling relationships where they had grown up apart from one another (with or without contact in childhood) was too narrow. Participants were keen to talk about their adoptive sibling relationships, their experiences as only children, and the impact on relationships within the adoption kinship network of finding (or being found by) their birth siblings. It was also clear from the literature that a study focusing on the kinship relationships of siblings through adoption would have more to contribute to knowledge than the previously narrower focus. Widening the focus to include participants who were adopted and had adoptive sibling relationships, those who were brought up as only children and those who had been adopted with their birth siblings

allowed for a more rounded study of the sibling relationships of adopted people across the life-span. It has also provided more potential to be useful for social work practitioners working with sibling groups being placed for adoption, rather than focusing purely on siblings who were separated through adoption.

Sampling in grounded theory emphasises a progressive focusing of sampling criteria as a research project progresses (Richards and Morse, 2007). Denscombe (2010: 108) illustrates this by stating 'the instances to be included follow a trail of discovery – like a detective follows a "lead". Each new phase of the investigation reflects what has been discovered so far, with new avenues of investigation and new angles to be explored.' The selection criteria for the study was therefore further developed at this stage, with the minimum criteria being adopted adults who had knowledge of at least one birth sibling, whether they grew up together or apart, since this was the primary concern of the research project. In order to seek greater knowledge about the meanings and experiences of sibling relationships for adopted people, potential participants were also included if they had one of the following characteristics:

- adopted adults who grew up with adoptive siblings
- adopted adults who grew up as only children.

In addition to the selection criteria that pertained specifically to siblings, a range of other factors was also relevant to select participants, in order to allow for some variety as well as comparability in relation to the meaning and experience of sibling relationships in adoption:

- **age of the participants.** The minimum age for participation was 18 years of age. Consent could be given by the participant directly, rather than also requiring parental consent for those aged 16–17 years of age. There was no maximum age limit. Given the life-span approach of this study a broad age range was aimed for, and achieved. However, it also became clear as the study progressed that chronological age was less important than the depth and range of participants' experiences, irrespective of age.

- **length of time since the participants had searched for and / or been in contact with their birth siblings.** Previous adoption research has emphasised

that relationships with birth family members post-reunion can change and develop over time (Modell, 1997; Triseliotis et al, 2005; Feeney et al, 2007). Adopted adults were sought who could represent a range of experiences. Participants were included if they had knowledge of birth siblings but had chosen not to search for them, those who were in the process of searching, and those who had been in touch with their birth siblings for as wide a range of time as possible. Again, specific targets were not set but close attention was paid to gaining a range of experiences as the study progressed.

- **different experiences of adoption.** Adoptive and birth sibling relationships cannot be fully explored without considering the context, experience and meaning of growing up in an adoptive family. Sibling relationships do not occur in isolation, and the influence of being adopted and experiencing growing up in an adoptive family was of particular interest in terms of its influence on birth and adoptive sibling relationships over time. Again, although no specific targets were set, it was aimed that a range of adoption experiences would be included, from those who had, broadly speaking, a positive experience of adoption to those whose experiences were more unhappy.

Two groups of potential participants were excluded from the study. Firstly, a number of adopted adults contacted me from overseas, as far afield as Australia and the United States of America. Whilst the stories they told me were absolutely fascinating, and I could have conducted telephone interviews, this would not have allowed me to meet the participants in person and observe their surroundings, as I had done with the other participants. Meeting participants resulted in gaining valuable information about their relationships with their siblings and other family members through, for example, being shown photographs and documents, and observing their interactions with me as a researcher in person. I also wished to maintain a United Kingdom focus within the sample, whereby the legal and policy context in which the participants were adopted were broadly similar and therefore had relevance to social work practice in the UK today. An exception to this was, however, made within the sample. One participant was adopted abroad but had spent all their adult life in the UK. In addition, the legal and policy context in their country at the time of adoption was broadly similar to the UK, and from our initial telephone contact I was aware that they would be what Spradley (1980) describes as an 'excellent informant'.

The second group of potential participants who were excluded were those who were clearly emotionally distressed about issues related to adoption at the point of contact. I did not feel, ethically, that it was appropriate to interview them at a time when they themselves were going through a difficult period in their lives about which I would interview them, as it may increase their emotional distress.

Sample sizes in qualitative research are necessarily smaller than studies with a quantitative focus, given the sheer volume, depth and richness of the data generated that requires analysis (Bryman, 2008). Given the iterative, inductive focus of this study which had a grounded theory focus, constant comparison of the data was utilised until theoretical saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006) following twenty interviews. As Dey (2007: 185) notes in relation to theoretical saturation: 'stop when the ideas run out ... adding further to the data makes no difference. Like a sponge which can hold no more water, the theory needs no more elaboration'. The achievement of theoretical saturation is by no means straightforward, and I had to be attentive to several practical issues that were present. First, the data generated needed to be manageable by a novice solo researcher, particularly given the sheer volume of rich data that was generated throughout the lengthy interviews. Secondly, the time and expense confines of this PhD research project had to be taken into account, particularly because accessing suitable participants took a long time and meant extensive travel throughout the UK. However, within these confines, I was confident that theoretical saturation had been reached in relation to the participants' adoptive sibling relationships and birth sibling relationships post-reunion, as no new categories were emerging from the data.

At the outset of this study it was anticipated that potential participants could be sought by approaching the post-adoption services of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. Two local authorities were initially approached by letter, and information sheets about the project were included for the agency and for potential participants (see Appendix 1 and 2). An offer was also made to provide a seminar on the research towards the end of the project. The aim was for staff members to refer potential participants who met the inclusion criteria for the project. An additional consideration in approaching local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies was the availability of support from the agency to participants following the interview if required, given the potentially sensitive subject matter of the interview. In practice, one local authority did

not respond, despite several follow-up attempts being made by e-mail and telephone. Another local authority did respond positively, but in order to minimise the time their workers spent on referring participants they opted to write a piece about the research project in their local newsletter for users of the post-adoption service. This resulted in one approach from an adoptive parent who was very interested in the research, but no potential participants.

Van Maanen and Kolb (1985: 11) summarise the process of gaining access as follows:

> 'Gaining access to most organisations is not a matter to be taken lightly but one that involves some combination of planning, hard work and dumb luck'.

This was certainly the case in gaining access to the participants for this study, with the process taking just over two years (March 2009 – April 2011) to access all participants and complete data collection. Following the lack of success with the two local authority post-adoption services, approaches were made over time to five different voluntary adoption agencies throughout the UK, with a view to receiving direct referrals and / or placing advertisements in their newsletters and websites. Again, information sheets for the agencies and potential participants were sent with the initial letter. Approaches were made to potential 'gatekeepers' within each organisation (i.e. those whose permission was required to access participants and / or facilitate contact with them: see King and Horrocks, 2010). One was known to me professionally through previous work undertaken with the organisation, and they were also aware of my identity as an adopted person.

As a 'known' person to this organisation (although not a known researcher), the process of gaining access was more straightforward. I had already established credibility with them as a professional social worker, and their feedback from my initial approach indicated that through my social work skills they were confident that I could manage what might be potentially emotional interviews with their service users. I was not sure whether my known identity as an adopted person to this organisation would help or hinder the access process. As it happens, in their view this gave me added credibility to understand the world of adoption and siblings as an 'insider'. However, I went to great lengths to ensure they understood that I had no personal agenda about siblings and

adoption, but a curiosity arising out of professional and personal experience of adoption to explore the issue of sibling relationships in detail.

There are potential benefits and disadvantages of 'insider' status when negotiating access to potential participants (Coffey, 1999; Robson, 2002). In this case my being a social worker and an adopted person could on the one hand establish credibility, but on the other may have raised concerns about a personal agenda or 'missing' potentially interesting participants due to over-familiarity with the subject area personally and professionally. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) note that one advantage of 'insider' status is that it can open up access sites that may potentially be closed to people perceived to be 'strangers', and this seemed to be the case with each voluntary adoption agency that was approached. In fact, with one adoption agency it was not until I had reluctantly declared my personal status as an adopted person (having previously declared my professional credentials during rather protracted negotiations, and realising that 'insider' status as an adopted person might assist), that they agreed to grant access. However, there is a delicate balance to be achieved when considering insider / outsider status (Coffey, 1999), which in terms of sampling and access meant paying close attention to the sampling criteria when selecting participants and critically reviewing the choices made throughout the process.

Buchanan et al (1988) emphasise the need to be both flexible and opportunistic when negotiating access, and Robson (2002: 378) states that 'in real world enquiry, the contest between what is theoretically desirable and practically possible must be won by the practical'. Given that I was approaching a number of voluntary adoption agencies, I was confident that my sample would be both practical in terms of access and theoretically desirable through attending to both comparability and diversity within the sample. In practice this was by and large the case, because enough referrals and direct approaches were made to the project to allow for the selection of a wide range of suitable participants which reflected the sample criteria. The main difficulty was the low number of participants who were adopted through the care system rather than relinquished as babies. I was concerned initially (and possibly naively) that findings primarily from those relinquished as babies may not have as much resonance for social work practice today as those adopted through the care system. However, given the life-span perspective and the focus on meanings and experiences regarding sibling relationships

in this study, the rich data generated does in my view have clear relevance for social work practice today with sibling groups in adoption.

Having gained access to five voluntary adoption agencies over time, I deployed different approaches in order to recruit participants, namely receiving direct referrals from social workers within the organisations and placing advertisements on the organisations' websites. Prior to referring participants to the study, the social workers had an initial conversation about the project with the potential participant and passed on the relevant information sheet. The use of website advertisements was a deliberate research strategy in order to try to attempt to access both those who had searched for birth family and those who had not, given the methodological issues present in researching only those who had opted to search alone (Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 2005). As the study progressed, I continued to nurture the relationships with the voluntary adoption agencies, as Robson (2002) suggests, through keeping them informed about the progress of the study. I began to receive invitations to present my 'research in progress' to these organisations' conferences (including two conferences specifically for adopted people), and through this had what Van Maanen and Kolb (1985: 11) term 'dumb luck', as I also received a number of direct approaches from adopted people who had attended the conferences, and who fitted the sampling criteria.

There was also an element of convenience sampling present within the sample initially, in that one of the participants was known to me personally and acted as a pilot interview. However, grounded theory methods emphasise flexibility in the sample initially in order to gather a wide range of relevant data (Denscombe, 2010), and the participant fitted the sampling criteria, thus remaining purposive, as well as being convenient through being a personal contact. Later in the process, I interviewed two other participants who were known to me personally and one who was referred through a family member. Corbin and Strauss (2008) stress that sampling in grounded theory studies should be flexible and responsive to emerging concepts as data collection progresses, in order to generate theory. They state that:

> 'With theoretical sampling, there is flexibility to go where analysis indicates would be the most fruitful place to collect more data that will answer the questions that arise during analysis'.

With this in mind, the two participants mentioned above were chosen through theoretical sampling as the study progressed, because they characterised concepts that needed to be developed within the on-going analysis. Further, they represented phenomena that were strikingly unusual within the sample and were what Rapley (2011) terms 'exceptions', or negative / deviant cases (Perakyla, 2011) on the face of it. However, despite their unusual circumstances within the sample, they gave me what Schofield (2003: 18) terms 'the possibility of more flexible and creative "rules"', rather than being exceptions that prove the rule (Rapley, 2011).

Once potential participants had either approached me directly, or been referred by one of the participating adoption agencies, an initial telephone conversation took place that allowed me to hear something of the person's 'story' in order to assess their suitability for inclusion in the study, and to talk through issues of informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. It was clear during these conversations that participants felt very motivated to be able to tell their stories, and many wished to help other children in sibling groups requiring adoption today. Some responded out of curiosity for the subject area, and others wanted the opportunity to be able to talk through and think about their experiences, both of adoption and being adopted, and their birth / adoptive siblings. Without exception, the participants wanted the research to be 'of use' in social work today, and I felt a great sense of responsibility to ensure that the study was both feasible and valuable (Pagggett, 1998), and had practical application within social work today.

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues were considered throughout the research process, from the initial design and planning of the study, through collecting and analysing the data to writing up the thesis and considering appropriate means of dissemination. A wide variety of sources were consulted to inform my thinking on research ethics, including the key issues of consent, anonymity, confidentiality and the protection of participants, and in particular the ethical issues which arise when undertaking social work research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Punch, 2006; Mason, 2002; D'Cruz and Jones, 2004; McLaughlin, 2007; Hardwick and Worsley, 2011; Silverman, 2011).

I was also influenced by the Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, 2008) which is based on Butler's (2002) ethical framework for social work research. Butler (2002: 26) argued that social work research needs to be underpinned by social work values, and stated that what is required is 'a sophisticated ethical awareness that goes beyond questions of governance'. With this in mind, I paid particular attention to Point 3 of the Code of Ethics, which states that the process of researching social work issues needs to be congruent with the over-arching aims and values which underpin the social work profession, namely to 'seek to empower service users, promote their welfare and improve their access to economic and social capital on equal terms with other citizens' (JUCSWEC, 2008). The voices of adopted adults in relation to their sibling relationships have been marginalised in the research literature, and this study aimed to begin to redress that balance through the creation of a well-designed study which contributes to knowledge within the field and has relevance and benefit to social workers and ultimately service users.

The research study gained ethical approval from the University of East Anglia's School and Social Work and Psychology's Research Ethics Committee, which followed the British Psychological Society's *Code of Conduct, Ethical Principles and Guidelines* (2008/9). However, as Delamont (2002) notes, ethical issues tend to arise throughout research projects, and it is not always possible to anticipate all of them. This was certainly the case in the management of the data for dissemination: I did not anticipate initially how identifying some of the participants' stories would be. Considerable effort has therefore been made, through the use of pseudonyms and in some cases attributing quotes from one person to another, to achieve anonymity and protection of the participants' unique and very individual stories.

One of the key ethical issues in relation to any research study is gaining informed consent from research participants. It is defined by the Social Research Association as 'a procedure for ensuring that research participants understand what is being done to them, the limits of their participation, and awareness of any potential risks they incur' (2003: 28). Hardwick and Worsley (2011) state that informed consent usually has three elements, which must all be present: being competent to give informed consent; taking part in the study voluntarily; and having enough information to make an informed

decision. I took considerable care to ensure that all three elements were present for each participant. Upon initial contact, a telephone conversation took place where the focus of the study was clearly outlined (and an information sheet arranged to be sent or e-mailed if they had not already received one). I clarified the reasons for their interest in the study, and ensured that their participation was voluntary. These initial conversations also enabled me to assess competency, which was not an issue for any of the participants who approached me. I also explained the shape of the interview and the broad areas which would be explored: for example, their adoption experience, curiosity about siblings in childhood and adulthood, their motivation (or not) to search for birth family members, the process of search and reunion and what had happened subsequently. For the participants who also had adoptive siblings, I explained that I would like to explore their relationships with them from childhood to the present day.

In sharing with the participants the key areas of the interview, I was aiming to give them enough information to make an informed decision about whether to take part, being mindful of Lewis's (2003) comments that there is really nothing to be gained from participants who are not properly prepared for the interview. I was also aware that the subject matter may be particularly sensitive. I did not want participants to be exposed to emotional harm during the interview as a result of not being prepared for the broad structure of what would be asked. Indeed, for some potential participants prior knowledge about sensitive subject areas meant that, due to their own current circumstances and / or emotional health, they decided not to take part. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were fully discussed at this initial stage, and many of the participants were very keen to ensure that this was adhered to, given the uniqueness of their stories and the possibility of identification. In addition, I made it clear that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, and that if there were any questions they did not wish to answer, this would be respected.

Following the initial telephone discussion and continued expression of interest to take part in the study, a consent form (see Appendix 3) was either posted or e-mailed to the potential participant, who was then given time to think through whether they still wished to be included. In practice, all those who reached the stage of receiving the consent form went on to agree to be interviewed. On the day of the interview, all the

above issues were explored again prior to the interview commencing, and the consent form was signed by the participant.

It is important to acknowledge that the issues raised in the research interviews about adoption and sibling relationships were complex and emotive for the participants. The interviews brought up thoughts, feelings and issues which some of the participants found very painful. Some also found that the process of thinking through their adoption experience and sibling relationships in the interview setting led to them considering issues they had not previously considered and / or dealt with. Some participants became very tearful and emotional during their interviews, and this required great sensitivity on my part, including offering the opportunity to take a break or offering that they could stop the interview at any point. My experience as a social work practitioner who has considerable experience of working with children and adults affected by loss and separation greatly assisted me here. I carefully managed the interviews with sensitivity and tact, taking due regard of the participants' emotional state, and was able to manage their emotions without prematurely closing down interviews (King and Horrocks, 2010). None of the participants wished to stop their interview, but several took the opportunity to have breaks if they became very emotional.

It was striking to hear comments from several of the participants, particularly those who had been very emotional during their interview, that the process of re-telling their 'stories' had been in many ways cathartic for them. Several participants commented that having the space to talk through their story from birth to the present day felt like a luxury they had not been afforded before, and that, although painful, it had helped them clarify some issues in relation to adoption and siblings in their own minds. For example, one participant had struggled with his feelings for his birth sister, feeling that their relationship was in some ways less meaningful to him than it 'should' be. However, the process of unpicking their relationship and what it meant to him during the interview; something he had not undertaken previously, allowed him space and time to reflect on the life-span of their relationship and what it meant to him in a meaningful way. He concluded that he had a meaningful and positive, although complex, relationship with his birth sister, which was clearly significant for him.

I was mindful that research is in many respects a one-way process, with the aim being to create knowledge (Hugman, 2010). However, whilst the research interviews gave me very rich data to work with, they also had benefits for the participants: something I had not entirely anticipated at the outset. Whilst I was attentive to protecting participants from emotional harm throughout the research process, the experience of being interviewed was also empowering for some, and reflected principles of emancipatory research outlined in the Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research (JUCSWEC, 2008).

The process of interviewing the participants also raised issues of the difficulty of being both a qualified social worker and a researcher. There were occasions during some of the interviews when participants wished for advice and guidance about their own 'stories' and the meanings they derived from them; in some senses wishing to test out their experiences through hearing my own evaluation / assessment of their situation. I resisted doing this, being clear about my role as a novice researcher rather than a social worker. In doing this I kept in mind McLaughlin's (2007: 65) advice when undertaking social work research that:

> 'The researcher's role is not to be confused with that of advisor, counsellor or social worker. The researcher should avoid giving advice, or commenting favourably or unfavourably on a participant's decisions'.

However, given that I was also ethically concerned with the participants' welfare, I had anticipated that signposting to relevant organisations may be required for some not already linked to an appropriate agency, and gave participants relevant information about different agencies if it was either requested or indicated.

Alongside issues of confidentiality and anonymity in the dissemination of the research, the participants and agencies were made aware that all data would be stored securely, and all agencies were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

The interview approach

Within qualitative inquiry, interviewing is seen as a highly appropriate method of data collection for studies where 'a deeper understanding of an issue is sought' (Shaw and Gould, 2001: 144) and where the study seeks 'to develop a detailed understanding of

subjective meanings, attitudes and beliefs' (Smith, 2009: 115). For this study, interviewing was seen as the most appropriate method of data collection, since the aims of the study were to develop an in-depth understanding of adopted people's experience of their birth and adoptive sibling relationships over the life-span, and the meanings the participants gave to their sibling relationships. Further, as Charmaz (2006: 28) notes, interviewing fits particularly well with a grounded theory approach, because they are both 'open-ended but directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet flexible'.

Alternative methods of qualitative inquiry were considered, such as the use of focus groups. Whilst this could have yielded interesting data in terms of the collective development of attitudes and beliefs towards adoptive and birth siblings (Denscombe, 2010), it would not have given the opportunity for participants to share their own detailed experiences and stories across the life-span, which was more appropriately gained through individual interviews.

Interviewing is not a neutral phenomenon, but an active interaction which is historically, politically and contextually bound (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Further, it is described as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1984: 102), where knowledge is constructed or reconstructed, with the researcher and interviewee co-producing this knowledge (Mason, 2002). I was struck during the interview process that several of the participants commented that 'I have never thought about this before' when asked questions about their birth and adoptive sibling relationships. In this way the research interview provided an opportunity for the participants to think through their experiences and meanings in relation to sibling relationships, and led to the co-creation of knowledge about birth and adoptive sibling relationships.

The issue of knowledge creation in research interviews and its application to wider social worlds has long been debated in the literature (Silverman, 2001; Sanders, 1995; Charmaz, 1995). Radical social constructivists believe, put simplistically, that reality is created through the interaction of participant and interviewer in research and cannot be transferred to social worlds outside the interview context. However, Miller and Glasner (2011) have a less radical position within an interpretivist framework, arguing that in their interviews with adolescents, the adolescents' social worlds in which they operated, for example around their age, gender and ethnicity, were present both in their

interviews and within their social worlds. Therefore, whilst participant and interviewer do co-create knowledge within interviews, knowledge also comes from the participants' experience of their social and cultural world and can therefore be applied to relevant social worlds outside the interview context; understanding, however, that there is not one 'reality' to be accessed, which would represent a more positivistic viewpoint, but multiple realities.

Miller and Glasner's (2011) viewpoint had particular resonance for this research project, because the participants were operating from their social worlds in which they were adopted and had siblings, although their social worlds and the meanings they derived from them were often very different. However, using Miller and Glasner's (2011) standpoint meant that while knowledge was co-created during the interviews, their narratives were also derived from their social and cultural worlds as, for example, an adopted person, a sibling, a woman: something which remained constant whether or not they were interviewed. On this basis, the knowledge that was developed during the interviews could be applied both to provide greater understanding of the wider social context of sibling kinship relationships in adoption, and the cultural frameworks they used to make sense of these experiences.

The language the participants used during their interviews was closely attended to, and in doing this I was influenced by King and Horrocks' (2011: 215) views on language:

> 'Our knowledge never objectively reflects the external reality; it is always a creation (a construction) that is brought into being through language. When we engage in narration we are using language to construct and represent events and experiences'.

As the interviews progressed the language the participants used, in particular around defining who they counted as a sibling, was overlaid in cultural interpretations of 'blood' and 'association'. Indeed, the cultural and linguistic tools available to describe their complex relationships with birth and adoptive kin are limited, and required significant work to get behind their statements and consider implicit meanings from their explicit statements. For example, the statement 'half sibling', used frequently during the interviews to describe the status of a birth sibling in relation to blood ties, had different meanings for different people, which was not always obvious initially. For some, it meant a lessening of the status of the sibling relationship, while for others they referred

to the 'blood' status of being a half sibling but also commented that this did not mean it was any less of a relationship than with full siblings. Close attention needed to be paid during the interview in order to flesh these ideas out and not make assumptions on the basis of the language used, given the limits of language to define these complex relationships.

When undertaking the interviews it was important to remember that there were several different types of data being produced by the adopted adults in the sample. I was influenced by Schofield's (2003: 14) summary of the different types of data generated in her study of previously fostered adults, which was as follows:

(1)   what happened – the reality or 'truth' about their childhood;

(2)   what they remember – the reality or 'truth' at the time and since;

(3)   what they have been told, or remember that they have been told about their childhood – again as processed at the time and since;

(4)   who they are now – their adult lives and their adult state of mind, with its complex roots in the childhood reality, the memories, the stories told and the processing.

As in Schofield's study, the adopted adults in the sample often had significant gaps in their life story narratives as a result of being adopted and having a lack of information about their birth families. Some also experienced traumatic or very difficult adoptions which affected what they remembered and forgot, and how they made sense of their lives and their sibling relationships. Proust, who was very concerned with memory, stated that 'remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were'. However, I was not aiming to ascertain objective 'facts' about the participants' lives (or necessarily their remembrance of things as they were), but rather understand, through their stories, how they understood and made sense of their experiences and the meanings they attributed to them. However, close attention was paid to the context of their stories in light of the different types of data from which they were derived, as described above, and also from the influence of the social and cultural worlds in which they lived their everyday lives.

Careful consideration was given to the type of interview method chosen. Broadly speaking, qualitative interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured (Robson, 2002), and the chosen method of interview should correspond to the aims of the study, the research questions and types of information to be obtained (Mason, 2002). Given the exploratory nature of this study, where flexibility in questioning was vital and obtaining depth and richness of the data was important, a structured interview approach was not indicated. Given the life-story approach of the interview, a narrative, or unstructured interview may have been a helpful approach. However, there were a number of specific areas which I wished to pursue during the interviews, particularly given the lack of knowledge about adoption and sibling relationships, and a semi-structured in-depth interview method was able to address these specific issues, as well as giving the participants flexibility to pursue and develop themes that were new or unexpected (Mason, 2002). In addition, as a novice researcher the semi-structured interview allowed me to develop competence and confidence in interviewing as a social researcher within a flexible framework, something which would have been difficult had a narrative, or unstructured approach been taken.

Conducting the interviews

As a qualified social worker (but novice researcher) I have had considerable experience of interviewing over a number of years, and therefore had confidence in my ability to undertake research interviews, using many of the skill-sets acquired in interviewing service users. As D'Cruz and Jones (2004: 111) state:

> 'The familiarity with interviewing as a 'social work skill' shows how social workers already have some connection with a key ability required for social research'.

I remained mindful of the issues already discussed regarding interviewing as a researcher and interviewing as a social worker. The parallels present, particularly with regard to interviewing prospective foster carers and adopters, were interesting, because these assessments require skilled interviewing to elicit depth and richness in life narratives, something also present in these interviews. Obviously, a key difference here is that when undertaking fostering or adoption interviews the aim is to provide an assessment of suitability. Here, the aim was to elicit experiences, stories and meanings to further knowledge in the field.

I continued to reflect on my role as a researcher rather than a social worker throughout the research study. For example, I considered how my professional status as a social worker, which was known to the participants, could affect the interview process. Issues of power and status are important to consider when gathering data through interviews – how the participant may perceive a researcher in terms of their status, gender, age etc (Robson, 2002; King and Horrocks, 2010). I was mindful that perceptions of a difference in status may prevent building a good rapport and / or inhibit the participants in their narratives (King and Horrocks, 2010). In reality, this happened on just one occasion, when a participant was vocal about her mistrust of social workers. In addition, although it was not explicitly stated, my accent perhaps indicated that I was middle-class, and the participant came from a working-class background of which she was very proud. This difference widened the status differences, and despite working very hard to minimise these differences during rapport-building and throughout the interview, it was only through declaring my 'insider' status as an adoptive person (something I did not routinely do) that the participant began to open up a little more freely.

An interview guide was designed to allow for exploration of the key themes, as described in the research questions (see Appendix 4). Additional prompts and probes where used to explore the participants' experiences more fully and elicit rich data, or 'thick description', for example by asking for examples or stories to illustrate their points (Geertz, 1973; Charmaz, 2006). The interview guide was also designed to allow for flexibility, so that the unexpected was encouraged to emerge (Mason, 2002).

I chose to take a chronological approach to the interviews, taking participants through their adoption experience as children and adolescents (including relationships with adoptive siblings), their curiosity about birth family and birth siblings in particular, their motivation to search (or not search) for birth family members, including siblings, the process of search and reunion with birth family members and what happened subsequently, and relationships with adoptive family members in adulthood. Several participants commented on the usefulness of a chronological approach to order their thoughts and ideas about adoption and sibling relationships. However, there was enough flexibility within the interviews for participants to start at a different point if they wished. For example, some participants wished to talk about their current situation

before going back to consider their childhood, and this was accommodated; others went to and fro between the past and the present.

At the end of each interview, participants were asked to look to the future, both in terms of their sibling relationships and also about how they felt their experiences might inform social work practice in adoption with sibling groups. This served two purposes: first, to begin a process of detachment from the interview, particularly given the emotive nature of the topic (Robson, 2002; King and Horrocks, 2010); and secondly to allow for the development of a bridge between their own subjective experiences and how this might be applied to social work practice today (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011).

One pilot interview was carried out to test the interview guide, and minor changes were made, including the provision of questions regarding curiosity about birth family members, as this had not been fully considered initially. As the study progressed and further interviews were carried out, in conjunction with further reading of the literature and initial analysis of the interview data, additional questions and prompts were added to provide more depth and focus in relation to adoptive sibling relationships over time, and, for example, in relation to emerging concepts regarding how the participants defined their sibling kinship relationships and how they practised and 'displayed' these relationships to others. As Charmaz (2006) notes, grounded theory studies emphasise that data collection and analysis run simultaneously, as key ideas and concepts to be explored in subsequent interviews emerge as data collection progresses.

Participants were offered the option of choosing where to be interviewed, either at home or in a local social work office. All but one of the participants chose to be interviewed in their own homes, which provided further rich information about their lives. Interviews were tape recorded, bearing in mind Kvale and Brinkman's (2009: 179) advice that this then allows the researcher to 'concentrate on the topic and the dynamics of the interview'. In practice, this meant that I was able to closely attend to the explicit and implicit content of each interview, including verbal and non-verbal cues, and carefully manage the sensitive and often emotional content of the interviews. It also allowed me to carefully observe the participants' surroundings (for those I interviewed in their own homes), which elicited useful information about how the participants lived their lives and who they counted as core family members, for example by the family

photographs that were displayed. Use was made of field-notes taken after the interviews finished, and while not formally used as data, they were helpful in contributing to making sense of the participants' lives.

Data management and analysis

The iterative and inductive nature of qualitative research means that there is no 'right' or uniform way to approach analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Bryman, 2008). Charmaz (2006: 46) defines analysis in grounded theory as the 'pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain this data'. Using a grounded theory approach, from the development of the research design to collecting and analysing the data, provided a clear, coherent and transparent framework for the study, increasing its credibility (Charmaz, 2006). It enabled 'data collection, analysis and eventual theory [to] stand in close relationship with one another' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 12). Further, the process of coding and analysis in grounded theory allowed me to 'show the workings' (Holliday, 2002: 123) of the analysis clearly, enabling transparency and contributing to the study's rigour.

Data collection and analysis in grounded theory should be completed in tandem with one another, and this was achieved in this study. As Charmaz and Bryant (2011: 292) state:

> 'Grounded theorists engage in data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process that uses comparative methods. They compare data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with tentative categories, and categories with categories. This method fosters analysing actions and processes rather than themes and topics'.

The data sources analysed for this study were the participants' interview transcripts. As noted earlier, field-notes were taken after each interview and were incorporated into interview summaries. They were not formally coded, but the observations and impressions gained assisted me when 'interrogating the data' (Delamont, 2002: 177). The field-notes consisted of observations about the interview setting (such as actively observing who was in the family photographs that were placed around the house), the visual artefacts that were produced about their adoption in the course of the interview (for example birth certificates, letters, photographs) and how they were stored. The interviewee's general demeanour before, during and after the interview was commented

on, and the researcher's own feelings about the interview process were noted. As Atkinson et al (2003: 60) state, field-notes are 'the building blocks of qualitative research, a place for the accumulation of data and reflections', and they assisted in contextualising the interview transcripts.

Each interview was audio-taped and fully transcribed. This was an extremely lengthy process as the interviews were on average between 2 – 3 hours duration. Having transcribed the first two interviews myself, I then opted to hire a professional transcriber to complete the remaining transcripts as each interview was completed. In doing this I was mindful of King and Horrock's (2010) comments on threats to quality in transcription; namely missing context within the interview, and 'tidying up' transcribed talk (2010: 144).

In terms of context, the professional transcriber was given clear instructions to code significant pauses, and different emotions (for example crying or laughter). They were also instructed not to 'tidy up' the grammar or sentence construction, as Poland (2002) notes can occur when researchers are concerned not to make the participant or the researchers appear inarticulate. As King and Horrocks (2010: 148) state, 'it is not the purpose of transcription to produce a corrected version of what has been said, but rather an accurate one'. With this in mind, and once each transcript was completed, I listened to each interview in full with the transcript. Additional contextual markers were added which may not have been obvious to the transcriber given they were not present during the interview. Each transcript was also checked for accuracy and corrected where needed. The process of listening to the interviews again while checking the transcription also provided an opportunity to develop early ideas about the direction of the analysis, and fed in to later interviews. I continued to listen to the interviews throughout the analysis phase as this assisted in the analytical thought process, and kept me grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Written summaries were completed as soon as possible after each interview (see Appendix 5 for an example framework). They detailed the context of the participant (in terms of demographic data, number of birth and adoptive siblings and so on), a summary of each section of the interview, the impressions gained from informal observation and consideration of the key themes emerging. Completing the interview summaries was particularly helpful in terms of managing the large volume of data

generated, and assisted in initial comparisons of the data across interviews; although it was not a substitute for the line-by-line coding that was carried out.

The formal process of analysis began with an active engagement with the data in constructing initial, or 'open' codes, rather than simply passively reading the transcripts (Charmaz, 2006). Mason (2002: 148) highlights that qualitative data tends to be read either 'literally, interpretively or reflexively' (2002: 148). I aimed to read and interpret the data on all three levels; literally in terms of words and language used; interpretively by reading 'through or beyond' the data (200: 149); and reflexively by maintaining an awareness of my role and perspective as a researcher within in research process. For example, the language used in the interviews about the biological and social connections of kinship was read literally on one level in terms the words and language used by the participants. It was also read interpretively in order to get behind the physical language to deeper meanings. As a researcher who was also an 'insider', I had to carefully attend to my interpretations of their language use reflexively, being aware not to make judgements based on my own subjective experiences.

The use of Charmaz's (2006) approach to analysis in grounded theory was extremely helpful as it gave a clear structure to the analytic process of theory-building; moving from open coding, to focused coding and finally theoretical coding. Throughout the process I kept in mind Dey's (1993: 229) exhortation that 'there is a difference between an open mind and an empty head'. Glaser and Strauss's (1967) initial emphasis was that researchers should go into the field unencumbered by preconceived ideas about their data collection and analysis from existing literature. Dey (2007) comments that while there is veracity to this viewpoint in terms of the inductive process, in reality prior knowledge can help shape and guide the research process, providing that pre-existing ideas and categories are not made to 'fit' the data collected, but rather emerge from the data itself.

Data was initially 'open' coded on a line-by-line and segment by segment basis for each interview transcript. Following Charmaz's (2006) guidelines, I kept the codes 'active' as much as possible by the use of gerunds (a noun form of a verb – for example 'feeling', 'experiencing'), in order to foster the analytic process whereby meanings could be discerned through studying actions, processes and events. Charmaz (2006: 136) states that using gerunds 'fosters theoretical sensitivity because these words nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes'.

The 'open' codes were then examined within each transcript and compared across every transcript in order to begin to identify the emerging themes and categories (focused coding). Following this process encouraged exploration of the data in an analytical way, rather than simply being an organising function (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). As Charmaz and Bryant (2011) note, using the process of 'constant comparison' means that higher levels of abstraction can be achieved. However, as Dey (2007: 177) states, constant comparison is more than simply pattern recognition in the data. It is about the 'underlying conceptualisations which can identify and describe ... the empirical relationships (not just the superficial regularities) identified within the data'. He also sees the development of categories as 'forming the major bones of the analysis, later fleshed out by identifying and analysing in detail their various properties and relations' (Dey, 2007: 168).

Coding was undertaken manually, using (many) tables to organise the segments of data and their associated codes; first as open codes and then grouping the codes and data together as focused categories. I did begin using the qualitative software package 'Nvivo' to assist with the management of the data, but stopped using it at an early stage. I appreciated the value of such a package to assist in the analysis, but disagreed with Lewins and Silver (2007: 10), who argue that such packages assist with 'closeness' to the data. In fact, I felt more remote from the data, and preferred coding manually (albeit on a computer, but using my own tables), as it felt more intuitive and interactive.

Memoing was used throughout the process of analysis. Hammersley and Atkinson describe memos as 'occasional written notes whereby progress is assessed, emergent ideas are identified, research strategy is sketched and so on' (1995: 191). However, I took a more focused approach to memoing, keeping in mind Strauss and Corbin's view that 'writing memos and doing diagrams are important elements of analysis and never should be considered superfluous ... memoing and diagramming should begin with initial analysis and continue through the research process' (1998: 218). Memos provide an opportunity to think about and develop initial ideas, and were used creatively (including diagrams and tables) in the development of concepts and categories (Charmaz, 2006).

The analytic process in this study is illustrated in Appendix 6 and 7, which charts the development of the theoretical category 'meaning' (cultural and personal meanings of 'family' and 'siblings'); part of the psycho-social model presented to explain how

adopted people navigate their sibling relationships across the life-span. Examples of open codes are given, and the process of constant comparison within and between the interview transcripts assisted me in thinking more conceptually about them; considering not only which were the most significant or frequently used codes, but also which ones 'made the most analytic sense to categorise [the] data incisively and completely' (Charmaz, 2006: 58). At the level of focused coding, the following categories were developed, which together encapsulated the theoretical category 'meaning':

- Conceptualising 'family' – meanings of being adopted and having a birth family.
- Conceptualising 'siblings' in 'family life'
- Personal beliefs about biological and social connectedness.
- Moral notions of kinship – 'what is the proper thing to do?'

The development of the theoretical category 'meaning' (and indeed the other categories in the psycho-social model) evolved from the process of 'weaving the fractured story together again' (Glaser, 1978: 72). As Charmaz (2006: 63) notes, 'theoretical codes specify possible relationships between categories ... they are integrative; they lend form to the focused codes [and] help you tell an analytic story that has coherence'. The development of the psycho-social model not only describes the four different categories of thinking, relating, meaning and context, but also puts forward explanations with regard to how each of the categories relate to each other, and the factors that influence this. A 'cultural map' (Modell, 1997) was therefore developed to provide a theoretical explanation for how sibling relationships in adoption were navigated across the life-span in this study.

Trustworthiness of the research

Assessing the quality of qualitative research has been long contested within the field. Researchers who adopt a more positivist stance value the more traditional concepts of reliability and validity; more usually present in quantitative approaches with clear 'rules' that govern their assessment (Bryman, 2008). However, assessing quality through the more flexible use of 'credibility' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), or 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) had more relevance to this study, given its exploratory focus. Assessing the 'trustworthiness' of this research recognises that the findings have to be plausible and believable, but also that a number of other 'plausible' explanations may

arise from other people's reading of the data, which could be equally valid (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Charmaz and Bryant (2011: 298) state that:

> 'The credibility of grounded theory starts from the ground up. The quality and sufficiency of the data for accomplishing the research goals matter....[it] emphasises choosing data collection methods that fit the research question and gathering sufficient data to construct a credible analysis to fulfil the research goals'.

Within this study, close attention was paid to the trustworthiness of the research in the following areas:

(1) The research design and process have been outlined in detail in order to increase transparency, and to demonstrate that the design, methods and research process flow logically together. As Holliday (2002: 123) states, 'showing the workings makes a major contribution to the rigour.....of qualitative research'.

(2) The following four empirical chapters provide what Geertz (1973) describes as 'thick description'; that is, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation, in order for interpretations to be made about the congruence of the data and the analysis presented (King and Horrocks, 2010), and to increase the transparency of the analysis (Huberman and Miles, 1994).

(3) A reflexive approach has been adopted, as detailed in this chapter, with reflections and 'critical self-scrutiny' (Mason, 2002: 7) on my identity and role throughout the research process, and any possible influences on the interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2006).

(4) As a novice researcher, I made use of my supervisory team early in the analytical process in order to check that the coding frameworks I was developing were coherent with the data; what King and Horrocks (2010) term 'code confirming'. This was a very helpful process, and in particular assisted me to make the codes more 'alive' with the use of gerunds and grounding these early codes in the participants' language as much as possible.

(5) I was able to test my early ideas and findings for theoretical consistency. Dey (2007: 177) describes this as the 'degree to which our theoretical claims are

consistent with well-established knowledge in the field'. I did not take the more traditional route of member checking with the participants to test for validity, given their wide geographical spread throughout the UK. However, I was able to test for theoretical consistency through presenting my early ideas and findings to various academic and practice-based conferences, two of which were specifically for adopted people. This was particularly helpful, and the academics, practitioners and adopted people were very supportive of my ideas and interpretations of the data, indicating that my claims were theoretically consistent. On several occasions practitioners and adopted people also alerted me to possible relationships in the data that needed further refinement (for example the over-riding influence of culture on definitions of siblinghood). Undertaking this process also increased the accountability of the study, something which is emphasised in JUSWEC's Code of Ethics.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the research design and process that was undertaken in carrying out this study. Each stage of the research has been discussed and reflected on in detail, in order to provide transparency and increase the trustworthiness of the study's findings. The next four chapters present the empirical findings of the research study. The following chapter focuses on introducing the participants by providing relevant demographic profiles, and discussing their experiences of adoption in their adoptive families.

Chapter 6:   Introducing the participants

Introduction

This chapter will profile some of the characteristics of the participants in this study, in order to provide a context for the following three chapters, which explore how the participants defined their birth and adoptive sibling relationships over time, and how they experienced and 'practised' their adoptive and birth sibling relationships across the life-span. Information in this chapter focuses firstly on the sources through which participants became involved in the research study, and then highlights demographic details (age, gender and ethnicity) to provide a general context for the sample. There follows a discussion of the adoption and sibling specific criteria, namely the number and type of adoptive and birth siblings, time since searching for / finding birth siblings. Qualitative data is presented in the section on the participants' adoption experience, illustrating the use in this study of Howe and Feast's (2000) typology of adoption experience.

To reiterate, the study focused on a purposive sample of adopted adults who had knowledge of / contact with at least one birth sibling, and who also had a range of adoption experiences in relation to siblings: either growing up with adoptive siblings, foster siblings, or birth siblings, or being only children. The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate the subjective experiences and meanings of birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span, with a view to contributing to knowledge and social work practice in relation to adoption and siblinghood.

Sources of recruitment

The previous chapter outlined the strategy with regard to accessing participants. Table 6.1 outlines the different sources through which participants were recruited to the study:

Table 6.1
Sources of recruitment to the study

	N = 20	%
Referral from voluntary adoption agency staff	4	20
Self-referral through adoption agency websites	8	40
Self-referral through contact at adoption agency conferences	4	20
Personal contacts	4	20

The five voluntary adoption agencies who supported the research study work throughout the four nations which comprise the United Kingdom, and all provide a combination of birth records counselling and post-adoption support and / or provide a signposting facility to relevant services for those affected by adoption. Social workers within the organisations directly approached service users who fitted the sampling criteria with information about the research project, and then passed on contact details if the potential participants were interested in taking part and had agreed to be contacted.

As the table above notes, 60% of those recruited to the study were self-referrals, with the remaining 40% equally divided between those who were referred to the project from voluntary adoption agencies and those who were my own personal contacts. As noted in the previous chapter, recruiting participants to the study was a long process, and took just over two years from undertaking the first pilot interview to completing data collection.

I was initially concerned with not overly biasing the sample towards those who had chosen to search for birth family members, wishing to gain a potentially wider range of perspectives through interviewing participants who had also either been found by birth relatives or who had not chosen to search. The adoption agencies approached were all national agencies with prominent websites, and the advertisements placed on them aimed to attract those who were adopted and interested in their birth siblings, but had not necessarily searched for them. However, one problem became apparent very quickly during the early interviews: most participants had not had any knowledge of the

existence of birth brothers and sisters prior to searching for birth family members (most often their birth mother). While those who are adopted are confident in the biological existence of birth parents, and research studies which focus on those who search and are searched for can have this remit (see Howe and Feast, 2000), clearly knowledge about siblings was not a 'given' in the same way. This led to a more pragmatic view, whereby differentiation between those who had searched for birth siblings and those who had not was not possible. However, two of the participants had been found by birth family members rather than searching for them, and their views are represented throughout the following chapters.

Demographic characteristics

The age range of the sample, as shown in Table 6.2, was particularly helpful, and spanned from mid-20s to mid-70s. Given the life-span perspective of this study, I had aimed to achieve a wide age range which covered early adulthood, middle adulthood and old age, and this was achieved, although it would perhaps have been helpful to have more representation at either end of the age scale. In particular, I had hoped to find more participants who were aged 18–25 years, because this may have provided an opportunity for a more detailed examination of those who were adopted from care (n = 3), rather than relinquished (n = 17). The lack of this information could potentially be seen as a limitation of the study. However, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, the issues raised regarding adoption and sibling groups, for example in terms of knowledge about the existence of birth siblings, growing up together or apart and the importance of taking a life-span perspective, are as relevant today in social work practice as they were when the participants were adopted, irrespective of the method of adoption (from care or relinquishment).

There were several advantages to achieving a broad age range: first, from a developmental perspective it was helpful to interview participants in the different life-stages in adulthood, and the benefits and barriers these presented in developing and maintaining sibling relationships (for example having children, being busy with careers, caring for elderly relatives, coming to terms with being widowed etc). Secondly, the wide age range provided a helpful longitudinal perspective in looking back and looking forwards with regard to sibling relationships, from different life stages. Finally, I had (perhaps naively) thought at the outset that having a wide age range would provide

helpful data regarding the longitudinal experience of birth and adoptive sibling relationships. While this was certainly true for those who had grown up with adoptive and birth siblings, it was less true for those who met birth siblings for the first time in adulthood. First reunions happened at a wide variety of ages, and the key here was the length of time since the reunion, irrespective of age (see Table 6.5).

Table 6.2
Age, gender and ethnicity

		N = 20	%
Age	20–30	1	5
	31–40	3	15
	41–50	6	30
	51–60	5	25
	61–70	4	20
	70+	1	5
Gender	Male	4	20
	Female	16	80
Ethnicity	White British	10	50
	White Scottish / Welsh / Irish	7	35
	Other minority ethnic group	3	15

No specific targets were set in regard to the gender or ethnicity of participants, but efforts were made when recruiting to reflect diversity within the sample. Significantly more women than men took part in the study, and the figures for male participants are less than those who have taken part in other adoption studies where search and reunion with birth family is considered (see Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 2005). The reasons for this are unclear, but it could be reflective of the view in some studies that more women than men have an interest in searching for their birth relatives. It could also be the result of a lack of knowledge / information available about birth siblings in general.

Something that was interesting within the interviews was the participant's ethnic identity. Although only two of the sample were deemed to be from 'traditional' minority ethnic backgrounds, several of the participants strongly identified as being from the Celtic nations which make up the UK, and did not wish to be identified as White British. These ethnic identities were, for them, fundamental to their sense of self, and were usually as a result of their adoption rather than their birth. Indeed, several had been brought up as Scottish, Welsh or Irish having had English parents and been born in England, and their primary ethnic identity was identified as being that of their adoptive family, both before and after tracing their birth family. However, most participants acknowledged their dual ethnic identities, where relevant, and had an interest in their birth heritage, including those from 'traditional' minority ethnic groups. However, one participant talked of being told about one Celtic nation identity as her birth identity, and as a young adult she had fantasised about this and even visited the country in question, feeling a strong sense of identity and connection to the country as a result of that visit. Upon tracing her birth family she learned that her birth ethnic identity was the same as her adoptive ethnic identity. She felt a strong sense of loss and grief for many years regarding what she had originally been told was her birth identity, particularly as she experienced an unhappy adoption, and had felt comforted by having a different ethnic identity to that of her adoptive parents. In addition, one of the participants who was from a 'traditional' ethnic minority background also strongly identified as being from a Celtic nation through adoption, demonstrating the complexity of ethnic identity in adoption.

Composition of sibling relationships within adoptive family

Within the sample, a wide spectrum of sibling (and non-sibling) relationships were represented by the participants in relation to growing up within their adoptive families; from being raised as only children to growing up with adoptive siblings or birth siblings. Adoptive sibling relationships were represented through brothers and sisters being the birth children of the adoptive parents (usually the oldest child), or non-related children adopted into the same family. None of the participants grew up with a combination of birth and adoptive siblings. This complex spread of sibling relationships is summarised in Figure 6.1 below:

Figure 6.1

Composition of sibling relationships in childhood (n = 20)

A bar chart with the vertical axis ranging from 0 to 9 and the following categories and values:

- Only child: 8
- Non-related adoptive siblings: 5
- Birth children of adopters: 3
- Combination of non-related adoptive siblings and birth children of adopters: 2
- Birth siblings: 2
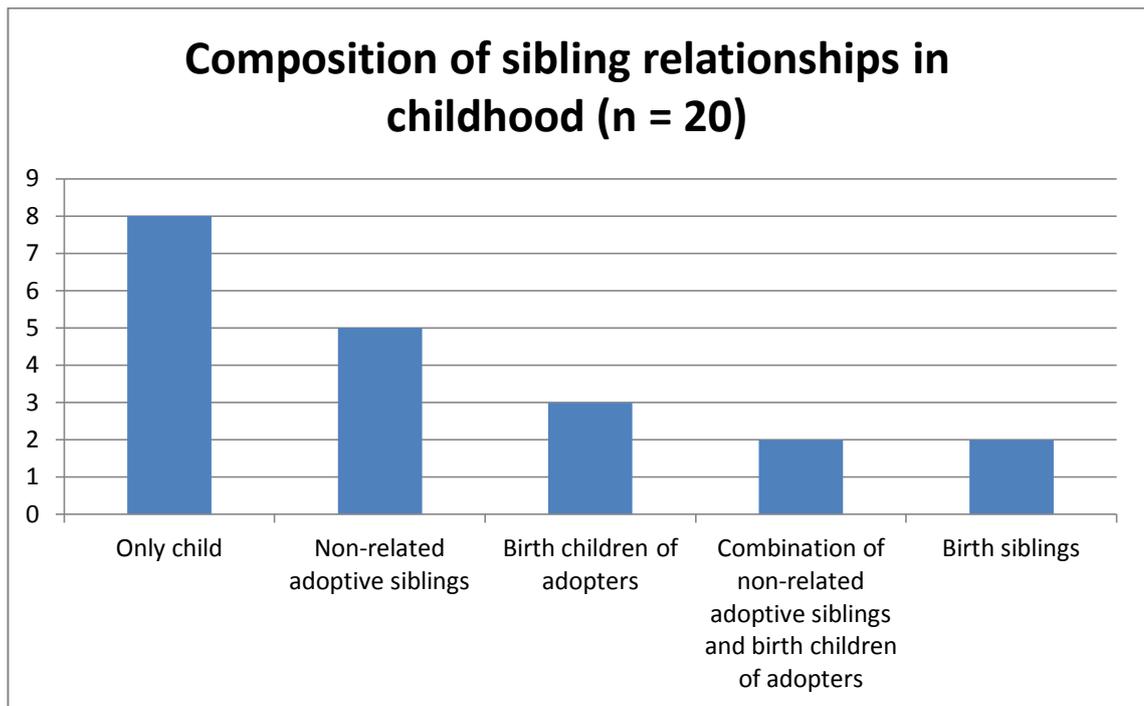
Adoption experience

An important component of exploring adopted people's sibling relationships through the life-span is the context through which these relationships are experienced as part of family life, both in childhood and adulthood. It was therefore important to gain a sense of how the participants experienced and made sense of their adoption, and in turn how this influenced their adoptive and birth sibling relationships. These issues will be discussed in more detail in the following three chapters, with an explanation of the framework used here.

Kirk (1964) described issues of belonging and difference as the 'paradox' of adoption, in that adoption emphasises 'belonging' to the adoptive family, whilst at the same time emphasising 'difference', because the child is not born into the adoptive family. Howe and Feast (2000) state that many adopted people and their adoptive families resolve this paradox quite smoothly, and that feelings of difference can be experienced in a relatively benign way, not in and of themselves affecting their feelings of belonging and feeling loved and secure. However, for others the feelings of difference can affect their feelings

of belonging, and for some their feeling loved, leading to an unhappier adoption experience.

Howe and Feast (2000) developed a typology when evaluating adoption experience in their study, which focuses on feelings of belonging and difference, and is illustrated in Table 6.3 below. The different categories which make up the typology will be explored in more detail further on in this section.

Table 6.3
Howe and Feast's (2000) Typology of adoption experience

		Felt different to adoptive family	
		No	Yes
Felt belonged in adoptive family	Yes	Feelings of integration *Integrated experience of adoption*	Feelings of difference *Differentiated experience of adoption*
	No	Not significantly represented (theoretically unlikely position)	Feelings of alienation *Alienated experience of adoption*

Initial coding of the interviews in this study raised considerable issues of belonging and difference which can usefully be illustrated using Howe and Feast's (2000) typology. Other studies (see Biehal et al, 2010) have rated adoption experience using categories such as 'good', 'close', 'distant' etc, but they arguably do not consider the essence of adoption fully; that of belonging and difference, and their inter-relationships. Table 6.4 illustrates the range of adoption experiences present in this study:

Table 6.4
Adoption experience

| | | **Felt different from adoptive family** | |
		No	Yes
Felt belonged in adoptive family	Yes	*Integrated experience of adoption* 35% (n = 7)	*Differentiated experience of adoption* 30% (n = 6)
	No	Not significantly represented (theoretically unlikely position)	*Alienated experience of adoption* 35% (n = 7)

Howe and Feast's (2000) study found that of those who had searched for their birth families (which make up the majority of this study's sample), 40% had experienced an integrated adoption, 22% had a differentiated experience and 27% had an alienated experience. Given that the aim of this study was to explore a range of adoption experiences, rather than compare searchers and non-searchers, it was helpful that there were broadly equal numbers of participants representing each facet of the adoption experience.

For those participants who had an integrated adoption experience (who did not feel different to their adoptive family and felt that they belonged), their narratives featured statements about their adoptive family being 'my family', and often commented on feeling loved and nurtured, and being treated the same as their adoptive siblings. For example, one participant commented that *'my parents that brought me up are my parents and I don't see them as anything else, they are my mum and dad'*. Another participant commented: *'I never noticed any difference in their parenting between my sister and myself. We were always treated fairly, we were always treated equally and I was very close to both my mother and my father'*. One participant did feel an element of difference from her adoptive siblings, but strongly commented that this was in relation to her gender as the only girl rather than to her adoption, which she maintained was very positive and did not affect her sense of belonging or difference.

The participants who had a differentiated adoption experience did generally feel it was experienced benignly, and was often to do with differences in outlook, personality, interests and world view with regard to their adoptive parents. For example, one participant stated:

> *When I reflect back, they [adoptive parents] gave me a good start to life. They weren't well educated people, they were very simple people. I mean, she wasn't very sophisticated, and I am not saying that in a derogatory way, but she just wasn't very worldly. I mean, there wasn't a sense of kind of worldliness to their upbringing, but certainly in terms of their loving and caring and needs being met, they certainly ticked all the boxes.*

So on the one hand, the participants in this category did feel different from their adoptive parents, but this did not affect their sense of belonging to their adoptive family.

The category of alienated adoption experience reflected those participants who, for a variety of reasons, felt they were different from their birth family and did not belong. Reasons for this included a profound sense of difference from adoptive parents, feelings of rejection from adoptive family, and a sense that, in one participant's words, *'they were not my clan'.* This group can further be illustrated by one participant who, whilst loving her adoptive mother, never felt she really belonged or was accepted:

> *I was always wary of my mother ... I was very proud of her and somehow I didn't quite come up to her expectations, so I could so easily blot my copy book, if you like. When I look at my whole life I see that, yes, I have always felt that whatever I am doing I am on the outside of, I never really felt accepted.*

There was a small sub-group present within this category who had additionally suffered abuse within the adoptive family, usually physical and emotional abuse, which led to particularly acute feelings of rejection and alienation, and feeling unloved. Interestingly, for each of this group one parent was seen as primarily responsible for the abuse as the perpetrator, but feelings of anger and rejection were also usually directed to the other parent (although to a lesser degree) as a result of what they saw as a failure to protect them from harm. This is illustrated by one participant who stated:

> *Her [adoptive mother's] treatment when I was a child was she would hit me and then she wouldn't speak to me, or she would reject me in whatever way to her was most appropriate.*

And of course ... you know being adopted is a rejection and then when your adopted mother ....
So I had my birth mother rejecting me and then I had my adopted mother rejecting me, and my
adopted father not doing anything to protect me at all. It was awful.

For the participants in this group, as adults they often reflected on the dual rejection they felt they had suffered, firstly through their perception of being rejected through being adopted, which was compounded by feelings of rejection within their adoptive family. Interestingly, adoptive sibling relationships within this small sub-group were often problematic over time, perhaps reflecting the complex dynamics present within these adoptive families, which will be explored further in Chapter 8.

Given the qualitative focus of this small-scale research study, hypotheses regarding cause and effect (for example, the type of adoption experience predicting how adopted people experience their adoptive sibling relationships) were not appropriate, given the focus on subjective meanings and experiences. However, as the following three chapters highlight, the participants' adoption experiences were one of a number of influences regarding how their adoptive and birth sibling relationships were defined, developed and 'practiced' over time.

Composition of birth sibling relationships

Within this sample there were a complex array of birth sibling relationships which consisted of full siblings, half siblings and siblings by association (for example, step-siblings), and participants often had a combination of two of these within their birth sibling group. Following Edwards et al's (2006) flexible definition of sibling relationships, those whom the sample identified as being a sibling were included (hence the inclusion of a birth cousin who was identified as being a sibling). Participants had between one and ten birth siblings, with an average (mean) of 4.7 siblings. This larger than average number of siblings is perhaps reflective of the complex and diverse nature family structures present within adoptive kinship networks. For example, two participants had grown up with one birth sibling but also had other birth siblings from whom they were separated. Figure 6.2 below summarises these relationships:

Figure 6.2

Composition of birth sibling relationships (n = 20)

- Full siblings only
- Half siblings only
- Combination of full and half siblings
- Combination of half siblings and siblings by association
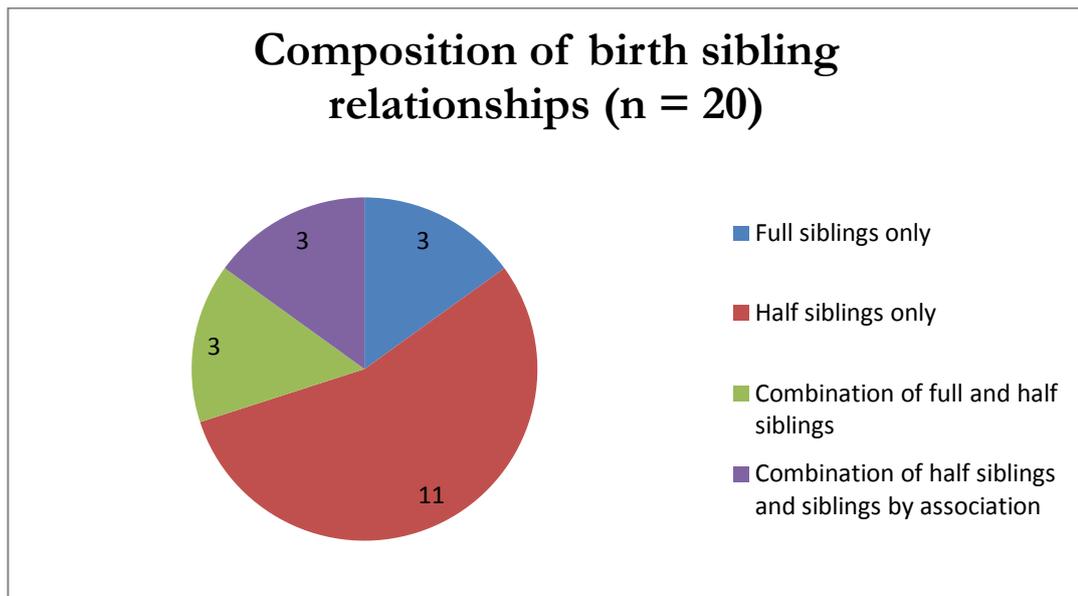
As the chart above demonstrates, participants were more likely to have half brothers and sisters. This group was represented in three ways: having maternal half siblings only (n = 6); having paternal siblings only (n = 1); and a combination of maternal and paternal brothers and sisters (n = 4). This reflected a number of different factors. First, the participants usually focused on finding their birth mother first and hence were more likely to have knowledge of their maternal birth siblings. In addition, several of the participants had either opted not to trace their birth father, or were having difficulty establishing their identity. The lack of paternal siblings in the sample should therefore be read bearing these issues in mind.

All the participants in this study had knowledge of having birth siblings, either through growing up with them (n = 2); being provided with some information as children about one or more of their birth siblings (n = 4), including the two participants who had also grown up with birth siblings and apart from others); or finding out about them for the first time as adults (n = 16). Fifteen participants had been reunited in person with their birth siblings in adulthood and had had more than one meeting with them. The length of time since their reunion with at least one birth sibling is illustrated in Table 6.5 below:

*Table 6.*5
Length of time since reunion

	N = 15	%
Less than 1 year	1	7
1–5 years	3	20
6–10 years	3	20
11–20 years	5	33
21–31 years	3	20

It was particularly pleasing that 73% of the sample had been in contact with at least one of their birth siblings for over six years, as this allowed for an in-depth exploration of the development of these relationships and how they are 'done' in practice over time. It should be noted, however, that the participants often developed a relationship with one or two birth sibling before going on to develop a relationship with others.

Summary

This chapter has introduced the participants in this study by providing their demographic context, information about the composition of their adoptive and birth sibling relationships, and their subjective evaluation of their adoption experience. The following three chapters go on to consider in detail how the participants defined their birth and adoptive sibling relationships, and explores the everyday experience, practice and meanings of these relationships across the life-span.

Chapter 7: Defining siblinghood for adopted people – who is my brother and sister?

Introduction

There are a range of discourses about siblinghood and who should be defined as a brother and sister. These range from traditional notions of kinship and the family which rely on identifying siblings through blood ties alone, to more social constructions of siblinghood which emphasise social connectedness; through for example adoption or gaining siblings through divorce and re-marriage (Schneider, 1980; Modell, 1994). Sibling relationships in general are complex and unique, but for the participants in this study there were additional layers of complexity as a result of being adopted. In particular, they grew up biologically connected to brothers and sisters but usually had no knowledge of their existence. Further, whilst some grew up with adoptive siblings, others were raised as only children, thereby discovering for the first time that they had any siblings at all when they reached adulthood.

The complexity of understanding sibling relationships in general and adopted people's sibling relationships in particular is brought to the fore when attempting to understand how the adopted people in this study defined their sibling relationships over time. In particular, there was a complex interweaving of biological and social notions of kinship in their definitions. Alongside defining *who* was a sibling, there were a range of views about the degree to which siblings also *felt* like brothers and sisters, and it was common for the participants to single out one or more of their sibling group as feeling more like a sibling than the others. Cultural notions about what a sibling 'should' be influenced these narratives, and are included throughout the chapter. The notion of 'culture' and its influence on adoptive and birth sibling relationships is also explored in more detail in the following two chapters, particularly in relation to family 'scripts' about siblings, and issues of class and gender.

Expressing feelings of siblinghood and the reasons for its presence or absence was a difficult task for the participants, and invariably included a defence of their position in terms of justifying their feelings and their actions. These justifications seemed to act as a

form of protection both for themselves and their identity, and often indicated their care of and concern about both their adoptive and birth families.

Dimensions of siblinghood

The following diagram illustrates the different dimensions that the participants used to explain how they defined who was their brother and sister:

Figure 7.1
Dimensions of siblinghood
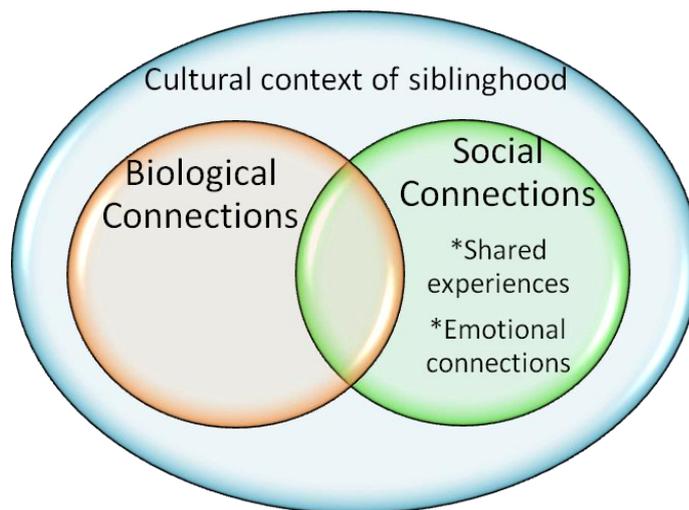
Cultural context of siblinghood

Biological Connections

Social Connections

*Shared experiences

*Emotional connections

Biological connections

The presence or absence of a biological connection to birth and adoptive siblings was powerful in the participants' narratives, and the language used, both with regard to defining *who* was a sister and brother and who *felt* like a sibling. It raised notions of the prevailing cultural discourse regarding who counts as a sibling and why, with biological siblings often referred to as 'blood', 'proper siblings', 'full blood siblings' and 'real siblings'. This could have been viewed as perpetuating the view of non-blood relatives being 'fictive' kin (Modell, 1994), but the reality was rather more complex. Although the language used may have indicated an emphasis on 'blood' ties, the participants' narratives were many-layered and suggestive of the limits of language available to describe who is a brother and sister.

The narratives suggested that a biological connection was powerful in terms of finding people, often for the first time in their lives, who were from the same generation and who looked similar to them, and who sometimes shared similar mannerisms and personality attributes. These feelings of similarity were often overwhelming for the participants, and this is vividly described by Ann-Marie, who on meeting her birth mother and brother for the first time stated:

> *Anyway, they came in and I looked at him and I thought, 'He looks like [birth mother] and he looks like me ... It was this resemblance that you couldn't take your eyes off somebody, because you wanted to sort of touch their skin. It was strange.*

This illustrates how powerful biological connection can potentially be for those who have grown up with no-one around them who shares their genetic heritage. For birth siblings in particular, who in this sample were usually of the same generation as the participants, physical similarities were often easier to see and hence had the potential to be significant. Having a genetic link was often referred to as being a reference point for the participants in terms of understanding themselves and their birth origins, and for many of the participants acted as a source of feelings of belonging and connection, with many ultimately feeling that their birth siblings both were and felt like brothers and sisters. This is illustrated by William, who has been in contact with his maternal birth siblings for over 20 years. He states that:

> *Some things they do or look or say, it just sometimes catches you unawares and you think my goodness me, you just can't get away from the fact that you are linked, and there are lots of things you do actually have in common and some things you don't have in common. But there is definitely family resemblances and family interests, family things like skills, ideas – lots of things that people in your family have and you connect with.*

For William, having a biological connection was a process of both observing and perhaps looking for the physical and non-physical genetic similarities, or links, to his birth sibling group. He found meanings about siblinghood through the biological connection that were about feelings of belonging and connectedness, which for him laid the foundation for his sense of his siblings both being and feeling like brothers and sisters.

The presence of a biological connection to their birth siblings provided an obvious basis for the participants to define who their brothers and sisters were. However, some participants made a distinction between those who were half siblings and those who were full siblings, stating that those who were full siblings were more fully identified as being a brother or sister. Others felt strongly that having a different parent did not matter. For example, Miriam stated that:

> *'I was very pleased when I realised I had a half sister because I was so delighted that I had found family, but when she [social worker] said it was a full sister I was just overwhelmed. I was stunned, it was wonderful'.*

For these participants the issue of being a full sibling was important to them, and in some senses perhaps appeared to be significant in promoting a greater feeling of siblinghood when thinking about who they defined as a sibling. In contrast, others felt that being a half or full sibling was irrelevant. For example, Kim stated that *'A half sibling is not a half relationship',* illustrating the views of many of the sample that the issue of whether or not they and their birth siblings shared the same two parents was not important in who they defined as a sibling.

For some participants, a lack of physical resemblance was sometimes used to justify or explain why they felt that some of their birth siblings felt less like siblings than others. For example, Jenny has four maternal birth siblings, two of whom were born as a result of her mother's second marriage. She commented that these half siblings felt less like siblings because *'there is more resemblance to [second husband] than to [birth mother]. It is almost one step removed because that physical resemblance isn't there'.* Conversely, when talking about her other birth sister, who was also a half-sibling and adopted, she stated that *'because she has got the resemblance you feel she is more of a sister'.* On the one hand, having less of a physical resemblance may have been a barrier to feelings of siblinghood for Jenny. However, by placing such meaning on physical resemblance, it almost provided what, for her, may have felt like a more straightforward way of justifying to herself why two of her siblings did not really feel like brothers and sisters, and was perhaps a way of defending both her position and herself.

Birth siblings had a particular role to play in terms of biological connectedness and the search for identity for those participants who had not met their birth parents, either through their death prior to searching for them, or through their birth parents refusing to meet them. In these cases siblings could be particularly helpful with regard to information about the participants' biological connections to their birth family, alongside understanding who they looked like. In these cases birth siblings were often the only means available to get this information, and were therefore very important. This was particularly so in relation to information about birth fathers and possible paternal siblings, and the effect of uncertain paternity and therefore identifying who their paternal birth siblings were. There were several stories throughout the interviews about birth mothers hiding the identity of the genetic father of the participants. For example, several participants were born in World War 2. They had learnt over time and through searching that the father's name on the birth certificate was not thought to be their genetic father, but that their birth was the result of their birth mother becoming involved with someone else whilst the husband was away fighting in the war. The child was then adopted, but the husband's name was entered on the birth certificate for reasons that are clearly understandable given the prevailing social climate at that time.

For some of the younger participants, they either found that their father's name had not been entered on their original birth certificate, or received information from other birth family members that the name on the birth certificate was in all probability not their birth father:

> *Well, you see, the problem is because of the amount of rubbish that was in my adoption records, I am not 100% convinced that he is my genetic father.*
> Interviewer: What makes you unsure?
> *I have no proof, there is nothing on the birth certificate, there is nothing: it is just a name that was given. You start to think that maybe it was just a convenient name to use; she [birth mother] knew him and so she just changed all the other stuff around about so he could never be identified.*

In these cases birth mothers were not always able (through death or significant ill health such as dementia), or were sometimes unwilling, to divulge who the birth father was. This left these participants either not being able to know about the possibility of

paternal birth siblings, or in several cases not knowing which of two possible birth fathers (both of whom had children) was their genetic father, and therefore who their birth siblings were. Birth siblings sometimes acted as a mediator between their parent (most often their birth mother) and the adopted sibling in order to get the information. Conversely, some continued to act as the secret keepers for the family and refused to give this information (often wishing to protect their parent), or were unable to clarify the participant's paternal biological connection. For example, one of Josie's birth sisters refused to confirm or deny the identity of her birth father, as this was against their birth mothers' wishes, and it affected her perception of their relatedness:

> *If only she'd open her mouth. We don't know if we are real brothers and sisters, or half brothers and sisters.*

For some of the participants, they hoped that following the death of their birth mother their siblings might become more forthcoming if they felt they knew the information but were not sharing it. However, this left some of the participants in a real dilemma about their genetic origins, and they often had a genuine wish and need to know their paternity in order to be able to find, or clarify who their paternal siblings were.

The absence of a biological connection to siblings is particularly brought to the fore when considering the *adoptive* sibling relationships of the participants. Those in the sample who had grown up with adoptive siblings were usually very clear in their narratives that the absence of such a connection did not affect their view that their adoptive siblings were their brothers and sisters, and this view remained stable throughout childhood and adulthood. For example, Susan stated of her adoptive siblings that:

> *We are all very definite that we are all brothers and sisters, blood aside; we are brothers and sisters and always will be. We all grew up accepting it [adoption]; we never looked at each other differently.*

Whilst Susan grew up with adoptive siblings who were not biologically related either to herself or to her adoptive parents, Karen grew up with three birth siblings who were the

birth children of her adoptive parents. In her narrative about her adoptive siblings, she emphasised social connectedness by stating:

> *It is not about blood lines, it is not about you looking like someone or having the same physical features ... it is about shared time and experience which gives you a set of values, morals and perspectives on the world.*

However for Karen, the presence of a biological connection to her birth siblings was particularly important, especially as she was adopted trans-racially, and she found it very powerful to spend time with siblings whom she felt looked like her and shared her cultural background, which gave her a different and in her view complementary sibling connection to them.

Many of the participants in this sample had not really thought previously about who they defined as a sibling. Some of their narratives in relation to adoptive siblings were overlaid with a sense of justification about their definition due to a lack of biological connections. This can be seen above when both participants actively mentioned the lack of a blood tie. This again resonances with the dominant cultural discourse that 'real' family can only be those who are related by 'blood'. Many of the participants were at great pains to point out, and justify, that their adoptive sibling relationships were equal to, and often more important than, their birth sibling relationships due to the social connectedness they have shared over time since childhood.

When describing their feelings of belonging and / or difference to their adoptive families, some of the participants attributed looking like, or being like, their siblings as an indicator that they felt they belonged in their adoptive family, despite the absence of any biological connection. Conversely, for some participants differences between adoptive siblings, especially if they had a more distant relationship with them, was sometimes justified as being the result of a lack of genetic connection, through not being physically similar or being different people with different outlooks on life, and the lack of genetic connection in their view went some way to explaining these differences. For some there was little recognition that siblings with biological connections can be very different from one another, while others acknowledged that this could be the case.

The presence or absence of a biological connection to birth and adoptive siblings was very powerful within the participants' narratives in relation to how they defined who was and who felt like a brother and sister. For adoptive siblings the lack of a biological connection did not preclude feelings of siblinghood, and their narratives were very full of reasons and justifications for this, perhaps in the light of the dominant cultural discourse of siblings being identified through blood relationships. Additionally, the identification of a biological connection assisted the participants who had not grown up with their birth siblings to identify at a basic level *who* their birth brothers and sisters were. For some, this knowledge about their origins and identity was sufficient for them and they did not wish to develop social connectedness through pursuing a relationship with their siblings. For others they were prevented from doing this either through a lack of knowledge about who their siblings were, or as a result of their birth siblings not wishing to pursue a relationship with them. Yet for a number of the participants they felt that the biological connection to their birth siblings, which encompassed physical and non-physical feelings of sameness and difference alongside a more complete sense of knowing who they were and where they had come from, laid the foundation for a relationship to develop whereby birth siblings also *felt* like siblings, or had the potential in the future to feel like siblings. This is illustrated by one participant, Jane, who had been in contact with her maternal birth siblings for over 30 years. She stated:

I mean there is that something looking at someone and thinking 'I look really like you', but that doesn't go far. After that it is about building shared experiences, shared trust.

Social connections

Whilst biological connection is one important factor in defining who is a sibling, social connections are also relevant to both understanding who is a sibling and who *feels* like a sibling over time, as Jane's views above highlight. Analysis of the data revealed that two dimensions of social connection were present: the presence or absence of shared experiences, and the presence or absence of feelings of connection / affinity. These different dimensions, and their inter-relatedness, both with each other and with the presence or absence of biological connections, together provided a greater understanding of the different factors that the participants felt were relevant when defining their birth and adoptive sibling relationships. This section will consider each of the dimensions in relation to the participants' birth and adoptive sibling relationships,

and the stability / change in definitions that occur over time from childhood and throughout adulthood.

Shared experiences

For those participants who experienced growing up with adoptive siblings, where no biological connection was present, and those who grew up with their birth siblings, there was a strong emphasis in their stories of the significance of sharing experiences in childhood. The physical time that they spent together as children in day-to-day life laid the foundation for continuing bonds in adult life where their sibling not only *was* a brother or sister, but also *felt* like one too. Sarah, who grew up with an adoptive sister, said that:

> *'I think what makes her a sister is that we grew up together, we were always together, always playing after school together, walking to and from school, just shared time and being part of that family. You know, she feels like a sister'.*

So, for Sarah, those day-to-day experiences promoted not just a sense of her sister feeling like a sibling, but also a sense of belonging and membership of her adoptive family, which was echoed in many of the other narratives from the participants. For example, Miriam talked about the day when she told her adoptive sister that she was in touch with her birth sister. Her adoptive sister's initial reaction was one of great upset and feelings of rejection. Miriam recalled saying to her:

> *I have spent all these years of my life with you. You are my sister and you are never, ever going to stop being my sister. Nobody could take back all those years that we have grown up together. You are a big part of my life and nothing has changed, it is just that this other person [birth sister] happens to be genetically linked to me and I have always wondered, and I have never been able to look at someone who is from that generation.*

For Miriam, the experience of growing up with her adoptive sister (who was the birth child of their adoptive parents) also meant that although they shared very different relationships with their parents, there was a clear sense of belonging together in the family. Their shared knowledge and experience of family culture and family history promoted feelings of siblinghood. This shared knowledge became very important in

later years when their adoptive parents died, and the sharing of memories once again acted as a reminder of family membership. However, there is also a clear sense here that Miriam felt she had to justify to her sister both the security of their own relationship and also her links to her birth sister, seeing both relationships as different yet important to herself and her identity. This was clearly significant to her in terms of remembering this conversation many years later and in the strong tone with which she talked about this incident.

The experience of growing up with a non-related adoptive sibling led many of the participants to emphasise shared experiences in childhood in their definitions of siblinghood:

> *I think I feel mostly about him as a brother as in relation to our parents really and like us sharing that, I would have hated not to have grown up with him.....we have a shared past.*

Furthermore, these shared experiences in childhood also seemed to promote a sense of connection, or bond to them throughout their lives, irrespective of whether their relationship was close or distant, which was about both the individual bond with each other and also the wider bond of family membership and belonging to the adoptive family.

There were also instances of adoptive and birth siblings developing a strong bond together to the exclusion of the relationship with their adoptive parents. This was noticeably present for those participants who had experienced very unhappy and abusive childhoods within their adoptive families; the sibling bond acted as both a protective function for one another and served to increase their identification of their sibling both as their 'proper' brother or sister and in some cases also as their primary family member, to the exclusion of their adoptive parents in adult life. For example, Wendy, who was adopted in middle childhood with her brother, described a very unhappy adoption experience where she felt unloved and unwanted by her adopters. She said:

> *Currently I have no contact with either my birth parents or my adoptive parents, but I do maintain contact with my brother regularly, because I never stopped loving him.*

Wendy came across during her interview as a very angry and alienated woman in relation to her adoption, and was not able to articulate clearly what being a family was for her, apart from in relation to her brother where their shared experiences as children served to cement in her mind that she loved him and that he was her only real family. This could be on the one hand part of her difficult experiences in childhood, but could also be about individual needs in adulthood.

The majority of the participants did not know throughout childhood that they had birth siblings, only finding out about them when they searched for (or were found by) their birth families in adulthood. They therefore did not have the foundation of sharing day-to-day life with their siblings in childhood. For some who met their siblings for the first time in adulthood, the lack of these childhood experiences together were explained as being a block, either initially or in the longer term, to fully developing *feelings* of siblinghood, although it did not prevent them from naming these siblings as brothers and sisters due to the biological connection they shared. For example, Ruth has been in contact with her paternal birth siblings for the last 10 years. Talking about one of her birth sisters, she said that:

> *S and I don't have a history of ... you know, we didn't grow up together. We have the same genetics and we have things that make us similar as a result of that, but we don't have a history, and we can never catch up or make up for that.*

However, Ruth also talks about her hopes of developing a shared future, with shared memories, which whilst not replacing the lack of shared experiences in childhood, gives her an opportunity through shared experiences to more closely identify with feelings of kinship and siblinghood. In many senses, Ruth's narrative below and that of several other participants suggests that birth siblings often have to 'earn' the title of sibling, which takes both time and mutual effort. She said:

> *The relationship is gathering momentum and it is getting closer, we are becoming much closer as the years go on ... I hope it will continue to develop at the speeded up pace that it is and we will become much closer and we will have more of a shared history, with them coming to my daughter's wedding ... you know, more than the two of us or the three of us, and that is what history is and that's what's important.*

So for Ruth, shared experiences with her birth siblings meant developing a shared history in the present and the future, which also gives her the opportunity to develop a closer bond with them whereby they began to earn the status of *feeling* like siblings.

This was not the case for Andrew, who feels that although he would like to see his birth brother, neither time (in terms of shared experiences through contact) nor effort on his part will make a difference in terms of his view that his birth brother does not *feel* like a sibling. Andrew was adopted with his birth sister into one family, and apart from his half brother who was adopted by another family. His adoptive parents actively promoted contact with his maternal half brother throughout his childhood, with whom he had direct contact once a year for a couple of hours. However, he felt that this level of contact was not meaningful for him. He did not have the breadth of shared experiences with his brother to enable him to be called a 'proper' sibling, and it did not give him a strong foundation through which to develop a relationship in adulthood. He said:

> *I don't really see him as a brother, I think because we didn't live with him as a child and when we were adopted we didn't see each other very often. He doesn't seem like a brother. If someone asks me if I have any brothers and sisters, I say I have got a sister. I would say ... it doesn't come naturally to me to say I have got a sister and a brother. I can take it [the relationship] or leave it. I know it sounds bad but it wouldn't really bother me either way, and I think that's just because I have not had the contact ... I mean it would be nice to go and see him [birth brother], but if it doesn't happen I am not really bothered about that.*

Andrew comes across as being quite resolved about how he defines his relationship with his birth brother, and has a clear 'story' in terms of how he explains his feelings. He does not attach blame to anyone about this situation, and uses his explanation in order to justify his differential feelings towards his siblings, where one *feels* like a sibling and the other is less relevant in his life.

Shared experiences with birth siblings enabled biological and social connections to the adopted person's birth family, particularly when the siblings were the only, or primary, source of contact. These shared memories enabled feelings of siblinghood to develop for some through underlining biological connections to the birth family alongside the

participant feeling that they had a more complete sense of themselves and their birth origins. For others, they did not feel they had the right to ask for contact (or more contact than they had), partly because they did not feel as if they had a strong sense of siblinghood with particular siblings, or because they did not want to intrude on an already close-knit birth family. This also affected how they felt about their siblings' status. These issues are developed further in chapter 9.

For several of the participants sharing experiences was important, but was not the precursor to developing strong feelings of a birth sibling being a brother or sister. They felt an instant bond, or connection with their sibling (usually one sibling in particular rather than the whole sibling group), which they found very difficult to describe. For example, when Miriam saw her birth sister for the first time, she made reference to how she felt when her first child was born, saying:

> *You imagine for nine months who this little person will look like and it's your family and this is part of you, and then you see them for the first time. That's exactly how I felt when I saw B [birth sister]; it was exactly the same feeling, a kind of wonderment. We sat in the taxi and we hardly spoke, we just kept looking at each other ... I am thinking, 'She looks like me'. We just stared, we just kept staring at each other; we just couldn't believe it.*

For Miriam, her connection to her birth sister was instant and grounded in their biological connection and her perceived similarity with one another. She powerfully equates her feelings upon meeting her to being like the birth of her child in terms of anticipating and then meeting a family member who is part of her genetic heritage and connected to her in a very tangible way. Miriam has developed her relationship with her birth sister over the last 15 years, through meeting regularly and developing a shared history together. However, her feelings of instant connection towards her led her to invest in this relationship through their shared experiences, rather than vice versa.

Shared experiences, by their very definition, require mutuality, and the absence of shared experiences was commonly referred to as preventing the growth of feelings of siblinghood. Reasons for a lack of shared experiences included birth siblings being unaware of the adopted person's existence, and unwillingness on the part of either the adopted person or their birth siblings to spend time together due to such factors as the

birth siblings feeling threatened by their status, the adopted person not wishing to pursue a relationship, and feeling uneasy at intruding on an already established sibling group. In Steve's case he became very excited on learning he had a birth brother, and talked to his adult children about the prospect of spending time together and that they might have cousins. In reality, his birth brother did not wish to have on-going contact with him and Steve stated that:

> *I don't really have much interest in him ... I kind of almost forgot about him as quickly as I got to know he existed. He was a means to an end, like I know who you are, and where is our mother? ...To all intents and purposes he is the only son.*

By stating that his birth brother is the only son of their mother (thereby excluding himself), Steve seems to have dealt with this rejection through distancing himself from his birth family and denying himself the status of having a brother. He justifies his views by saying that his brother was a means to an end and not important to him, yet initially he had been open to forming a relationship with him. This suggests that mutuality is a key element for some people in deciding who is a sister or brother.

Emotional connections

The presence or absence of feelings of emotional connection and affinity were frequently mentioned in the participants' narratives as a means of attempting to define and justify who *felt* like a sibling. These feelings were also used to highlight how shared experiences, whether in childhood or in adulthood, can promote emotional bonds and assist definitions of who is a brother or sister, which has already been explored in the previous section.

Many of the participants commented during the interviews that they had not really thought about how to describe who their siblings were before, and they struggled to quantify their feelings. It came across in the participants' narratives as trying to explain and justify the unexplainable. Feelings of emotional connection came across as having an almost 'magical' quality that defied description. For example, when Miriam spoke about her birth siblings she underlined the 'magical' quality of emotional connection by saying:

It is like a bit of a coming home, you feel quite relaxed with these people. It is kind of like an unspoken thing, a connection and you can't put your finger on it, it is just there.

This raises the issue of Miriam's identity, and is suggestive, by referring to feeling that she had 'come home', that her siblings also served the function of helping her resolve some identity issues, particularly in the absence of her birth mother, who had died before Miriam found her birth family.

Using emotional connectedness and affinity as a dimension to define sibling relationships was, for some of the participants, suggestive of them seeking meanings about why some siblings felt like siblings and others did not through the degree of emotional connection or affinity they felt towards them, and by doing this seeking to justify their feelings about who felt like a sibling. Within the sample, this was a particular feature of birth sibling relationships where participants met their birth brothers and sisters for the first time in adulthood. It was common here for the participants to feel that one or two birth siblings in particular felt more like a sibling than the others because they felt a close bond or affinity towards them.

For those participants with adoptive siblings, whilst they used feelings of connection and affinity to describe the everyday workings of their relationship, they rarely used them as a dimension in defining who was and felt like a sibling. It was almost seen as a given that growing up together meant being connected to a sibling through sharing family life as children. They knew one another deeply, and felt obligated to be there for one another, although they might not always get on.

Closeness and distance within adoptive sibling relationships was sometimes expressed in their lack of biological connection such as having different temperaments and different interests, but this did not affect their definitions of who was and who felt like a sibling. One participant, Sarah, who grew up with a combination of adopted and foster siblings, commented that:

[In childhood] we were siblings; we fought, we laughed, we played together and we were there for each other ... We have all been through our rough times and have fallen out, but they are my brothers and sisters, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

Sarah makes the point here that although she has not always got on with her siblings, her emotional connection as a sister towards them is present and she does not seek to justify their status through the presence or absence of an emotional connection.

The following genogram illustrates the complexity of the birth and adoptive sibling relationships of another participant, Judith:

Figure 7.2
Judith's genogram
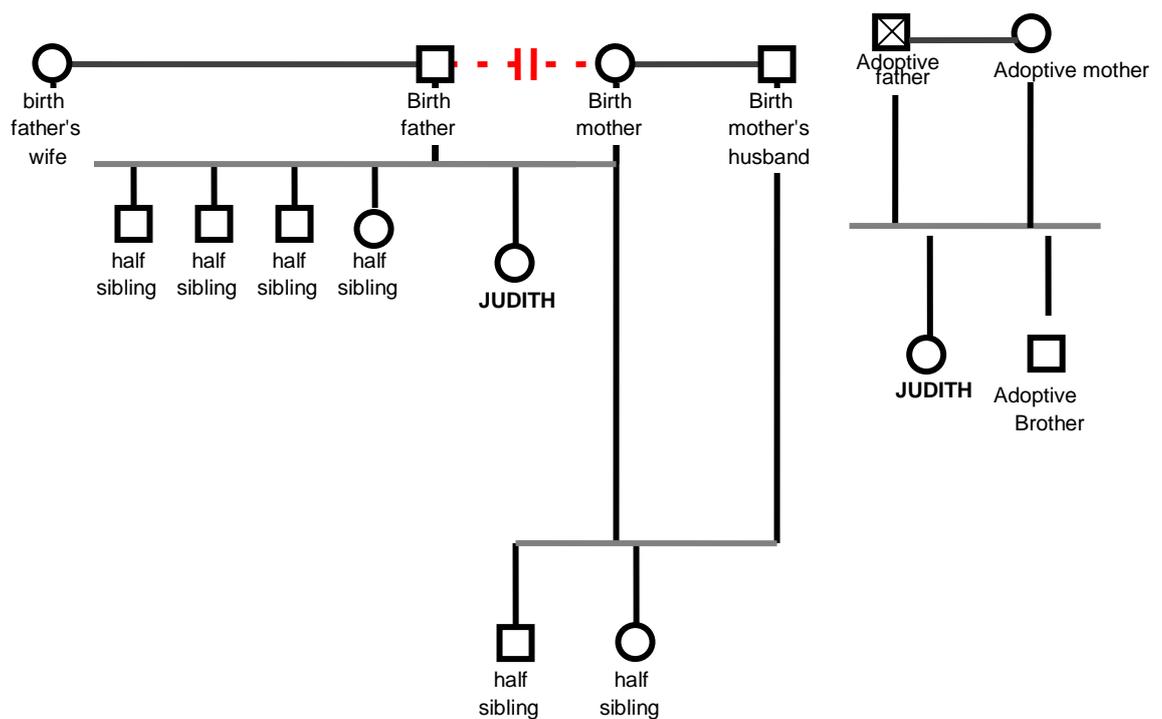
Judith was adopted as a baby and grew up with an adoptive brother. She searched for and found her maternal and paternal birth family around 15 years ago, and feels that whilst all are defined as being siblings, only some of her sibling group feel like siblings. In relation to her adoptive brother, Judith states that:

> *I am guessing that if someone asked me who I was closest to growing up, I would probably say him [adoptive brother], in front of my mother, even. But he is the sort of person who you cannot really depend on either emotionally or practically, so you just adapt to that.*

Judith feels strongly connected to her brother through their shared childhood, and she accepts his limitations in adulthood, none of which changes the stability of her definition of him as a brother. She does not feel a great need to justify this relationship.

However, in relation to her birth siblings, Judith clearly uses feelings of connection to help her differentiate about who feels like a sibling. She says:

> *I have never felt ... like I have always liked them [paternal siblings], but I have never felt that they were my siblings. For a start, they are very close to each other and they have grown up together .... It is very, very different with my birth mother's daughter; it is completely different – a much stronger relationship.*

Here, Judith attempts to explain her different feelings towards her birth siblings partly in terms of lacking the shared experiences in childhood. However, Judith did not share a relationship with her maternal birth sister either in childhood, and in describing it as a stronger relationship she uses feelings of connection and affinity to define who feels more like a sibling within her birth sibling group, although she really struggled to explain what she meant, as is illustrated below:

> Interviewer: And what is a sister to you then? What does that word mean for you?
>
> Judith: *I just feel I have had a much more intense relationship with F ... We probably are more similar and get on more ... I don't know exactly, but it is a sort of a particular relationship that isn't just a friend, that you are connected to each other. So when you think wherever you are in the world you are connected to that person ... and she can tell me about my birth mother and the family, so she is a kind of connection to that side of my origins.*

Judith places the relationship with her maternal birth sister in the context of being similar and getting on more than with her paternal siblings, also describing the relationship as more than friendship, and noting the stability of that connection through time and place alongside being a physical connection to her birth origins. Ultimately, throughout the interview Judith's narrative about her maternal birth sister illustrated her struggles with understanding why she felt her maternal birth sibling was more of a sister than her paternal siblings, and how difficult it is to explain and justify their bond.

Given the dominant cultural discourse of siblings being defined through blood relationships, it was interesting that the participants placed such emphasis on the presence or absence of feelings of emotional connection / affinity within their birth sibling relationships. The variation present for many of the participants in relation to the degrees of siblinghood they felt for their birth brothers and sisters suggests that for those sibling relationships which begin in adulthood, there may be an element of choice present in deciding and justifying who is and who feels like a sibling, given the absence of growing up together. The level of emotional connection and affinity the participants felt towards a birth sibling was seen as influential in making these decisions and choices.

Whilst for some their feelings of connection to one or more sibling were present immediately upon meeting, more commonly the participants described having to work on this, which took time and effort, and required a level of mutuality from the other sibling. For example, Lucy has three adoptive siblings and has been in contact with her maternal and paternal birth siblings for the last seven years. She describes her relationship with her adoptive siblings as very solid and secure, and is clear that they both are and feel like siblings as a result of growing up together and knowing one another deeply. She says of developing relationships with her paternal birth siblings:

> Lucy: *You kind of have to like people to want to. If you grow up with someone you like them because you have grown up with them and you don't know any different. You might hate them at times, and you know them so there is nothing difficult about it, but when you don't know people, if there is not that connection then it is going to be harder to get to know somebody.*
> Interviewer: Can you describe that connection?
> Lucy: *You know a connection where it is that thing where you have not seen a friend for like three years and you just pick up where you left off, and it is not difficult and nobody feels guilty about not being touch for three years, because it is ok and you can have silences ... It is becoming easier because there has been more contact and they [paternal birth siblings] want to have a relationship.*

This passage illustrates the challenge for Lucy of developing emotional connectedness to her paternal birth siblings in the absence of growing up with them, her identification of needing to like them in order to develop a sense of connectedness, and the importance of mutuality in their relationships. Later in the interview Lucy goes on to

state *'I would probably now classify them as sisters and brothers, or half sisters and half brothers'*. For her, identifying them as siblings has taken time and effort through their shared experiences and developing emotional connectedness to them, and indicates a choice to invest in the relationship as time progresses. She does, however, remain ambiguous about their status as full or half siblings, but in her tone and presentation during the interview comes across as being resolved about it and well able to manage the ambiguity.

For other participants, there was a view that despite putting time and effort into trying to build a relationship, their lack of emotional connection was a block to feeling a sibling was a brother or sister, although there was an acknowledgment that they are defined as being siblings. For example, Ann-Marie stated in relation to her birth brother:

> *Do you know, I have never really got to know him. I don't know that I really do want to know him, because I don't think we have got very much common ground. We can operate in the same room, we can have civilised conversations, but I never feel there is any deep connection.*

Although they do meet up occasionally and she states elsewhere in her interview that he is her brother, Ann-Marie does not feel a significant emotional connection with him and is ambiguous about whether or not he feels like a brother. Ann-Marie presented during her interview as very pre-occupied about her adoption, and she had an unhappy adoption experience. Her struggle to find emotional connection with her brother may be as a result of a mismatch between her and her brother's respective needs and expectations, but could also reflect being different people who have different values and life experiences.

Friendship was used as a metaphor by several of the participants in an attempt to define and describe their feelings of siblinghood with their adoptive and birth siblings. There were a range of views in relation to siblings being seen through the lens of friendship, with different meanings being placed on adoptive and birth sibling relationships respectively. In adoptive sibling relationships, the use of friendship appeared to be a secondary factor in describing feelings of siblinghood, rather than defining who was a sibling. Zoe commented of her adoptive brother that *'you kind of know he is there as a brother and a friend, and if I needed I could phone him up and cry down the phone'*. Peter also

commented of his adoptive brother that *'We operate now as mates. We know we are brothers and we are never going to take that away'.* These views seem to represent friendship more as a function of the sibling relationship, and reflect their views about their emotional connectedness and feelings of siblinghood, rather than using friendship to define who is a sibling.

In contrast, friendship was also used by the participants to try and explain the similarities and differences between being a friend and being a birth sibling. This is perhaps a reflection of trying to understand and define relationships that for most participants began in adulthood, where the frame of reference could more easily understood by comparing and contrasting it to friendship. For example, one participant stated *'do you know, I think it is the potential that no matter what they are my brothers and sisters, whereas friends come and go from your life. There is a link there that is more than just friendship'.* For this participant, their definition of siblinghood revolved around birth siblings offering the stability and consistency of family membership through the blood tie, with friends being more transient. So for them, defining who was a sibling considers links that begin with biological connection which are present irrespective of other types of connection, and offer a permanency that in their mind does not equate with friendship.

Other participants used friendship to try and explain and communicate their feelings of emotional connection to a particular birth sibling with whom they had identified as having a very close bond, as illustrate by Ruth below:

> *With C [birth sister], as the years go on we are becoming closer, but I don't know the difference between in my heart how I feel about C and how in my heart I feel about S [best friend]. C and I don't have a history of ... you know, we didn't grow up together. We have the same genetics and we have things that make us similar as a result of that, but we don't have a history and we can never catch up or make up for that. I don't see that it will ever be any different between my good friend S and my very special sister C, but sister / friend – I can't see the difference.*

Here, Ruth has clearly thought deeply about how to place her feelings for her birth sister and her best friend, both of whom are very important people in her life, and with whom she has powerful emotional connections. She placed her relationship with her

sister in the context of lacking those shared experiences in childhood but finding similarity and emotional closeness through their biological connection and her feelings towards her. Feeling like a sibling here is likened to feeling a very strong emotional connection that compares with close friendship, implying that the absence of a shared past is significant, but that strong emotional connectedness and developing feelings of siblinghood are possible through mutual time and effort.

Another use of friendship was to clearly define adoptive siblings as brothers and sisters, and birth siblings as friends, implying a different status that was not akin to being or feeling like a sibling. For example, Sarah had not met her birth siblings, but was clear that she did not, in her mind, see them as siblings. For her, her adoptive brothers and sisters were her only siblings, and she stated:

> *I have got my brothers and sisters. We are as dysfunctional as we can be at times; they are my brothers and sisters, my safe place. If we [birth siblings] made friendships along the way, then fair enough; but I am not looking to fill some kind of hole, or look for something that I have not had.*

Sarah strongly identified with her adoptive family, and had experienced rejection from her birth mother who refused to allow her to meet her birth siblings. Sarah's views, therefore, could on the one hand be a result of her strong identification with her adoptive family, or could be more complex and the result of dealing with rejection from her birth mother, guarding herself from further rejection or not wishing to hurt her adoptive family, all of which could contribute to adopted people not wishing to define or feel that their birth siblings are brothers and sisters.

Feelings of emotional connection and affinity therefore were used by the participants in a variety of ways to understand and explain who feels like a sibling and how these feelings contribute to defining who is a sibling. It was clear from the data that there was great value in growing up with siblings, since this contributed to them really knowing each other (whether they were close or distant in adulthood) and laid the foundations of a life-long sibling bond. Building connections in adulthood with birth siblings required time, effort and commitment on both sides, and if this was not present, the participants struggled to feel like their birth siblings were sisters and brothers.

Summary

The participants drew on biological, social and cultural notions of kinship when defining *who* was a sibling. Adoptive siblings were usually defined as both being a sibling and feeling like a brother or sister, and these narratives were grounded in their shared experiences of family life as children, and their strong knowledge of and familiarity with one another, whether or not their relationship was close. In relation to birth siblings, there were differences in who was physically defined as a birth brother or sister, and who also *felt* like a sibling. In making these distinctions, the participants drew on a discourse of choice in their narratives, although this was not always conscious, often highlighting the quality of their relationship and the lack of shared experiences as children as central factors. It was also common for one birth sibling to *feel* more like a sibling than others. However, these definitions did not remain static. Positive and meaningful relationships (and shared memories) were often built up over time, and there was a sense that their siblings could 'earn' the status of feeling like a brother or sister if sustained time and effort was placed into the relationship.

Chapter 8: Adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span

Introduction

Adoptive sibling relationships appear on the surface to mirror relationships with siblings raised together in intact families in terms of experiencing the day-to-day sibling relationship in childhood and beyond, but without a blood tie. Indeed one of the implicit aims of adoption legislation and policy is for children to experience 'normal' family life within a family unit, which has echoes of, in many respects, being raised together as siblings 'as if begotten' through blood (Modell, 1994). Whilst some research studies have explored this notion of kinship within adoption in terms of parent-child relationships (Modell, 1994; Jones and Hackett, 2011), very limited work has been completed to date exploring adoptive sibling relationships. Those studies that have been completed usually focus on childhood and adolescence, looking at sibling dynamics (Ward, 1987), sibling separations (Drapeau et al, 2000) or the effect of different levels of openness within the adoptive kinship network on adoptive sibling relationships (Berge et al, 2006).

This study has provided an excellent opportunity to consider adoptive sibling relationships through the life-span, given the focus on past, present and future in the interviews and the large age range of the sample. Very rich data was given about adoptive sibling relationships and their day-to-day practice, which has provided insights into their meanings and how they are developed and practised longitudinally. This chapter will firstly consider the participants' relationships with their adoptive siblings in childhood and adolescence, and the factors that influenced the development of these relationships, both positively and negatively. The participants' adoptive sibling relationships in adulthood will then be explored, with a focus on their everyday practices as expressions of their kinship connections.

Adoptive sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence

Through progressive coding of the interview data, four themes emerged regarding the participants' consideration of their adoptive sibling relationships in childhood: emotional connectedness; sibling rivalry; showing care and concern for one another;

and building identity. This was not unexpected, given the previous research into childhood sibling relationships in intact families discussed in Chapter 2. However, within these themes there were elements that were predominantly related to adoption and being adopted. In particular, how the participants perceived and understood their relationship with their adoptive siblings in the light of being adopted, and how adoptive siblings used each other as a resource to make sense of their own adoption. Another factor was the influence of adoptive parents' relationship with each other and with their children. Again, whilst the influence of parent-child relationships on sibling relationships in intact families have been the focus of considerable research (see Chapter 2), there were elements here that resonated particularly about adoption. Firstly, families are constructed in different ways: there is no blood tie present between adoptive parents and adopted child and there is the active absence of the adopted child's family of origin. The levels of communicative and structural openness (or how adoptive families think and talk about adoption and the child's birth family and / or manage direct contact; Brodzinsky, 2006) were also important in considering adoptive sibling relationships. Further, the presence for some of feeling either favoured or not favoured as a child as a result of their adoption affected the adoptive sibling experience.

Emotional connectedness

Emotional connectedness was expressed through different dimensions of closeness and distance which the participants felt towards their adoptive siblings in childhood. These ranged from relationships which were seen as primarily emotionally close, to those which were characterised by hostility and aggression (and therefore emotional distance), or, more usually, a combination of the two. This was reflective of 'normal' sibling relationships for children growing up in intact families, where levels of emotional closeness and hostility are usually present, sometimes at the same time (Dunn, 2008). Unlike the development of their birth sibling relationships in adulthood (which are explored in the next chapter), there was no sense in childhood that the participants had to actively develop emotional connectedness to one another. Rather, their levels of closeness and distance were seen as a natural part of growing up together within their adoptive family:

> *I mean we didn't fight or anything, we weren't at loggerheads or anything like that and I was never jealous of her … I never thought anything about it. As children you just accept that this is normal, this is your life, you know.* (Miriam)

I think it was just standard, what we got up to was no more unique than what other kids got up to, apart from I don't think we fought as much. (Steve)

These two quotes illustrate what the participants perceived as the normalcy of their childhood adoptive sibling relationships. Levels of closeness and distance were unremarkable and accepted, and a cultural 'script' of closeness and distance in sibling relationships in childhood was used when retrospectively thinking about their adoptive sibling relationships. However, what was particularly interesting was the type of language used in the above quotes. In the first quote, Miriam uses negative tenses – 'We didn't fight', 'I was never jealous of her' – defining and justifying her relationship with her adoptive sister. It was as if negativity might have been expected, particularly as her sister was her adoptive parents' birth child. In the second quote, Steve talks about the relationship with his adoptive sister (who was also adopted into the family) as being 'standard' and 'no more unique' than other people's sibling relationships. This could imply that he is evaluating and justifying this relationship on the basis of their siblinghood status but also in relation to their adoptive status, where no blood tie is present. For Steve, his relationship with his adoptive sister may be seen by him as being more equal, given they were both adopted into the family, particularly as his statements contain less implied negativity. It may be that both Miriam and Steve are also implicitly talking about their status as adoptive siblings, although they do not make that explicit, and that their 'script' of their sibling relationships is as much about adoption as it is about being a sibling.

Factors that promoted a sense of closeness to adoptive siblings in childhood included proximity to one another, sharing common interests and friends, and playing together. For example, Mary stated:

We used to go on all these big long holidays during the school holidays and he would be my main playmate, and being only two years difference it was close enough to, you know.

Here, Mary highlights two other common factors of childhood sibling relationships: that of being close in age as promoting emotional closeness; and being each other's 'main playmate'. Lucy also noted this in relation to her adoptive sibling relationships with her younger brother and older sister:

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I was probably more in line age-wise with him and we had a lot of friends that kind of crossed over in our year groups and I was probably more of a tomboy growing up, so we would just do more stuff together. Anita was ... a bit more sensible, you know, and didn't do naughty things. You wouldn't, well certainly from what I remember as an older child, it wouldn't have been a fun relationship I had with my sister; you know, she would be the boss.

Here, being close in age meant sharing friends. Lucy also felt she had more in common with her brother, and her older sister took the role of being in charge, thus being distanced somewhat from the ordinary play and common interests that Lucy and her younger brother shared, which promoted their closeness.

However, being close in age was not always an indicator of emotional closeness, as this could also lead to increased tension:

Well, I suppose I probably looked up to him. He was bigger than me, he was faster than me, and I wanted to try and keep up with him, but he just hit me all the time. But that didn't seem to stop me always trying to run after him and play with him and his pals and want to be there with him. (Ruth)

Ruth was a couple of years younger than her adoptive brother, and as a child she admired him and wanted to spend time with him. However, this feeling was not reciprocated and her brother resisted her attempts to spend time with him and his friends, resorting to aggression on a regular basis.

Another factor that was common across the participants was the importance placed on being similar or different people in childhood in terms of personality, and how this affected emotional closeness:

We moved house when I was just about four, and we moved into a residential area that had lots of children our own age and so my life was just spent constantly outside playing sports and playing in the street and bicycles and really sort of different. She [adoptive sister] was much more into dolls and she didn't have all that many friends, she was ... I don't mean introverted, she was a bit more, I don't mean less confident, that sounds a bit brash. I remember I would make do if we were on holiday ... I can remember holidays, you know, where I always wanted

to find the swimming pool. So my dad would then find the swimming pool, and my sister used to always stay with my mother. She didn't want to really ... You know, I was always sort of having other kids round; you know, was there anybody to play football with? And I would have my tennis racket, and I had nobody to play with because she didn't … it just wasn't her fault, she just wasn't sporty.

Through her sister being a quieter and less out-going person, Miriam felt she did not share much common ground or activities in childhood with her, and this led to having fewer opportunities to develop emotional closeness. She also clearly feels awkward about her status as the favoured child of her father, which had its own costs for her.

The previous chapter highlighted the use of a lack of biological connection to adoptive siblings in the participants' narratives to attempt to make sense of how they define and understand their adoptive sibling relationships. While siblings who are biologically related also talk about their differences in personality / interests as a means of explaining their closeness and distance, for those who are adopted this arguably has greater resonance and meaning. Miriam also commented during her interview that 'I have always felt there was a difference and I can't put my finger on it' when talking about her relationship with her adoptive sister. This perhaps suggests that their differences had more significance and meaning to Miriam as a result of her being adopted into the family.

An important factor that influenced levels of closeness and distance in childhood was the way in which adoption 'stories' were communicated in the family, and the meanings that the participants and their siblings took from this. For example, Ruth talked about her adoptive mother's different explanations for her and her brother's arrival into the family, and how this was used to confer a favoured status on her:

You know she had this story for me, this romantic lovely story about where I had come from, but quite a different story about my brother who is two years older than me ... and she talked about how he had been neglected and his parents hadn't wanted him and that he was a poor soul and the clothes he came in were horrible, whereas the clothes I came in were beautiful. You know, she made this distinction between the two of us all our lives, and he grew up with a huge chip on his shoulder and really resentful of everything.

The status of being the favoured child detrimentally affected Ruth and her brother's relationship through childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and illustrates the importance of adoptive parents being sensitive to wider family dynamics. Parental differentiation between children in any family is not helpful, but adoption makes this more possible where there are actual differences between siblings in their history. The quality of adoptive sibling relationships can be affected in the long term, and feelings of alienation from the adoptive family can be present.

In a similar vein, Sarah's adoptive sibling group was made up of birth children of her adoptive parents and unrelated adoptive siblings. She recounts how she and her adoptive brother were told of their adoption, and how her brother, the birth child of her adoptive parents reacted:

> *And I remember us sitting at the dinner table and my mum telling us that most mums aren't as lucky as to be able to choose their baby and to be able to choose their family ... and they had picked us and loved us the minute they saw us and they went and chose us, and they went on about how special we were ... I wasn't upset. In a way, the funny thing was that my eldest brother was sitting there at the time, and my mum and dad had done such a good job of telling us that he burst out crying, and they completely forgot how they were going to deal with him in amongst this. He burst out crying and said that he wanted to be as special as we were.*

By emphasising their chosen and special status, the sibling who was not adopted felt rejected and excluded. Although Sarah's view was that this was temporary, and that her adoptive parents addressed this fully with her brother over time, the importance and significance placed on these adoption stories by children in adoptive families can have potentially short- and long-term consequences for emotional closeness in adoptive sibling relationships.

In a different way, Amy reflected on her feelings as a child that her adoptive mother loved her own birth child more than Amy and her adoptive brother. She stated:

> *I think always in my mind as a child – not now, but as a child – you always think that maybe your mum loves the birth child a bit more than the other two ... It is just 'how can you not think that?' as a child … Do you know what I mean? It is like, 'I don't know how you could not think that'. But there was nothing to even begin to evidence that at all. Mum would always show us equal amounts of attention and love.*

While this was not the primary factor for Amy in her relationship with her older sister throughout childhood, it was clearly important and perhaps reflective of her own feelings of being adopted rather than born into the family, with the associated status that she felt this conferred on her older sister.

Transitioning from childhood to adolescence often brought about changes, or turning points, in emotional closeness in the participants' adoptive sibling relationships, illustrating the changing and dynamic nature of these relationships:

> *Well, that became more difficult as well. I was very good at school and he wasn't. He started to hang out with a bit of a rough crowd; he wasn't an academic achiever and so became a bit of a ... bad kid as a way of coping with that … I was very much focused on doing well at school, because I, even back then, had the sense that education would be my ticket out of this sort of very inward looking way of living ... So my memories of sort of adolescence with him are the sort of later years which actually are not good, lots of disagreements; he was nicking my things and, you know, I just didn't like him much.* (Judith – both siblings adopted into family)

> *I was still closer to my brother as a teenager. We would go out together, we would go to the pub together later, you know, and we would still have our friends that crossed the year gap, so that kind of maintained … I mean things did change, but probably because we were getting older and we were beginning to get more interested in different things – you know, Derek getting interested in girls or football or whatever, and I would be interested in boys, so it wouldn't be the same sort of stuff.* (Lucy – both siblings adopted into family)

Both these participants were reflecting on their relationship with a sibling who was un-related and also adopted into the family. The first quote highlights that, developmentally, differences often become more apparent in adolescence when young people are more consciously finding their own way through life. In Judith's case this resulted in her and her adoptive brother developing different priorities and an increase in emotional distance. For Lucy, her close relationship with her brother was maintained because, although they developed different interests, they still spent positive time together and perhaps continued to share the same values and outlook on life. As will be illustrated later in the chapter, the participants' adoptive sibling relationships continued

to be dynamic through adulthood, with further changes in their emotional closeness and distance being present.

It was interesting to note that the participants' narratives in relation to emotional closeness in *adolescence* were primarily focused on what could be described as 'normal' sibling issues that are present irrespective of adoption. However, it could be that these ordinary issues continue to have an 'edge' to them that may be about adoption. For example, Judith's brother's response to her in adolescence may also have been about their respective feelings of belonging and difference in their adoptive family.

Sibling rivalry

Research about siblings in intact families discussed in Chapter 2 highlights that sibling rivalry is a normal part of growing up together, and it is to be expected that siblings have periods of jealousy, competitiveness and feeling favoured / unfavoured. The participants' narratives generally reflected this, although there were some occasions when their adoptive status conferred particular feelings of negativity either from or towards their adoptive siblings.

Most participants described what could be classed as typical levels of sibling rivalry in childhood, as illustrated below:

> *I was brought up as a second child. So I quite liked the whole experience, because I just sat back and watched chaos descend and she got all the flak. I was quite happy with that, as far as I was concerned I was quite happy with it. From her perspective she maybe would have a wee bit more resentment because she was getting all the hassle and maybe I should have got some more.* (Martin)

> *Myself and [adoptive sister] were basically worst enemies, we were very close in age and exactly the opposite nature-wise. We always stuck up for each other but it was a running battle as we were growing up as well ... She took great pleasure in getting up during the night and going to the bathroom, climbing on top of me and having a wee dig as she was passing [up to her bunk bed]. We did have our fights and arguments.* (Susan)

Both these quotes illustrate different facets of normal sibling rivalry – in Martin's case having it easier as a result of being a younger sibling, and taking advantage of that, and

in Susan's case having a balance between fights and arguments but also sticking up for one another as sisters when needed. For most participants, fighting with adoptive siblings but also being there for them when needed was typical of their childhood and adolescent sibling relationships.

For some, though, their adoptive status was highlighted as a reason for overtly hostile sibling relationships. For example, Kim had an older adoptive brother who was the birth child of her adoptive parents. She recounted that she was adopted as, in her words, a 'replacement' for a child who had died. She reported that her adoptive parents never got over their grief and loss for this child, with the result that they were hostile and rejecting of her. Her adoptive brother also took this stance, and Kim recalls that he added to her sense of feeling like an outsider:

> *We were kind of under one roof but in separate families ... Our bedrooms were next to each other. He had everything, you know ... and I had the little box room that just had a desk and a bed and I had a cupboard. I remember I had a cupboard in the wall that I used to hide in, and he would be in his room and I could hear his music and I didn't have any … We didn't ... there just wasn't anything ... He would look at me with the same, I don't know, contempt that [adoptive mother] did, really ... So it was always like two lives, except at moments of crisis.*

In her eyes Kim's brother's status as the 'favoured' child meant that she remained an outsider in the family, and this was constantly re-confirmed to her through her brother's overt hostility and contempt towards her. This remained constant, and he received tacit permission from his parents to continue through their lack of addressing it with him.

This highlights the enormous, life-long impact that wider events in adoptive families can have on adopted children. Adoptive parents' views about and responses to their adopted child, both in general and in relation to their sibling relationships, are clearly influential. It also illustrates the power of 'stories' about adoption and their importance. By focusing on herself as a 'replacement' child, Kim has internalised the family 'story' regarding the reasons why her adoptive parents chose to adopt another child, and sees it as a fact. Given her adverse experiences in her adoptive family and strong feelings of alienation and rejection during her childhood she was not able to develop an alternative

'story' that could perhaps have served to buffer some of these very negative feelings and experiences.

Mary's older sister was also her adoptive parents' birth child, but Mary recalls the lack of hostility from her:

> *One thing about her, she has never been a jealous person. She just doesn't have an ounce of jealousy in her, which is nice because I always thought that it must have been hard when you are five-and-a-half years old and this so-called 'chosen' child arrives. It could be a bit of a ... well, what's happening here? But she was never like that, never; you know, she wasn't ... I don't think she has got a jealous bone in her body at all, and there was never anything, never any jealousies.*

Mary recalls later in the interview that her parents did not differentiate between them as a result of her adoptive status. This may well have been a factor, alongside her sister's own temperament, which meant that sibling rivalry as a result of her adoptive status was not present. This illustrates the complexity of understanding sibling relationships in general due to the multiple factors that are present and interacting with one another. It also highlights some of the additional factors that can be present in adoptive sibling relationships, which are uniquely associated with adoption, and therefore add an additional layer of complexity.

Showing care and concern for one another

An important aspect of the participants' adoptive sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence was the mutual care and concern shown for one another. This was expressed in a number of ways, from 'looking out for each other' to protecting one another at home and in the community. There was a strong sense in the narratives that showing care and concern for siblings was the 'proper thing to do'. It was seen as a moral obligation, and expected as the need arose, reflecting the culturally dominant norms and 'scripts' that are present regarding sibling relationships in general. For example, Susan talked about her adoptive sister standing up for her in the local community:

I was quiet, in a shell and [adoptive sister] would challenge people for me, she would stand up for me if she thought I was being mistreated in any way. She was a protector as well, but in a different way. You know, Carley would fight for me if she thought someone was looking at me in a funny way and they weren't, but her perception of that she would challenge. 'I mean, you don't do that to my sister!'

Susan perceived that her quietness as a child meant that her sister stood up for her, and clearly felt it was her role to protect her in the local community. Saying 'you don't do that to my sister' demonstrates that, in her adoptive sister's eyes, an important role as a sibling is to show care and concern through protection and solidarity with one another.

In a different way, adoptive siblings also offered protection to one another at home. One participant and her brother were severely physically and emotionally abused by their adoptive parents throughout their childhood, and although they were not emotionally close they did nevertheless protect one another:

Yeah, my mother was very strict about what time we came home and I think I had to be in at quarter to ten … I would always be late coming in, and my brother would change the clock and things like that, or he would distract my mother and get her involved in something else so that hopefully she wouldn't notice the time when I came in … He would cover for me, and I would do the same for him.

This suggests that showing care and concern for a sibling can be present even if there is a lack of closeness or the presence hostility. Offering protection in the face of adversity enabled this participant and her brother to share a sense of solidarity that was otherwise not present in their lives.

Conversely, for Deidre, having her older adoptive sister show care and concern in the face of parental domestic violence did promote closeness:

I remember [adoptive sister] being so lovely … I think mum and dad's relationship wasn't great growing up, and she would really look after us … She would climb into bed with us and she would wipe your tears away. She would be so lovely, really lovely.

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In the situations described above the participants and their adoptive siblings were actively opting in, or choosing, to show care and concern for one another in a variety of ways. For others, largely as a result of their gender and / or birth order, there was an *expectation*, usually from their adoptive parents, that their role was to show care and concern for one another. For example, Judith talked about her role as the only girl in a family with several adoptive brothers:

> *All I ever wanted was a sister and my mum was coming home with all these ... I quite like babies, as girls tend to, but the fact that they were boys wasn't particularly good because it just turned me into a second mother, so that is essentially what I was and, yeah, all I ever wanted was a sister.*

For Judith, showing care and concern was an expectation that she had to conform to and not a choice, which she resented.

Building identity

Identity development is an integral part of child development, and for those who are adopted the additional challenge is to make sense of who they are and why they were adopted (Howe and Feast, 2000). It might be expected that adoptive siblings would have been a useful resource for one another in childhood to talk about and make sense of being adopted. Research has highlighted that adolescence in particular is a time of growing curiosity about identity and birth origins (Wrobel and Dillon, 2009). However, the participants generally reported that they had little or no conversations directly with their adoptive siblings in childhood about being adopted, and that this was something that developed later on. For example:

> *We generally just didn't talk about it [adoption], to be perfectly honest ... The bizarre thing is that we never even discussed the whole thing about could we have half brothers and sisters and all that. We never even discussed that; it never came into any of our minds.*

Here, Paul highlights what was very typical in this sample; that they didn't talk together about their adoption, and certainly not about the possibility of birth siblings. By him saying 'it never came into any of our minds' this may be a reflection of the stability he felt in his adoptive family and his very positive experience of adoption. However, it

could also have been related to the level of communicative openness in his adoptive family. Later in the interview Paul comments:

> Paul: *It [being adopted] was always referred to as 'when you arrived' and the eyes [adoptive parents'] would start looking at each other – 'I hope they don't ask any more …'*
> Interviewer: What does that mean for you when they said that?
> Paul: *It meant that they were trying to hide something, it was masked. Why can't they just be open about it? You know, it was all very much masked in that way, a mystery.*

Verbal and non-verbal cues were present from his parents regarding their discomfort in talking about adoption, particularly in referring to their adoption as 'when you arrived'. Paul and his sister may have taken this as a signal that it was not all right to talk openly about their adoption and birth origins, either with their adoptive parents or with each other.

In contrast, Susan recalls her adoptive parents as being very communicatively open about Susan and her adoptive siblings' birth origins, making a point of openly discussing any issues as they arose in childhood and adolescence:

> Susan: *We always knew we could ask them anything we wanted to; they would periodically bring it up to make sure that we were coping with things and to make sure there wasn't any questions that were going unanswered. It was very much an open book.*
> Interviewer: And as a sibling group did you ever talk about it away from your parents, just amongst yourselves at all?
> Susan: *I suppose when we were older … growing up we kind of accepted it and we were all there for the same conversations. I don't remember having other conversations just with them. I suppose growing up and we were teenagers and [adoptive sister] was the first to do it, she was the first to go and find out, that did start more conversations, in that I asked [adoptive brother] if that was something he was going to pursue at any point. It was probably no more than that.*

It is interesting to note that even with this openness of attitude about adoption, Susan and her adoptive siblings did not really use each other as a resource for talking about their adoption in a significant way; this was very typical within the sample. It may be that their curiosity was satisfied through family conversations about adoption, or it may

be that siblings are not seen as an appropriate or 'proper' resource to talk about and make sense of adoption in childhood and adolescence, with the responsibility for this being placed with adoptive parents.

Sharing their everyday lives as children usually provided the foundation for their relationship in later life. They built a shared history together and a shared identity as siblings, alongside experiencing shared family life and family culture. In this respect the role of adoptive siblings in identity development could be described as being of little difference to siblings who grow up together in non-adoptive families. Their proximity to one another and their shared experience of a family culture and values provided the basis of developing a coherent identity and life narrative within the adoptive family as illustrated below:

> *What we find, though, and what was instilled in us was we always do things for people and all that sort of stuff – slightly different ways to do it, but we are always in contact.*

Adoptive siblings were also a good resource for shared family stories that promoted a coherent sense of identity within the adoptive family, albeit in slightly different ways at times to those who grow up with siblings who are biologically connected. For example, Susan recounted a story about her adoptive sister's arrival with the family:

> *I remember us going to visit this children's home and I remember eating an apple as we were going round it, looking at all these children; babies sat in baths, well not baths, kitchen sinks and kids of all colour and I remember meeting her. I had two brothers, so a sister seemed like a good idea at the time.*

Rather than remembering her mother's pregnancy and birth of a sibling, as would often be the case for siblings who share a mother, Susan provides a narrative for her adoptive sibling that painted a vivid picture of where she was prior to her adoption, which could assist her own life narrative and sense of identity.

The experience of being adopted, and having a birth family alongside an adoptive family adds additional complexity to the development of identity, which was often reflected in the participants' narratives. Subtle differences were therefore present in the role of adoptive siblings and the development of identity as opposed to the role of siblings brought up in intact families.

Adoptive sibling relationships in adulthood

The participants' experiences of growing up in their adoptive families with adoptive siblings clearly provided a foundation through which their adoptive sibling relationships were experienced and 'done' in practice in adulthood, both positively and negatively. Although some patterns established in childhood were continued into adulthood, there were also changes present in the participants' relationships with their adoptive siblings, both positive and negative. The presence of sibling rivalry and hostility in childhood tended to lessen significantly in adulthood with the benefit of greater maturity. Most participants reported having positive and satisfying relationships with their adoptive siblings in adulthood. However, the narratives of those who had experienced severe hostility from adoptive siblings in childhood, combined with a more unhappy adoption experience, tended to be characterised by loss and a lack of active contact in adulthood. Relationships in adulthood had additional dimensions as a result of being adopted, both in terms of searching for and finding birth family members, and thinking about whether and how to interweave birth relatives, including birth siblings, with the adoptive family.

This section will firstly explore the type and frequency of the participants' contact with their birth siblings in adulthood, and will move on to explore the two key themes that emerged from the interviews. Firstly, issues of continuity and change in adoptive sibling relationships in adulthood will be discussed with consideration given to the specific circumstances of managing being adopted with adoptive siblings. The second major theme that emerged was that of how adoptive siblings, through the many different ways of sharing 'ordinary kinship time' (Carsten, 2000), contributed to the participants' sense of continuity of past, present and future. This theme is also explored in the following chapter that considers birth sibling relationships across the life-span.

Contact with adoptive siblings in adulthood

The participants' contact with adoptive siblings in adulthood was varied within the sample, and usually included a combination of meeting up in person, phoning and texting one another, and keeping in touch indirectly via adoptive parents. Some participants were in direct contact with their adoptive siblings on a very regular basis:

> *We are always in contact even by text or whatever. I get lectured by mum and dad say, 'Call your sister' and I am like 'Well, I got a text from her yesterday' and it is like, 'Yeah okay.'*

And they tell me things about what she is doing and it's, 'Yeah I know.' You know, they don't appreciate that we communicate, not necessarily by telephone, but we do keep in contact.

This quote describes, on the one hand, the level of communication that can be present between siblings in adulthood and their own independently negotiated relationships, but also how this occurs away from parents, who may not always appreciate that siblings stay in touch independently.

In contrast, some participants had less contact with their siblings directly in adulthood, primarily relying on parents to pass on information and news:

Even though we don't see a lot of each other and we don't phone each other up and chat, we tend to find out about one another through mum and dad who are always calling me. But there is a sense that if I needed something, if there was a crisis, he would always be there for me and I will always be there for him.

However, even though direct contact may happen infrequently for some of the sample, there was a sense that adoptive siblings were usually 'held in mind', with the willingness to be there for each other remaining constant.

Very rarely were the participants not in touch with their adoptive siblings at all, and the complete breakdown of the relationship was usually the result of on-going issues that had been present in childhood, but unresolved. For example, Zoe highlighted the breakdown of her relationship with her adoptive brother (who was an unrelated adoptive sibling) ten years ago:

[He is] a very, very bitter person and in fact he and I haven't spoken since my adoptive father's funeral. He left without looking, without saying goodbye to me. We had a terrible argument over the funeral. He is someone who has a lot of issues as well, a lot of anger that he has never dealt with ... Sometimes I wonder how I will feel when he does actually die. I am assuming he will die before me, because of his lifestyle. Sitting here right now I kind of feel, well, after all these years, it probably won't bother me.

It is interesting to consider whether being an adoptive sibling with no blood tie played a part here in Zoe's construction of siblinghood and the loss of their relationship – was he somehow less important or relevant to her as a result of being an adoptive sibling rather than a birth sibling? Or were other factors also central, such as their difficult experience of adoptive family life? It may be that the basis of their relationship played a

part, but it is impossible in this study to untangle all the other influences described above.

Alongside their direct contact with each other, adoptive siblings in the sample also had to act as negotiators and mediators occasionally between their siblings and parents:

> *My mother would turn to me and I would have to be the solver of all the problems, which I couldn't really solve, and I used to say to my mum 'Mum, I can't do anything about it' ... In fact, she [adoptive sister] used to phone my mother all the time when they had got problems and my mother would phone me, and that went on through my married life, even after I had children.* (Dora)

So alongside their independent relationships with each other, some participants experienced their adoptive parents asking for help in relation to their siblings. This represented a significant shift from childhood to adulthood, where adoptive parents would have more naturally taken the lead role in helping to solve their children's problems. In adulthood, the emphasis sometimes shifted to the participants as adults taking the lead, representing a substantial change in roles over time.

The additional experience of being adopted continued to be interwoven in the participants' narratives of their adoptive sibling relationships, both positively and negatively, in ways that illustrate the life-long impact of adoption on adopted people and their families. These narratives were characterised by two themes; continuity and change in the adoptive sibling relationship and the factors that influenced this, and the role of adoptive siblings in relation to integrating the past, present and future; each of which will now be explored.

'We were very close and we are still close' – continuity and change in adoptive sibling relationships

Levels of continuity and change in adoptive sibling relationships were influenced by internal factors such as stability and change in feelings of closeness and distance. External factors such as the impact of geography, caring for elderly parents, and relationships with adoptive parents were also influential. The above quote reflects the views of a number of the participants who experienced stability in the feelings of emotional closeness they felt towards their adoptive siblings, both in childhood and in

adulthood. More often, however, feelings of emotional closeness increased in adulthood with the benefit of maturity and greater equality, as illustrated below:

It probably is more equal actually, yes absolutely. She is my older sister, but she is not my big sister; she doesn't boss me around any more ... Well, you change when you grow up, but I am a lot closer to [adoptive sister] now than I was as a child. (Lucy)

However, other participants had experienced more hostility and rivalry in childhood, and most also described improvements in their relationship in adulthood, which were often significant. For example, Steve noted the contrast in his relationship with his adoptive brother in childhood and adulthood:

Now, we had fought all the way up until I was 17/18. Then ... we got off the train together, and I had my rucksack with all my washing in, and we went for a pint on the way home ... We both talk about that moment, when I seemed to have gone off to Uni that September and then came back a bit more grown up, and since then we have always drank together ... We have never had a fight, we have never had a cross word, we have never hung up on the phone, we have never fallen out, ever, we talk about things. If he has got a difference of opinion to me we talk about it and then we just leave it as a difference of opinion.

Earlier in the interview Steve spoke about how he and his adoptive brother (who was also adopted into the family) would often get into physical fights as children. He came across during the interview as very proud of his relationship with his adoptive brother, often contrasting their positive relationship in adulthood with the sibling relationships of friends, and saying 'we operate as mates'. However, by emphasising the potential negatives in the relationship above through saying 'we have never ...' repeatedly, it is possible that there may be an underlying narrative about adoption present here; his sense of pride and achievement of a positive adoptive sibling relationship which in his mind may be surprising, given their lack of blood tie.

In contrast, and more rarely, continuity in emotional distance from adoptive siblings was present for a minority of participants. This was usually the case when severe adoptive sibling hostility was present in childhood which was reportedly not addressed by adoptive parents, combined with the participant having had a very unhappy adoption experience, often characterised by emotional / physical abuse. For example, as Kim describes:

I think we didn't argue and fight as we had done. I think it is like we are both resigned to what had been, without ever discussing what had been, but there was a difference between us, we were brought up in two different families ... I felt that it was difficult, because we never, ever talked about what had been. It is almost like you have a relationship and you both know, but you can't voice anything. It is a huge effort … I didn't get complete satisfaction from it, because there was this huge thing, you know, our lives, being brought up together, set against one another, but we can't discuss it, because to do that, he would have to acknowledge everything I went through.

Overt sibling hostility towards Kim decreased in adulthood from her adoptive brother (who was the birth child of her adoptive parents). However, the impact of what she experienced in childhood has meant that Kim has not had contact with her adoptive brother for several years. While this would not be her choice, she feels that until her adoptive parents die contact will not be possible. She states: 'I think we have a chance; I would like to think he thinks that too, but I think we would find we have a chance, but … whether we could ever feel as brother and sister with the emotional crap, I don't know'. So while on the one hand she would like to have 'a chance' to develop a more positive relationship with her adoptive brother, on the other there is the acknowledgement that after everything they have been through, perhaps he could never feel like a brother, although he is named as such. There is an additional element present here – that of mutuality, or both being invested in the relationship. Kim's narrative and her manner throughout the interview was one of loss on the one hand but hope for change in the future, and of openness to developing a relationship in the future. However, her adoptive brother may not have that need, raising the issue of potential differences in levels of mutuality.

Another factor that influenced continuity and change in adoptive sibling relationships was geographical distance and proximity, something that has been highlighted as a feature of siblings who grow up together in intact families (Cicirelli, 1995). The participants had a range of views about their physical proximity and distance from their adoptive siblings which generally reflected the levels of emotional closeness and distance they felt about them. For example, Karen and her brother live in different countries, and are not particularly close. She stated that:

> *He has come stayed with me a few times for work, and it was actually very good from afar to see his life settle down a bit.*

Karen's physical distance from her adoptive brother, interspersed with occasional visits, means that their relationship is convivial and satisfying 'from afar', which suits Karen as she is not involved in the minutiae of his day-to-day life, and reflects continuity in their relationship.

However, for others, changes in geographical distance hindered the everyday closeness of their relationship, but not their general feelings of closeness and distance:

> *It is probably harder with [adoptive brother] because he is so far away you don't really get the opportunity, even when he is back ... You can't have that time to ... you know, and you miss it because actually you just want to go down the pub with him and have a good blether and catch up … I am desperate for him to come home, so that you could have these opportunities, but when he is over for two weeks you are never going to get that opportunity.*

Geographical proximity also promoted a positive change in emotional closeness for some participants:

> *And [adoptive sister] came down to live near me. We lived like a mile down the road from each other and she adores the kids and we saw each other every week and you just become closer. Now that I am up here, it has kind of drifted a wee bit again.*

The participants' feelings and experiences about geographical proximity and distance were largely reflective of existing research into sibling relationships in adulthood for siblings who grow up together (Bank and Kahn 1982; Connidis, 1992). However, the presence of adoption and the impact this had on the development and maintenance of adoptive sibling relationships needs to be held in mind, as feelings of emotional closeness and distance were possibly 'played out' in some of the participants' narratives about physical proximity.

Changes in roles within the adoptive sibling group were also relevant when considering continuity and change over time, and usually occurred as a result of life changes such as

having children, or caring for elderly parents. Having children usually resulted in an increase in closeness as a result of having something in common:

We are beginning to re-connect in a completely new way ... They [adoptive sibling and partner] are now beginning to be on a similar plane that I have just been on ... and it will be important that we can share quality family time.

I think we probably have more in common as adults because we had children; definitely I think that.

These two participants were not particularly close to their adoptive siblings as children, although they were also not hostile to one another, describing their relationships through differences in gender, interests and personality. However, the experience of having children gave them something in common and increased closeness in adulthood as a result of this, again demonstrating the dynamic and changing nature of sibling relationships over time and the factors that can influence this. In the following chapter, we shall see that the presence of children assisted the development of birth sibling relationships, because again it gave them something in common. However, there was an additional element present which was about the importance of blood ties for the next generation. Investing in future relationships for their children was not commented upon in relation to adoptive sibling relationships. This may be because it was implicit and therefore not consciously thought about, or it may be because the presence of cousins for their children who are blood relatives was something important for them as parents, and more about a consequence of being adopted rather than about sibling relationships per se.

Participants who had elderly parents to support commented on their changing roles with adoptive siblings:

So I kind of feel like during our younger adult years we did drift apart a bit, but his life has settled down and we grew up together … Now we are both into middle age it is a new stage of our relationship to unfold around supporting our parents.

Joyce's statement is perhaps reflective of her integration into her adoptive family and positive adoption experience, and the presence of a strong cultural 'script' during the interview of caring for elderly parents being the 'proper thing to do', irrespective of adoption.

An interesting element of continuity and change was the influence of gender on the practice of adoptive sibling relationships in adulthood. Edwards et al (2005) highlighted the presence of gender differences in their research on siblings in childhood, where boys 'do' and girls 'talk', and the impact this can have on the everyday practice of sibling relationships. This was present in the narratives of several participants:

> *When the family get together, the first thing [adoptive brothers] want to do is go off and watch a match, and by the very nature of that it is all the siblings, but it does not include me. I can go off and play with the wives or something, but I am actually not a wife. But there will always, always be that, and there is not a lot I can do about it really.* (Judith)

> *So I would tell [adoptive sister] more than I would ever tell [adoptive brother], but I don't know if that is to do with him as a grown up man, that you wouldn't tell your grown up brother certain stuff, but you would be quite happy to tell your sister.* (Lucy)

Both these narratives illustrate the gender differences present in some participants' relationships with their adoptive siblings in adulthood. For Judith, these differences have always been present and so reflect continuity from childhood to adulthood in her relationship with her adoptive brothers in their day-to-day practice, and her exclusion from 'doing' the things they like to do, being relegated to 'playing with the wives'. She had always longed for sisters, and now has them as a result of being reunited with her birth sisters in adulthood. For her, this is immensely significant, and her relationships with her birth sisters are frequently characterised by 'talking' rather than 'doing'. For Lucy, her relationship with her adoptive brother has changed in adulthood as she is less willing to talk to him about very personal issues. Conversely, having a relationship with her sister that is characterised by 'talk' has influenced their closeness positively in adulthood.

Sibling relationships in adulthood are usually characterised developmentally by negotiating and developing the relationship more independently – as peers - away from the everyday presence of adoptive parents. Unlike their relationships with birth siblings whom they met for the first time in adulthood, the participants' adoptive sibling relationships were grounded in the familiar; their deep knowledge of each other and their relationship which had developed in childhood within their adoptive families. While the participants did not overtly talk about negotiation as part of their adult adoptive sibling relationships, it was implicit in many of their narratives described above, for example in thinking about their roles in caring for elderly parents and how having children affected their contact. The basis of their relationship was therefore not negotiated, as was the case with birth siblings, but these negotiations were rooted in the 'ordinary' everyday kinship they shared, and changed and developed according to circumstance.

However, one notable exception to this was in the careful attention and negotiation that took place regarding the participants' involvement with their birth families, and birth siblings in particular. The narratives were characterised by concern shown towards their adoptive siblings, and anticipation of their potential feelings:

> *I think [adoptive brother] ... was probably anxious. I mean, there was nothing to lose, but I guess there is always going to be some sort of anxieties about it. You know, is time going to be shared? But that never really happened, so I think those kinds of anxieties would have been by the wayside after a wee while, anyway.* (Amy)

'Family' occasions such as weddings, baptisms and funerals also took on additional significance when consideration had to be given to the place of birth family members, particularly as they are important occasions whereby membership of kinship groups are often 'displayed'. For example, Sarah's child was recently christened, and she wanted to use the opportunity of this public ritual to bring together her birth and adoptive families. It was the first occasion her adoptive and birth siblings had met:

> *I deliberately did it down there in my [adoptive] parent's neck of the woods, so they could be as comfortable as possible about it ... They [adoptive siblings] were typical, 'Yeah, pleased to meet you' and then went off for the whole thing – you know, all those blokes together and chatting*

amongst themselves, how they are in any social circumstances, not just ... So I was disappointed and all that, because I thought 'For one day you could have gone beyond yourselves and realise that this isn't about you, and you could have taken this opportunity to interact with these people a bit more'.

Sarah's extended family and friends welcomed her birth family, but her adoptive siblings presented as not being terribly interested, which was a surprise for Sarah, and she felt disappointed. Much is often invested in these types of family occasions, so Sarah's response is not altogether unexpected given the difference between her needs and the response of her family. It may have been that her birth family was not seen as particularly important to her adoptive siblings and their own sense of 'family'.

The presence of continuity and change in adoptive sibling relationships reflected 'normal' sibling relationships where greater maturity, changes in roles, geographical proximity and gender were present. However, the presence of adoption and being adopted continued to overlay the narratives, particularly in relation to the on-going influence of adoptive parents and the adoption experience on the relationship, and reflect the additional layers that can be present in adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span.

Having two families – integrating past, present and future

Earlier in this chapter it was highlighted that in relation to building identity, adoptive siblings were rarely used as a resource in childhood and adolescence to think and talk about adoption, with adoptive parents being seen as the primary resource in this respect. This changed substantially in adulthood, with adoptive siblings more often talking to one another and supporting each other about their adoption. In adulthood, adoptive siblings were often seen as a primary resource rather than adoptive parents, perhaps because they did not want to run the risk of hurting adoptive parents by talking about searching for birth family members. Thus using adoptive siblings as a primary resource was often seen as the 'proper thing to do':

So we never talked specifics, ever, until very, very recently in the past three or four years. Just before my mum became ill was when we sat down and talked and said 'Would you ever want to find out?' And my answer to that and his, would be, 'I don't know'. And at the time mum

was alive, and one of the things we did conclude was that we would both do nothing about it all while she was alive.

By talking through issues of searching together, Steve and his adoptive brother were able to use each other as a resource both to think about what they wanted to do, but also about what the 'proper thing to do' was in relation to their adoptive mother. These are complex issues, and an additional and unique element present in adoptive sibling relationships, as opposed to siblings who grow up together in intact families. By having a sibling who was also adopted, Steve was able to draw on someone who was a peer rather than a parent, and who thus potentially had a perspective that was more detached, yet still had a direct understanding of the issues present. This marked a clear shift from childhood to adulthood in who adopted people potentially used as a primary resource to think and talk about adoption with; adoptive siblings were often chosen above adoptive parents:

I think I told [adoptive brother] first before mum and dad when I did [find birth family], and he was really pleased about it. He was contacted by his birth mother; he never did get round to doing it, but yeah, he does tell me about it. I don't think he talks very much to anybody about it, but he would be more likely to tell me than mum and dad. (Ruth)

However, talking about adoption also showed differences between siblings about their views on adoption and being adopted:

We have talked about it ... He has never wanted to, and has always cut me off, actually He still does to this day, and when I was wanting to find my birth family, he was like, 'Why, what on earth do you want to do that for? Our mum and dad are our mum and dad, what do you want?' I think he actually just wants to pretend that he is not adopted; I have never heard him talking about them. He really just does not want to go there, so I don't bring it up with him. I respect that for him, he just doesn't want to acknowledge his birth family and his adopted status really. I have never heard him say, 'I am adopted'. I talk about it quite easily, about having two families and integrating and I like that as part of my day-to-day world and it is not for him, yeah, so I don't go there with him.

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Adoptive siblings can therefore have very different views within the same family about adoption and being adopted. The quote above illustrates on the one hand how thinking about adoption was threatening for one sibling in terms of their identity, but empowering for the other in terms of the integration of their birth and adoptive identity. In this case, the participant used their adoptive parents as a primary resource, accepting and respecting her brother's reluctance to engage.

Adoptive siblings also assisted some of the participants in practical ways regarding searching for birth family members, either by accident or design:

> *You know she spoke to me the other week on the phone when I got my birth certificate through, and she has gone off and done a load of research ... she is really joining in and stuff.*

> *We were looking for some legal papers and we found our adoption papers and my brother said, 'Do you mind if I read your papers?' and he was just like, 'Have you read the paragraph on the second page?' And I am like. 'I have read it loads.' 'No, but have you read it?' 'I have read it loads, mate, honestly' ... And he said, 'Yeah, but you've got a sister.' And I remember thinking that I knew that, but for some reason had obviously chosen to not take it in. And then that's when we both just stopped, and I was like 'Shit! I have got a sister' and he was like, 'Yeah, you have got a sister, mate.'*

It was clearly helpful for those participants whose adoptive siblings were a resource regarding adoption to have someone who, instinctively, through also being adopted, was able to understand the significance, for example, of having a sister, and offer support. It was more often adoptive siblings who had also been adopted (rather than the birth children of their adoptive parents) who offered this type of support. This was not always the case, however, as illustrated below, when Amy's adoptive brother (birth child of adoptive parents) intervened to support Amy tell her parents about her search for her birth family:

> *And so what they [adoptive parents] didn't know is that I had spoken to my brother; and also what they didn't know, I had enlisted his support to break this news to them and actually he met me off the train to them go to our parents' house. So they [adoptive parents] were quite surprised to sort of see him, but I knew that I was learning quite quickly that actually there is*

an awful lot of people that needs supporting, there is not just me, and I knew that they would
need it and I am not an impartial thing in this. They needed someone to go to and moan
about it and all the rest of it, so that's why ... he is an absolutely 100% diamond geyser, he
just dropped all work and whatever it was he was doing to come over and help us do this.

Amy's narrative illustrates well how the adopted people in this sample often had to untangle complex emotional issues in relation to themselves and their adoptive families in order to work out the 'proper thing to do' in relation to adoption issues. In this case, Amy was mindful of her own need for support on the one hand, but also that her adoptive parents may also need someone to talk to that was not her, and identified her brother as an appropriate source of support for both; almost like a mediator. There was also a sense of morality in this narrative, particularly when she says 'there is an awful lot of people that needs supporting, there is not just me', and that the 'proper thing to do' was fundamentally, morally right. This quote also illustrates how adoptive sibling relationships in adulthood often work independently from relationships with parents, and that siblings can be a source of emotional and practical support in their own right, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

There is a prominence in adoption research on the importance of continuity in life narratives to assist identity development, but the emphasis is normally on the importance of adopted people understanding their early life experiences prior to adoption (Drapeau et al, 2000; Howe and Feast, 2000). In a different way, adoptive siblings also provided an excellent resource for identity development in the remembrance of their childhoods, thus contributing to a continuous life narrative about the adoptive family experience. This served to provide a coherent life narrative of the past which was grounded in the present, and repeated throughout adulthood, thus creating a continuity of time in the past, present and future.

The concept of continuity of time for adopted people has been explored by Carsten (2000) in her study of adopted people's reunions with birth family members, who argued that continuity of time between past, present and future was difficult to achieve post-reunion. This concept will be explored in relation to birth sibling relationships in the following chapter, but the concept also has resonance for adoptive sibling relationships. Through being able to share stories with one another about their

childhood, they were remembering their shared ordinary 'kinship time' (Carsten, 2000) as children, which also assisted in the coherence of their life narratives:

> *The story my brothers always tell is that I was the baby sat on the floor that didn't move. You could put toys round me and I would sit there all day, and I didn't have to talk because I had two brothers to run about after me … I would sit and point to something and make a noise, and they would run and get it, and that's the story they tell.*

This is an ordinary story about babyhood that was shared by Sarah and her adoptive siblings, which gave her an understanding of what she was like as a baby, through their eyes. These stories are usually taken for granted in intact families with siblings who grow up together, and have the potential to provide an important context about what individuals were like as babies or young children. Adoptive siblings will have a particular 'take' on each other as children, which is valuable and perhaps different from the perspective of adoptive parents, and thus adds to a picture of themselves and their adoptive family relationships as children, mirroring a role of biologically related siblings who grow up together.

The ability to share stories of childhood and adoptive family experiences particularly came to the fore in adulthood, when the adoptive siblings had the potential to act as a shared source of support for one another as peers:

> *My brother phoned to see how she [adoptive mother] was and as soon as I hear his voice on the phone that was it, I was in absolute floods of tears, because he was the only person who knew how she could be and what it was like for me* (Ruth).

Through the sharing of ordinary everyday kinship in their adoptive families as children, and their shared knowledge of their adoptive parents, adoptive siblings usually had a deep understanding about the reality of life in their adoptive families, both positive and negative. By saying 'he was the only one who knew what it was like for me', Ruth highlights the intimate knowledge of family life that she and her adoptive brother shared, something that was not altogether positive for them, but that nevertheless they shared. While this is something that is familiar for those who grow up with siblings in intact families, the extra dimension of being adopted, and their shared (and sometimes

differing) experiences of family life as a result of being adopted added additional resonance to these stories.

The dominant cultural discourse in Western society regarding sibling relationships for those brought up together is one of mutual and unconditional obligations, expressed through the blood tie and the practical and emotional care and concern shown to one another – of being brothers and sisters 'no matter what'. Adoptive siblings do not have a bond through blood ties, but have a bond grounded in their shared everyday experiences from childhood onwards, and in sharing their adoptive family culture and practices. So to what extent did the participants experience their adoptive sibling relationships as mutual and unconditional, expressed through their care and concern of one another, and feel that their adoptive siblings were brothers and sister 'no matter what'?

Care and concern for adoptive siblings was expressed in a number of ways by the participants, including lending money, having siblings stay with them during turbulent periods in their lives, caring for nieces and nephews, offering emotional support when needed, and sharing the care of elderly parents. For example,

> *Well, she [adoptive sister] is on my car insurance, so when she is here she can drive round in my car with the kids.*

> *Her [adoptive sister's] daughter contacts me if there is any ... if she is having a bit of a struggle with her mum and if she is worried about anything, she comes to me and I will talk it over with her.*

These quotes illustrate the practical nature of the support that adoptive siblings gave one another, which is overlaid by emotional care both of the sibling and those in their families. As will be shown in the next chapter, the emotional care of extended family members, for example birth nieces and nephews, was not often present in the participants' narratives in the same way as it was here, with care and concern more often confined to birth siblings only and sometimes in conjunction with one another towards birth parents. It is interesting to consider the reasons for this, and could be reflective of a greater sense of permanence and security for most of the sample within adoptive

kinship relationships. Strong foundations for adoptive sibling relationships were built in childhood, and there was a powerful sense in most of the sample of knowing and accepting each other's positive qualities and flaws, with no accompanying sense of fragility or impermanence. For example:

We are all there for each other; we accept each other for who we are, we know they are always the ones on the end of a phone, we look after each other and we are the first ones to point out each other's weaknesses as well. We love each other.

But he [adoptive brother] is the sort of person who you cannot really depend on either emotionally or practically, so you just adapt to that. The first few times it is upsetting or whatever and you have your hopes, but then you just used to the fact that it is him.

These two quotes highlight different facets of the permanency of adoptive sibling relationships. The first quote illustrates the ways in which stability and permanency are expressed and 'done', through deep knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, their regular contact with one another and in being there for each other. In the second quote, the participant cannot rely on her brother 'being there' for her when needed, which may say something about the level of mutuality and reciprocity present in their relationship. However, by saying 'it is him', she believes that this is part of his make-up as a person rather than being of direct relevance to his status as a sibling, and it does not affect her sense of the stability or permanence of the relationship.

In a similar way, the cultural 'script' of the family is also relevant regarding providing practical and emotional support to adoptive siblings:

I think if push came to shove, they [adoptive siblings] would certainly be there if I needed them; but we are not a family of 'needy' people; that is not how we have been brought up. (Sarah)

Sarah's adoptive family's 'script' regarding the giving and receiving of practical and emotional support appears to be centred on 'neediness'. Sarah's first line of support would not be her adoptive siblings, and this is perhaps reflective of being raised within a family culture that does not encourage 'neediness', rather than being reflective of the state of permanence regarding her relationships with her adoptive siblings. This

highlights the importance of understanding the context of people's lives and the multiple factors that influence their construction of sibling relationships.

The following chapter highlights the issue of 'rights' within birth sibling relationships, and how some of the participants did not feel the 'right' to ask birth siblings for help and support, implying a certain fragility in their relationships. The issue of rights and obligations in relation to adoptive sibling relationships was very different. Implicit in most of the narratives was a strong sense of entitlement to the relationship, of being there for each other 'no matter what', irrespective of closeness or distance in adulthood, and that this was seen as the 'proper thing to do' in relation to brothers and sisters, thus buying into the dominant cultural discourse of how sibling relationships 'should' be experienced.

For those who lost touch with their adoptive siblings in adulthood, the fragility of their relationship tended to have roots in childhood and very difficult adoption experiences, as already discussed. Rights here were expressed in different ways – the right not to have a relationship, or the right to choose to hope that reconciliation may occur. This suggests an element of choice about the practice of the relationship, rather than in the status of adoptive siblings being defined as brothers and sisters. Thus, the relationship as a 'sibling' was still held in mind, but choices were made regarding how this was practised in reality. However, these choices must also be considered in the light of the wider social and cultural influences that were present.

Summary

At the start of this chapter the issue of adoptive siblings being raised together 'as if begotten' through blood was raised, given the implicit aims of adoption legislation and policy regarding adopted children being able to experience 'normal' family life. The life-span perspective that has shaped this chapter has highlighted that in many respects the adopted people in this sample were raised 'as if begotten' by their adoptive parents, through their assimilation of their adoptive families' practices and values, and in how their adoptive sibling relationships were experienced and 'done' in practice. However, issues of adoption pervaded all aspects of family life. The reality of their birth and having birth families was ever-present; in childhood through stories of how brothers and sisters arrived in the family, in how similarity to and difference from siblings were

explained, their experience of family life, communication about adoption and how they began to construct their identity. In adulthood, these issues particularly came to the fore through the process of search and reunion with birth families, and the roles adoptive siblings and the adoptive family in general played in this. However, adoptive sibling relationships were extremely stable, albeit with subtle changes that were often a response to developmental maturity and circumstance in adulthood. Only rarely were the participants not in touch with their adoptive brothers and sisters. This suggests that there was a strong sense of stability and permanence in adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span; that adoptive siblings were usually regarded as brothers and sisters 'no matter what', and furthermore had distinct roles to play with regard to supporting one another around specific issues pertaining to adoption.

Chapter 9: Birth sibling relationships across the life-span

Introduction

The previous two chapters considered who the participants in this study defined as siblings, and went on to explore how adoptive sibling relationships (where no blood tie is present) are developed, negotiated and maintained across the life span. This chapter will consider how the participants constructed and maintained kinship relationships with their birth siblings over time. Eighteen of the twenty participants grew up apart from all their birth brothers and sisters, usually having no knowledge of or contact with them during their formative years, and the remaining two participants grew up together with one birth sibling and apart from others. This chapter will therefore primarily focus on the experiences of growing up apart from birth siblings, in terms of knowledge of and curiosity about them in childhood and adolescence, how they practice or 'do' these kinship relationships in adulthood, and also how they are 'displayed' to others.

The concepts of family practices, or 'doing' family relationships (Morgan, 1996) and of 'displaying' (Finch, 2007) kinship relationships are useful, because they explore and explain the processes through which adopted people develop and maintain kinship relationships with their birth siblings, and how these relationships are then communicated, or 'displayed' to others. In this way whilst Finch (2007) emphasised the notion of 'display' as methods through which family kinship relationships are clearly communicated to others as being distinctive from other relationships, sibling relationships in this study were also 'displayed' at times by others as being exclusive, with the adopted person being excluded, and this will also be explored.

There have been many studies that have explored the day-to-day practice of sibling relationships for children brought up together in intact families (see Dunn and Kendrick, 1982; Dunn, 1992; Edwards et al, 2006; Punch, 2008), with less attention being paid to sibling relationships in adulthood (see Ross and Milgram, 1982; Cicirelli, 1982; Connidis, 1992). Some of these studies highlight the presence of a cultural 'script' for sibling kinship relationships that reflect what sibling relationships 'should' be, namely having a bond that is present both by virtue of the blood tie and through

sharing day-to-day experiences from childhood onwards, unconditional rights and obligations within the relationship that can include the giving and receiving of practical and emotional support, and having a relationship that by its very nature is permanent, irrespective of relationship quality, due to the blood tie of family. Whilst there are studies that have considered sibling relationships within the context of divorce and re-marriage, where a blood tie may not be present, there is a paucity of studies that have considered adopted people's birth sibling relationships over time.

Previous studies that have considered relationships with birth family members following search and reunion have predominantly focused on the relationships that have developed with birth parents, and more usually birth mothers (see Triseliotis, 1973; Sachdev, 1992; Pacheco and Eme; 1993; Howe and Feast, 2001; Clapton, 2003; Triseliotis et al, 2005; Passmore and Feeney, 2009). Some of these studies briefly considered birth sibling relationships, suggesting that they tended to be more straightforward and long-lasting than those with birth parents, lacking the emotionally-laden undertones present in relationships with birth parents as a result of the siblings having no involvement in parting with the child for adoption. However, all these studies lacked a detailed exploration of the birth sibling relationship post-reunion, placing them in the context of relationships with wider family and treating the sibling group as one unit, rather than considering the adopted person's relationships with members of the sibling group individually as well as collectively.

This chapter will therefore explore the participants' birth sibling relationships from childhood onwards, exploring how these relationships develop, the motivation for searching and being reunited with birth siblings in adulthood, how this was experienced, and the factors that are present in developing, negotiating and maintaining these relationships over time. The everyday practice of these relationships will be used as a framework to consider their meanings to the participants.

Birth sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence

Very few participants had knowledge in childhood and adolescence of the birth siblings they grew up apart from. Two of the participants who grew up with one of their birth siblings and apart from others knew about them by virtue of a combination of having contact in childhood and / or life-story work, as has been commented on previously.

Two other participants knew about one birth sibling (but not the others) through the adoption agency being aware of their existence at the time of the adoption. For example, Susan stated:

> *Yeah, I remember my mum telling me that she [birth sister] had blond hair – straight blond hair – because that was what the adoption agency told her.*

Susan grew up with this very limited knowledge of her birth sister, which she nevertheless found helpful as it provided a wider understanding of her birth family. However, she was not aware of her other birth siblings as a child, so it came as a shock to her to realise that other siblings existed.

For one participant, Ashley, who also spent time with another sibling in foster care before being adopted, she noted that upon reaching adolescence:

> *Something had made me remember her and I was in a panic and I was upset and I said to my [adoptive] mum, 'I want to know how my sister is, I want to find my sister,' and my mum burst into tears and said, 'I can't believe you are upsetting me like this.' And I remember thinking, 'I don't want to do that, I don't want to do that.'*

By emphasising her upset, Ashley's adoptive mother effectively (and perhaps unintentionally) closed down communication about Ashley's need to know about her birth sister, which resulted in significant resentment on both sides. This vividly highlights a disconnect that can be present between children's need to know about their birth siblings, particularly if they have pre-existing relationships as in this case, and adoptive families wishing to 'claim' their adopted children as their own (often with the best of intentions), without active birth family ties.

Curiosity about birth siblings varied across the sample in childhood and adolescence. Lowenstein (1994: 87) has defined curiosity as an information gap between 'what one knows and what one wants to know'. Curiosity is therefore seen as a natural process that for these participants aimed to fill in the gaps in information and knowledge about their birth families. In childhood, curiosity was usually and unsurprisingly focused on their birth parents, usually their birth mother. Most had been told the 'story' of why

they were adopted at an early age, so curiosity usually focused on filling the information gap between what they had already been told and what they wanted to know:

I think I had like-rose tinted glasses on, or a wee bit like a fairytale princess kind of thing, like you have got this other kind of family somewhere and you have no idea who they are if you walked past them in the street. For me, the biggest thing was wanting to know who I looked like, that sort of thing.

Curiosity about what their birth mother looked like, and also who they themselves looked like, was the over-riding factor for most of the participants in childhood. There was a sense from the data that thinking about birth mothers in particular was logical because they had given birth to them and not kept them, and most had been given a concrete 'story' about this to base their information gap on:

In my mind my birth family when I was growing up it was only one person and that was my birth mum … I never really thought about a birth father, not really, and I never thought about birth siblings.

The lack of curiosity about birth siblings in childhood was therefore more than simply a lack of information, because to fill an information gap a point of reference is required to initiate curiosity. In the absence of any knowledge about birth brothers and sisters they did not have anything tangible or certain to think about:

I don't think it was anything I had ever really thought about, I suppose because I had no points of reference for it. There was no point in thinking that I could have six brothers and sisters, or I could have none, there wasn't anything concrete to base these imaginings on.

For some, this lack of 'anything concrete' combined with increased feelings of difference towards their adoptive family led to more detailed fantasies in late childhood/ early adolescence, again predominantly about their birth mothers. For example, one participant stated:

I mean, I always hoped that she was beautiful and artistic and interesting and sophisticated. I wanted her to be a career woman, I wanted her to be what my adoptive mother was not. I

didn't want her to be a housewife who had no hobbies or interests, I wanted her to be glamorous; but those wishes never manifested in a particular image in my head, like I never looked at women in magazines and thought if she looked like them.

On the one hand it is unsurprising from a developmental perspective that adopted children move from more general fantasies to more specific ones about what birth family members (usually birth mothers) *are* rather than what they look like. However, this seemed particularly relevant to those for whom differences from their adoptive parents in personality and outlook were becoming more prevalent, or for those who experienced particularly unhappy (or alienated) adoptions. For example, fantasies about birth mothers in particular as rescuers were present in the narratives of this group of participants, with the emphasis on finding someone with the characteristics they wished for in a mother:

My birth mother became, bless her, this woman so high up on a pedestal, she was going to rescue me, she was going to take me away from all of this, she was going to make it better. She was going to be my mum and that was it; she was my hope, she was what I clung to. I didn't consider when I first found out whether she had more children or not.

As children and adolescents these fantasies seemed, in some ways, to act as a protective factor from their very unhappy adoption experiences, and gave them hope for the future, although as noted in the above quote the possibility of siblings was rarely thought about. However, as will be explored in the following section, this group of participants often found out in adulthood that their enormous expectations were not met in reality, leading to additional feelings of rejection and loss.

As the participants matured developmentally into adolescence, the focus of their curiosity about birth family members also changed. There was a progressive focusing on the possibility of searching for and finding birth family members (usually birth mothers, more rarely birth fathers) arising from a desire to understand more about the reasons why they were adopted, and to learn more about themselves and their identity, which is reflective of other research regarding adopted people's curiosity in adolescence about their birth families. For example, Wroebel and Dillon (2009) focused on adopted adolescents' curiosity about birth parents alone. What was interesting in this current study was the stark continuing lack of interest about birth siblings due to a lack of

knowledge about their existence. Only rarely did the participants think about the possibility of birth siblings. Here, Lucy talks about her curiosity about siblings in adolescence:

> *Oh yeah, I think once you are a teenager you understand exactly what, you know that this person has had a physical relationship and had a baby and you understand the social implications of it, but because you don't know any more about it … I guess because you don't know it is the unknown bit that you don't know. You are bound to have sisters or brothers because they are two adults, they were young and if they were together or if they moved on in life there is bound to be brothers or sisters around.*

Lucy benefited from having a clear adoption story given to her by her adoptive parents, so knew that her birth parents were young when they had her. Through maturing in adolescence and understanding the social context of her adoption she inferred that she may have birth siblings, and thought about this possibility. However, her reference to the 'known unknown' implies that her lack of knowledge prevented a clear reference point for her curiosity.

Most of the participants in this sample were adopted through confidential 'closed' adoptions at a time when provision of information about birth families was minimal. However, their lack of knowledge about birth siblings raises issues for children adopted today about what information is shared with adoptive families about birth siblings; whether they are routinely informed of new siblings; and whether / how this information is used by adoptive parents. The participants in this sample were usually very shocked and surprised (often pleasantly so) to discover as adults that they had birth siblings. Arguably, by knowing about their birth siblings' existence as children they would also have had fewer information gaps as adults, with curiosity being based on the known rather than the unknown.

Searching for and being reunited with birth siblings in adulthood

The participants in this sample spoke movingly about their motivations to search for birth family members, most often their birth mothers, and the effects on them of discovering through the searching process that they had birth brothers and sisters.

Motivation was frequently expressed through a wish to understand their medical history, and was often triggered by life events such as marriage and thinking about having children. A search for identity, and more specifically of finding out 'who am I, and why was I adopted?' (Howe and Feast, 2000) was also considered to be a primary focus:

> *I don't think I was looking for them at that point; I think I was looking for me, so I was just trying to find out anything about me.*

> *I think everybody has to know where they came from, and I still do feel quite fragile sometimes and I think that most of it is just not knowing quite ... I know who I am, but I just want to know where I came from ... I don't think it is going to change anything, but it's just the missing bit, isn't it? Just that missing bit that has to be tidied up, and there has to be some sort of closure, doesn't there?*

These two quotes highlight different facets of the motivation to search for birth family members, most often birth mothers; a focus on understanding self and also filling in 'missing bits' about where they came from.

More rarely, the focus of searching was birth siblings, and in these cases the existence of brothers and sisters was known at the outset of the search, sometimes accompanied by concerns that their birth mother might have died due to their age. One participant, who was searching for her birth sister stated:

> *I would like to just be able to talk ... I would like to find my sister and I would like to know what has happened to her ... Maybe because she was older, she could tell me what happened; you know, some of the history.*

So here, given the knowledge of having an older sister through a pre-existing relationship but the uncertainty of whether her birth mother was alive, this participant ascribed the role of information-giver to her birth sister in relation to filling in the 'missing bits' about why she was adopted and the birth family's history; something that is more usually ascribed to a birth parent. It is interesting to contemplate whether, given prior knowledge of birth siblings, more direct approaches may be made towards them alongside finding birth parents. Within this small sample, those that knew of the

existence of birth siblings before searching for them were certainly more motivated to find them, both in relation to identity issues and also to understand their view of the family history, but also from the perspective of 'rights'. For example, another participant who knew his birth sister had also been adopted and was in the process of searching for her said:

> *I want my sister to know she has got a brother ultimately ... But I think she needs to know, and I would like to know out of my curiosity what my sister is doing, what does she look like?*

By saying 'she needs to know', Martin is ascribing rights to his sister to know about him and views this as the 'proper thing to do', also acknowledging his interest in and curiosity about his sister's life, including their biological connectedness. Martin had an integrated adoption experience, and it was interesting that he had no interest in finding his birth parents; something which was very unusual in the sample, irrespective of adoption experience. This was perhaps a reflection of loyalty to his adoptive parents, and their recent deaths, and could also have been about his birth sister having no perceived role in Martin being adopted, thereby making it a more straightforward relationship to contemplate. He came across in the interview as feeling that, morally, the 'proper thing to do' was to search for his birth sister alone, but also that any contact with her would include his adoptive brother, being clear that they come as a 'package':

> *I come with my brother; I don't come on my own. That's the one thing that has to be understood if it goes that far. It is not just about me, it is about my brother as well and he is excited about it, which makes me feel really good.*

Martin's loyalty to and close relationship with his adoptive brother was a particular feature of this interview, and illustrates the complexities of adoption kinship networks for all involved both in contemplating searching for birth relatives, the process of reunion and what happens subsequently, and the influence of its members. By saying 'it's not just about me', there is an acknowledgement of the need to take account of other people's feelings, of negotiation and understanding other people's needs and perspectives. In this case, Martin's brother was supportive of the search, but for others, as was explored in the previous chapter, the need to take account of adoptive siblings' feelings meant that the participants also had to deal with resistance and feelings of

vulnerability about the relationship. This meant that the motivation, for self, to search for birth family members was often overlaid with competing needs from adoptive family members (including adoptive siblings) that had to be considered as part of the process.

Another facet of motivation was the expectations that ran alongside the participants' reasons for searching for birth family members. For some, the aim at the outset was to find out information alone – to fill in missing pieces of the jigsaw about their identity. For others, they knew at the outset that they wished to meet their birth family and develop a relationship. Some were unsure about what they wanted at the outset and remained open to possibilities, and others (particularly those that had experienced very unhappy adoptions) sometimes wished to find a 'family' of their own:

> *I had my own family and we are all very close, so it wasn't a case of needing to find another family, it was curiosity, and then what came with it just happened to be a kind of bonus.*

> *I want a family and I haven't got one.*

These two quotes illustrate different facets of motivation and expectations; on the one hand curiosity about birth family origins with no expectations of a relationship, and on the other the wish to have a 'family'. Unsurprisingly, those who were able to keep an open mind about what might happen during the search and reunion process, and who had less invested in finding a family for themselves were able to manage the process better. This is illustrated by Sam below, who stated:

> *Nobody could have ever met my expectations of that pedestal mother, nobody: Mother Theresa couldn't have managed that!*

For Sam, the combination of high expectations, a difficult adoption experience and the reality of her birth mother's life were too much to manage, and their relationship post-reunion was very brief. However, Sam also had birth siblings, who had high expectations of her as a 'rescuer', which was also too much:

They were so pleased to have this older sister and I think maybe I was going to be their rescuer for them, I was going to fix it. And they knew about me, they had always known about me and believed that their mum's problems and everything was down to losing me. I was back; I was going to make it better for them and I didn't ... I wanted to be that person, and I couldn't be that person.

So alongside managing personal expectations, other people's expectations also have to be managed and worked with. In this case, Sam's birth siblings placed great faith in her that as the older sister she would 'rescue' them all, when in fact this was an unrealistic expectation due to a combination of Sam's circumstances and those of her birth family. Through saying she 'wanted to be that person', Sam highlights that expectations on both sides can be enormous, with significant emotional energy being invested in hope and expectation for the future. However, the consequences for everyone involved, which in this case was losing contact with each other after a short time, highlight the need for expectations to be carefully managed over time, arguably perhaps through the provision of greater information in childhood, encouraging openness of attitude to birth families in adoptive kinship networks. It also highlights an important role for intermediary services in managing adopted people's expectations during search and reunion. It also highlights an important role for intermediary services in managing adopted people's expectations during search and reunion.

With regard to the searching process itself, two generations were clearly present within the sample; those who searched prior to the internet, and those for whom the internet was part of their everyday life. Irrespective of this however, a wide variety of searching methods were employed by all those in the sample. These included an extensive searching of public records (either in person or via the internet), placing carefully worded advertisements in local newspapers, hiring private detectives, using professional mediators (a combination of solicitors and social work agencies) and use of internet sites such as Google, Facebook and Genes Reunited.

For the majority of the sample, birth mothers were the initial focus of the search, and most often it was not until they had gone through the laborious searching of public records (births, marriages and deaths) that they discovered the existence of birth siblings. For example, one participant who found out about siblings via public records said:

You know, I realised, looking back, I hadn't actually taken siblings into account I don't think at all before that, and suddenly I was presented with them, and I had to just adjust to the fact that they existed.

Finding siblings was therefore a shock (albeit a pleasant one most of the time) and very powerful to many of the participants. They had not had any knowledge of them, and consequently their curiosity about birth family and motivations to search had been based on the 'information gap' they knew about – their birth parents. This required adjustments to their perceptions of who was in their birth family, and how to move forward with this knowledge.

Other participants only found out about some or all of their birth siblings following contact with a birth parent:

I remember being very surprised that I had more siblings, because everything the [social services'] records told me was that I had one. I didn't find the information that there was more until I actually made contact.

This highlights the importance of finding a way for complete information about sibling groups to be placed on adoption files. This is complex given the wide array of birth sibling relationships present in this sample alone, but could also represent what Saunders and Selwyn (2011) noted in their study, which was that half siblings are often viewed by social workers as being in some way less relevant than full siblings. Given the resistance to this notion within the majority of this sample, as discussed in chapter 7, and the frequency of birth siblings being half siblings, the importance of complete information about sibling groups appears to have particular resonance.

The use of the internet as a means of searching for birth family members was frequent for those whose search commenced over the last 10-12 years. Some used it to gain access to public records, and others carried out Google searches or used websites such as Facebook or Genes Reunited to try to trace birth family members, often with some success. However, those for whom this was a sole means of searching initially also commented on how it was often a 'shot in the dark', with many false trails, and that the

impact on strangers they approached for information was sometimes immense, both in regard to approaching people who turned out not to be family members, and those who were. With the benefit of hindsight, most of those who used the internet to search for birth family members felt that in retrospect they should have used a professional mediator, since this would have prevented what one participant described as 'collateral damage'.

However, although the use of professional mediators was widespread in the sample, the service they received was mixed. For some, a mediator provided invaluable support: talking through the process, managing expectations, searching for birth family members and managing the contact process. For example, Miriam noted that:

> *The social worker went through the whole thing with me and she was very good at saying, 'Now think about this and think about that'. She took me through the whole process and sat down and said 'Look, there is a possibility she may have died, or she may have married, or the circumstances of your birth might not have been how it was presented to you.' She was very good – not being negative in any way, but just saying I had to think about these things.*

However, not everyone received balanced advice, and this affected how they experienced the searching process:

> *I was very emotional and then when I went to get information from my adoption file I saw this social worker who basically said, 'I have got your file here and I am not going to let you look at it'. And she would read me things from it and I basically cried through the whole thing ... I have never forgotten it, really, like how not to be a social worker and she gave her opinion about everything. She said, 'I am sorry, but your mother doesn't come across as having many feelings!'*

These two contrasting experiences could be a reflection of the time periods in which people searched, with the former experience being more recent. However, it does raise issues, given what has already been discussed in relation to expectations and information, about the central role of professional mediators in managing the search and reunion experience, and the impact this can have on the adopted person, either positively or negatively.

The reunion process with birth siblings happened in a number of ways: more usually after meeting birth parent/s, but sometimes in tandem, or meeting birth siblings only. Careful negotiations often happened prior to meeting birth brothers and sisters, particularly when they had had no knowledge of the adopted person's existence:

> *She [birth mother] said that they [birth siblings] knew nothing about me, and that it was obviously something that she was going to have to tell them about. And so I could see that it was going to be quite a big deal for her, and I suppose that was the first indication that I knew that they didn't know. Up until then, they had no idea what the situation was.*

Many of the participants had birth siblings who had remained with their family of origin, and they often had no knowledge of the adopted person prior to their reunion with a birth parent. The impact of family secrets, and the birth parent's feelings of guilt and shame at the situation which resulted in their child being adopted, was quite profound for some within the sample, and resulted in careful negotiations about whether and how to facilitate meetings with birth siblings. For those birth parents that had new partners since the adoption and families of their own, this could also be difficult, and participants sometimes had to deal with the partner's feelings of protection for what they perceived as 'their' family:

> *Her husband was really not happy about it, and he had taken me aside and kind of said things to me like: 'You know, really you have got a family, that's the family you should be sticking with. You don't really need to be getting involved with another family'.*

This highlights the often competing needs within adoptive kinship networks: adopted people wishing to get to know their birth kin, and other members of the network being concerned about this, often through concern and worry for their own children, or perhaps not perceiving the adopted person as 'kin'.

In contrast, some participants discovered that their birth siblings either knew of their existence, or remembered them being in the family prior to adoption. One participant, Felicity, described her older birth sister's reaction upon meeting her for the first time, having had memories of Felicity in childhood:

> *She [birth sister] went straight into the kitchen, and you could more or less see the kitchen from the front door. She put her bags down, and with her back to me she said, 'I know who you are, I know why you have come. Why the bloody hell has it taken so long?'*

The vividness of this memory and the strong emotions it evoked, both for Felicity in re-telling this story and for her birth sister in asking why it had taken so long for her to get in contact, highlighted several issues. On the one hand, positive feelings were evoked for Felicity in terms of knowing she was remembered, and this also raised the possibility of someone being able to further her understanding of birth family history and why she was adopted. However, it also highlighted the consequences for those siblings left behind who have memories of their brothers and sisters whom they lose to adoption.

Having considered some of the more difficult reunion experiences with birth siblings earlier, it is also important to highlight that many reunion experiences with birth siblings were very satisfying for the participants, firstly in terms of providing a foundation for the development of positive kinship connections over time:

> *I know the first time I spoke to [birth sister], I was hoovering the stairs and the phone rang. I am balancing with the Hoover on the stairs and trying to get the phone and she said, 'Hiya it is your sister.' Well, I dropped the Hoover and I think we were chatting for about two hours and I was sat on the stairs. We keep in constant touch.*

So for some participants, feelings of siblinghood were present very quickly, in this case developed through prolonged conversations and feelings of similarity, which led to frequent contact. For others, as will be explored later in the chapter, these feelings took time to develop.

In addition, the reunion experience with siblings provided an opportunity, for some, for their birth brothers and sisters to play a role in explaining family history at the outset, and also to give some a sense of 'family' that also contained siblings:

> *Trepidation, amazement, because it all happened so quickly – one minute I hadn't met anybody, I was an only child and ... as I say, all of a sudden there is a history of a family and talking about it ...*

These two particular issues – that of initial meetings providing a foundation for developing relationships with birth siblings post-reunion and the role birth siblings can play in providing information about family history and reasons for adoption – will be explored in much more detail in the following section.

In terms of the experience of first meetings with birth siblings, the following account provides a vivid description of one participant's experience, which was echoed in several other accounts:

> *We all went out for a meal. Horrendous, absolutely horrendous, the stress; and you know if anyone had touched me I would have been ... you know these cartoon where you see cats clinging on to the ceiling, that's how I would have been.*

Before meeting birth siblings, participants often asked themselves questions such as 'Will I be liked?', 'Will I like them?', 'What are they like as people?' 'Will we have anything in common?' This could understandably be quite stressful, and the impact of meeting those with whom they had a biological connection but were strangers was quite profound for many, as was also the case with meeting birth parents.

For others, meeting birth siblings was in some ways less significant to meeting birth parents, and questions of who they define as a brother and sister were raised:

> *I couldn't quite relate to this person as actually being my brother. That was a bit weird, but we got on fine.*

Again, the issue of what it means to be a brother and sister was raised by this participant, as discussed in Chapter 7, and illustrates that the concept of siblinghood, and kinship, is complex. On the one hand they were connected genetically, but on the other the concept of having a brother was 'weird' because additional elements are normally present that contribute to the cultural 'script' of siblinghood, including having a shared relationship over time and family experiences in common.

Something that was particularly striking within the sample was that the participants often had different reactions to different birth siblings within the same sibling group. For example, Josie met one birth brother several months before meeting her birth

sister. She said of the reunion with her birth brother that *'I cried with happiness with this, it was wonderful'*. She and her birth brother shared interests in common, and he was very welcoming towards her, two elements that were important in subsequently developing their relationship. However, when she met her birth sister, she had a very different response from her:

> *They [birth sister and her husband] were checking me out in some way and I hadn't passed It was as simple as that. For whatever reason – after their money, not the right sort of person, no commonality, no click – whatever, it didn't actually work.*

This firstly illustrates how factors outside having a biological connection with each other can be important, including the level of reciprocity and mutuality and understanding adopted people's motivations for being reunited. It also highlights the importance of understanding the different dynamics that can be present within sibling groups reunited through adoption – something that is present within any sibling group – and not treating sibling relationships post-reunion collectively.

The process of search and reunion in this sample illustrates some of the important factors that were present both initially, and also subsequently in the development of these relationships over time. These will now be explored.

Developing and experiencing birth sibling relationships in adulthood

Having met their birth siblings for the first time in adulthood, the focus for the participants moved to considering how they should develop and maintain relationships with them over time. The two participants who grew up with birth siblings already had a clear basis for their relationship in adulthood as a result of growing up together, and their relationships presented as being a stable and important part of their lives, often mirroring the experiences of those who grew up with siblings in intact families. Given that the vast majority of the sample learnt about and / or met their birth siblings for the first time as strangers in adulthood, I have chosen to focus on these participants here.

The term 'relationship' implies a level of mutuality and inter-personal contact over time. With this in mind, the participants included in this section have all been reunited with their birth siblings in person, and as noted in Chapter 6 have had contact with their birth siblings over a wide time span, ranging from three months to thirty-one years, with an average (mean) time period of fourteen years. This has provided very rich data about the participants' longitudinal experiences of their birth sibling relationships, and has assisted in considering how these relationships develop and are practised over time.

The participants utilised different methods for developing and maintaining relationships with their birth siblings, ranging from more traditional forms of communication such as letters, telephone calls and meeting up face to face, to utilising new technology such as Facebook and texts. Typically, contact at the start of their relationships was more intense and often focused on learning about each other and making sense of the past, often with a great deal of sensitivity on both sides, as illustrated below:

> *How we started was we actually wrote to each other ... lots of really long letters, incredibly long letters; she would write me ten handwritten pages, and so I found someone who was interested who would explore the idea that to learn about each other and try and make sense of things, and we would always check out with each other how we were and what was okay to put.*

As relationships progressed past these initial stages, the type and level of contact would be negotiated over time, usually settling down to a level that both accepted. For example, here Dora explains her contact with three of her birth siblings:

> *Bert rings me every week on a Sunday, six o'clock every time, a bit old fashioned. Julie, we speak two or three times a week; and Sue and myself, we text each other or ring each other every day.*

Over time contact has been negotiated with each of her siblings in a manner that meets their needs. The high level of contact that Dora has with her birth siblings is unusual and perhaps reflective of having more time and space to give to her siblings at this particular point in her life. For others, their contact is more flexible and does not have such a clear routine, as illustrated below:

> *No particular pattern, we haven't got a routine or anything, so there might be three or four in a week and then nothing for a month. You know, she is very busy and I am quite busy.*

This was the more usual context of contact with birth siblings, particularly as many in the sample were in early / middle adulthood and had very busy lives. Contact would be regular but not always predictable, and often reflective of the day-to-day lives of the participants.

The use of social networking sites such as Facebook as a medium for contact was particularly interesting. For some participants it allowed them to keep updated on their siblings' lives, but at a distance, which mirrored in some ways the levels of closeness they felt for their birth brother or sister. For example, Lucy was connected to one of her birth sisters on Facebook, and she stated:

> *We are both on Facebook, so we kind of keep in touch that way, which is quite nice. It is quite an easy way to do it, because it is less ... When you pick up the phone, what do you say to somebody that you actually don't have an awful lot in common with except we share the same birth mother?*

Lucy's use of social networking sites as a method of contact meant that she could feel connected to her birth sister but it was on her own terms, particularly given her feelings of a lack of common ground between them. Using Facebook could also have the potential for the participants to find common grounds in their interests and activities, and so build up kinship ties. Although social networking sites have been a source of considerable concern regarding those looking for birth family members, here it also served a positive purpose of keeping birth siblings connected to one another in positive ways.

Through progressive coding of the interview data, four themes emerged which represented the different tasks that were present for the participants in developing and maintaining their birth sibling relationships over time: making sense of birth family culture; negotiating the relationship; developing emotional ties; and integrating the past, present and future. Each of these tasks will now be considered, including the factors that promoted birth sibling relationships developing positively and the barriers that were present within each of these tasks.

Like being in a foreign land? Making sense of birth family culture

> *What I really noticed at the beginning were the cultural differences. You know, I would go down and stay with them and everything was different; it was like being in a different culture. Different way of having tea, different food, different clothing, different things to watch on telly, different everything. It was so different I might as well have been in a foreign land really.* (Pat)

For many of the adopted people in this study, one of the first things that struck them upon meeting their birth families (including their birth siblings), was the differences in family culture that were often present between their adoptive family and their birth family. How the participants dealt with these differences was influential in the development and maintenance of relationships with their birth siblings, and a range of experiences was found in this study.

Firstly, the quote above illustrates very clearly how different Pat found her birth family culture initially. She was adopted and brought up as an only child in a middle-class family, and her birth family had much more humble origins, alongside a large sibling group who had all been raised together. Upon meeting her birth family she vividly describes above how starkly different their day–to-day family culture was to the culture she had been brought up in. However, these differences did not prevent her from looking beyond those first impressions, and she has now been in touch with her birth siblings for over 30 years. She recognises and accepts the differences, but also has a strong sense of self:

> *Everyone is very friendly; there is a lot of jokes, which I am not very good at, because I didn't grow up in that kind of rowdy family that fight. And they are very quick; they have all got very quick brains and they are all firing off lines and I am sort of 'Oh God, I can't keep up with this'. But I enjoy it, I like being around it ... You know, cards are always big and presents are way over the top and you absolutely don't miss them. I am crap at birthday presents: I just about manage to do it for my husband, but I haven't even tried to keep up with the rest of them. But I have just got to the point where I think 'You can take me or leave me really; I am what I am, and that's it'.*

On the one hand Pat enjoys the cultural differences present, but chooses what elements of the birth family culture she buys in to. Her strong sense of identity and high level of self-worth has probably assisted her here, alongside the time and effort she had invested in her birth sibling relationships over the years, and her understanding and acceptance of her respective adoptive and birth family cultures.

In contrast, some of the participants found it very difficult to get past their first impressions of the cultural differences between their birth and adoptive families. Mike met up with one of his birth siblings on one occasion and followed it up with a couple of phone calls, but did not pursue things further. He stated that:

> *It was the classic, you know the single mum with three or four kids, different fathers ... and she was a bit fragile. Oh yeah, we had a few chats and all that sort of stuff, but we didn't really ... there was no click or anything like that ... I would have to say I have certainly had a very privileged upbringing, for a start, and they didn't.*

So although on the surface Mike and Pat had similar experiences in terms of the cultural differences present in their adoptive and birth families, how they dealt with this was very different. Pat embraced these differences, and had a willingness to invest and find common ground, while Mike found nothing that he could relate to. They both therefore made choices about how to move forward in their relationships with their birth siblings – Pat to invest in the relationship and Mike to withdraw. This suggests that cultural differences alone were not the over-riding factor in considering whether or not birth sibling relationships developed, but that other factors were also present, which will be explored further during this chapter.

The issue of class is important to explore within the context of cultural differences. Most of the participants in this study were removed from situations of poverty in their birth families to be raised in more affluent circumstances within their adoptive families. In addition, many of the birth siblings had remained in their families of origin, and there were often stark differences in education, employment, life outcomes and political / social views. Being introduced to their birth siblings as strangers in adulthood therefore often involved additional complications and tasks that would not normally be present in sibling relationships where they have grown up together – that of understanding and

accepting the birth family culture, and vice versa. This is illustrated by Felicity, who grew up as an only child in her middle-class adoptive family. She was reunited twenty years ago with her birth siblings, who all remained in their working-class family of origin, and she has struggled over the years to understand their culture:

> *They are not idiots, but they are not educated people, if you follow me, and I have to be very careful because you mustn't sound snobbish ... They do shout and bawl and the language is pretty ... totally different.*

Although Felicity has maintained contact with her birth siblings for the last twenty years, this has been more at a distance, and as she notes: *'It is only the very big things they invite me to now'*. This would suggest a hierarchy of significance regarding family events, with Felicity only being included in major ones where perhaps wider family members are also invited. This is also suggestive of Felicity being seen by her birth siblings as not fully included in the membership of the immediate family.

Whilst Felicity highlighted social class as being one factor present in her relationship with her birth siblings, for her two other factors were more important, which have had an effect on their relationships over time: one being the death of her husband, and the other her views on the relative importance of her birth siblings, as illustrated below:

> *It is very hard doing things on your own all time. I probably didn't feel an outsider when [husband] was there, but I certainly do now. And it is not any of their doing, it is just me, because it is like watching something you don't know. You know, seeing their children running around and it is all new to you; it is like going into a playgroup or going anywhere new for the first time. Just the fact that there is a blood tie makes no difference at all. I think that who you are brought up with or where you are brought up is far more important; I don't think the blood tie means that much at all.*

In contrast, some participants grew up in adoptive families with whom they felt very different, for example in relation to social attitudes, personality, looks and general outlook on life. For some of these participants, being reunited with their birth families, including their birth siblings, allowed them to feel a greater sense of meaningful connection and belonging to their birth origins, assisted the development of their

identity and was influential in the development of their relationships with their birth brothers and sisters. In particular, for the two participants in the sample who were adopted trans-racially, meeting birth siblings gave them an opportunity to see people who they perceived to be visually like them, which was particularly significant for them. For example, Amy had grown up as the only mixed-race child in her adoptive family, with a large number of adoptive siblings. She commented that: *'I wasn't the same colour as everybody else or anybody else around, because I had nobody else to compare myself to in that circumstance'*. However, upon meeting her birth siblings, who were also mixed-race, she said of one of her birth siblings in particular *'Every time we walked into a room it was, 'Oh my God, don't they look alike?'* For Amy this was particularly significant, as she was able to relate in a very real and physical sense to her birth origins.

While birth family reunions serve this function in general for many who are adopted, irrespective of cultural heritage, developing relationships with birth siblings allowed the participants to understand their cultural background from the perspective of relatives who are of the same generation.

It cuts both ways – negotiating birth sibling relationships

> *With siblings it cuts both ways, and if you want to keep up that contact you have got to put the effort in as well.*

Any human relationship involves negotiation, but for the adopted people in this study there were additional tasks associated with forming a kinship connection with their birth siblings. They were connected to one another through the blood tie, but did not have a clear 'script' regarding how to be with one another as siblings, having usually met as strangers in adulthood. Negotiating the relationship at the outset was therefore crucial in order to establish a foundation for the future, but negotiation continued to be a feature throughout the relationship. As the quote above illustrates, issues of mutuality and investing time and effort to establish the relationship were crucial underpinning factors in negotiating sibling relationships. Within this, managing sibling dynamics in terms of taking account of their siblings' feelings, thinking about their place in the sibling group, and actively negotiating the ground rules of the relationships were present. In addition, sibling relationships could not be properly negotiated without

taking account of the wider family, both birth and adoptive, and the participants often spent a lot of time working out the 'proper thing to do' in relation to negotiating their developing relationships with their birth siblings, while keeping the feelings of their birth and adoptive families in mind.

In relation to mutuality, there was a wide range of experiences for the participants. Some participants wanted to invest more in negotiating the relationship than their birth siblings did; others found that their birth siblings were keener to get to know them than they were; whilst others found that their levels of mutuality were the same – either to invest in the relationship through negotiation or not. Equally, within the birth sibling groups, levels of mutuality were often not the same initially, but could change over time with on-going negotiation. This was therefore complex for the participants, and those who managed this best were those who were able to understand their birth siblings' perspectives.

One participant, Felicity, noted during her interview that one of her birth siblings was overtly hostile to her initially. She stated:

> *[She] admitted later that she was deliberately nasty to me because she was jealous, because ... it came as a big shock to her [having a sibling who was adopted], and she suddenly felt very jealous. I don't know why ... she suddenly felt very threatened somehow. So she did say to me a few years later that on that first meeting she was really quite bitchy, because she didn't like it, because she felt her life had been hard, her home life had been a nightmare, and it was my fault. That was why my mother was unhappy, that was why she was beaten, it was because of me. And that's why father always called them by numbers. It was her that told me and so she was very resentful, that it was my fault.*

Unbeknownst to Felicity, her birth siblings had suffered terribly due to her adoption and her father's anger at the pregnancy, so she had to take on board this one sibling's feelings and her lack of interest initially in positively negotiating the relationship. However, through negotiating and retaining contact with other members of the sibling group, Felicity was able to allow her sibling space to understand and vent her feelings in time, although she came across during the interview as still struggling to understand her perspective.

In a different way, Jane recalls the lack of interest initially from her paternal birth siblings in developing a relationship, and how active negotiation was not possible with them at that time:

> *I think early on they didn't know how to deal with me and the situation. So I felt they … you know, not in a nasty way, but they sort of emphasised their relationship; so there wasn't a way in.*

Jane felt excluded from their strong sibling group, and could not see a way of negotiating the development of the relationship. Over time, however, Jane has retained a level of contact with them that respects their wishes, and states:

> *It is not because we are so different or because we are on such different wavelengths that we couldn't have developed that, but we haven't; and now I am just as okay with that as they are, and I am really happy with how it is. It is actually fine, but early on I would have wanted more, but they wouldn't have needed any more, so that would have been the difference.*

By stepping back and understanding her birth siblings' perspectives and lack of mutuality Jane has, over the years, negotiated a relationship with them that takes account of and respects their feelings, understanding that for them this was the 'proper thing to do'.

While Jane's paternal birth siblings were of one mind about their lack of mutuality, her maternal birth sister was keen to develop the relationship, so they shared a level of mutuality which allowed for clear negotiations to take place regarding the basis of their relationship. She states that:

> *I can sort of tell when [birth sister] just wants to do things on her own or whatever. We are both very good at being ... we can both be absolutely clear and straightforward with each other. We decided that right at the beginning, and so we just always have been and even if that is to say 'Look, I just really need a day on my own' or whatever ... It wasn't easy; it wasn't clear where it was going necessarily. She had a lot to deal with that she could have done without, but I just felt that however she does it, it is fine with me.*

Their relationship has been characterised by a clear ground rule of honesty from the start, and an understanding from Jane of her sister's perspective. She was also happy to progress at her sister's pace, and this understanding of the other's perspective, of standing in their shoes as it were, and respecting the pace that the other wishes to progress the relationship appears to be important in how successfully birth sibling relationships are negotiated over time.

Consideration of their place and role within the sibling group was evident in the participants' interviews, both in terms of respecting the existing relationships within the sibling group and being sensitive to the revised birth order that results from their reunion. Amy would have been the oldest of her birth sibling group had she not been adopted, and she showed great sensitivity about this in relation to her them:

> *I was about to walk into this room, the elder sister – a position of duty and responsibility that I am completely unaccustomed to. I haven't made the move [to be an older sister] quite deliberately, because I thought the one person who is going to potentially lose out on all this is [oldest sibling], because she is the one person who loses status and I deliberately haven't tried to take on that role in any way. I am not in a position to do so and I can't come in with any huge tying commitments or resources or anything to take over that role and take that responsibility at the moment. I am not saying it is something I can't do. I am not trying to do that at all, so that is something I have just left for the time being.*

Here, Amy is very mindful both of the existing relationship between two of her siblings, and the potential effect on her oldest sibling of losing the status as the elder sister. It is clear that Amy has had a complex negotiation in her mind about this. Amy has carefully taken account of the relevant issues when considering her status as the oldest sibling, and in negotiating and developing a relationship with her birth siblings has come to the conclusion that the 'proper thing to do' is to step back and allow the relationship to develop over time.

Another important factor is the time and effort that is willing to be invested by both parties in negotiating and developing the birth sibling relationship over time. Two different dimensions appeared to be influential here; internal factors about the willingness to invest time and effort into developing the relationship, and external

factors which can affect this, such as geographical proximity and life stage. In considering individual willingness to invest in the relationship, Lucy stated:

I mean, there is that something looking at someone and thinking 'I look really like you', but that doesn't go far, really. After that, it has been about building shared experiences, shared trust. I have loaned various people money when they have been broke and they have paid me back so that kind of builds shared trust. Also, reminders about birthdays, just the little things, really, isn't it? I think it is something you have got to kind of work on.

For other participants, while they may have had an individual willingness to invest time and effort into building their relationship with their birth siblings, other external factors have got in the way of their ability to do this. For example, Judith noted that:

Geographically, like with my adoptive family, I live too far away [from birth siblings], so we are not building up those shared experiences. Everyone has got their own paths that they are following ... There is no way I can concentrate on other people and relationships as much now, as I am a mum. Since I have had [baby], I am not buzzing down once a month at all, so we are not building up those shared experiences at all. I mean, it is not going to be like it forever, but at the moment this is how it is.

The external constraints of geography and parenthood on the maintenance of sibling relationships are present in most kinship relationships in early and middle adulthood for those who have been brought up together in childhood (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Cicirelli, 1994). However, the difference for this group of adopted people is that they usually did not have already established relationships. The period of negotiating and developing their relationships with their birth siblings often coincided with having busy lives, working hard at careers and / or bringing up children, so the amount of time and effort that was available to invest in these new relationships was often limited, but nevertheless important. It was notable that those participants who had more time and space in their life when they were reunited with their siblings, either through age or circumstance, found it easier to develop these new relationships. However, by the time of reunion with their birth families, this group of participants often found that their birth parents were either very elderly or had died, illustrating that there are both advantages and disadvantages to searching for birth family later in life.

The negotiation and development of birth sibling relationships cannot be considered in isolation from the wider birth family and the adoptive family, because individuals do not usually operate in isolation from their family system. The influence of the actions and feelings, or perceived feelings, of the wider kinship network was powerful, and the adopted people in this study usually weighed up carefully how to proceed with their birth sibling relationships in the light of consideration of the other members of their family system. For some, they felt that their adoptive parents would not have coped with knowing about tracing and finding birth relatives – either birth parents or birth siblings. For example, Deidre talked about her adoptive mother, stating:

> *I never have felt like I could have done the whole adoption finding thing with her, because her emotions would have been all over the place and I would have had to look after her ... Her relationship with me was very important to her and who she was as a person in the world. She didn't have a job, and I did hint that I might just try and she got quite wobbly then. That's when I thought that there was no way I was going to tell her and I never did. I mean, she is dead now. I never did, I couldn't.*

Having once approached the subject, Deidre took account of her mother's reaction, which encompassed her mother's primary role in life as a mother and her struggle to be communicatively open with her daughter about adoption. This illustrates the very difficult task of negotiating and 'telling' members of the adoptive kinship network about one another, which in this case placed a considerable burden on Deidre to keep a secret. In practice, this also meant she had to negotiate keeping her two families apart over many years, and Deidre noted:

> *If my [adoptive] parents were staying with me and I got a phone call [from birth family], I would have to say, 'My mum and dad are here!' ... although [birth mother] always wanted me to tell my adoptive parents, because she wanted to be able to meet them and say 'thank you' and whatever, but she respected the fact that I just couldn't deal with it.*

So whilst her birth family were more communicatively open and wished to express their gratitude to her adoptive parents, Deidre felt that they would not have coped with it and she could not deal with it. The practical reality of this meant that Deidre's dual kinship connections remained separate, and in working out what the 'proper thing to

do' was for her adoptive parents, she paid a large cost herself in not being able to be honest about finding her birth family, and not sharing the satisfaction she derived from these relationships.

In a different way, Lucy found that the reality of finding her birth mother was very difficult for her adoptive mother, although she had always been communicatively open about Lucy's birth family and encouraged her to trace them. However, the reality of meeting Lucy's birth mother was very difficult for her adoptive mother:

> *Mum was desperate to meet her, so I had arranged for them to meet; and mum and I fell out, and she was staying with me, and it was awful. She just told me that I was rude and uncaring. I mean, she was really, really horrible to me. [She said that] I hadn't thought about her feelings at all. It shocked me because I hadn't expected it, because she had been the one all throughout my life who encouraged it, and then she wasn't too happy about it. You know, I don't think I had done anything wrong, but she found it hard and I hadn't anticipated it, because why would I? All along it was okay to do it. But she is fine now. She finds it hard sometimes. I think she ... gets scared to ask me sometimes how things are going ... It is easier, I think, with the sibling thing; it is not a threat to her.*

In contrast to Deidre's adoptive mother, Lucy's had always been communicatively open about her adoption, and encouraged her to trace her birth family, particularly because Lucy was adopted trans-racially. However, the practical reality was very different, and Lucy feels that she did not anticipate her adoptive mother's feelings enough, although it may be that her adoptive mother could also not have anticipated her own feelings when meeting Lucy's birth mother. However, her adoptive mother's reaction to Lucy's birth siblings was much more positive, in that she found Lucy's relationship with them less threatening. This was echoed by other participants, and is perhaps unsurprising, since birth siblings do not have responsibility for parting with the participant for adoption and are therefore removed from those extra emotions that may be present with birth parents. This suggests that it may be potentially easier for adoptive parents to accept their adopted child's relationship with birth siblings.

More rarely, some of the participants found that their adoptive families were both communicatively and structurally open to contact with their birth families in adulthood,

including birth siblings. Four of the participant's families went on to meet, in two cases developing positive relationships with one another. It is interesting to note that of the four families, only two were described as being communicatively open about adoption in childhood, suggesting that levels of openness can change over time.

Another participant, Alex, noted that his adoptive family were keen to meet his birth family, but they lived on another continent and this was not possible. They expressed their communicative and structural openness through asking about his birth family, helping him put together an album of his life for his birth mother and paying for their son to attend his birth mother's funeral abroad when she died. Alex talked about his adoptive father's reaction to the news his birth mother had died:

> *I called them and my father, who is sort of this policeman, he was crying down the phone. It was very touching actually, that this woman who he never met but he felt this connection with … they were very, very upset and they paid for my fares to go to the funeral.*

Alex's adoptive parents were able to empathise with and support his wish to find his birth mother and expressed this in emotional and practical ways. They were also open about contact with his birth siblings: '*They always ask me about Paul, they always ask me about Kate, and they know that these are important people to me. I am going home in July, and Kate is back there now and we are going to arrange for her to come and stay so they can get to know her a bit better*'. This clearly demonstrates their communicative and structural openness in supporting their son, although perhaps having his birth family living on a different continent made it easier and less threatening for his adoptive parents.

Arranging for their adoptive and birth families to meet was complex for the four participants, and required delicate negotiation over time. Those who had managed to achieve some degree of physical contact between their birth and adoptive families often reported feeling a greater integration of their dual connection. They noted that they usually took the lead in managing both sides' feelings, which required patience, tenacity and sensitivity. This took considerable skill and effort, and those who had managed to achieve this noted and that they themselves had to be confident that their adoptive and birth families would find things in common and be able to manage the experience. For example, Joyce describes what in her view were the key elements that brought both families together, stating:

My persistence and my tact and theirs, obviously, because you can't do it on your own, it didn't all come from me. It has been a very long journey, but we have actually been able to bring all these things together and with probably both my adoptive parents not having the faintest idea that that this was where life was going, but they actually think it is all very wonderful. They tell their friends like it is a good thing. It is like it was extremely sad when dad died last year, he was 90, but the most helpful thing, the best thing about it for me was that [birth sister] came to the memorial service, my birth father would have done if he was well enough and my brother's birth mother came to that memorial; that was really nice ... It makes you feel better about yourself, I felt much better about myself that she was there ... Obviously if it had been a more difficult situation with my adoptive family, then she couldn't have been, but it isn't like that.

Here Joyce acknowledges that mutuality was important, with all parties wanting to meet. Her parents' response was also important; they 'displayed' their acceptance of the widening of their own kinship network.

Ruth was surprised to have been fully included in her birth father's funeral. She stated:

When my birth father died … I went to the funeral. I wasn't involved in any of the funeral arrangements, but the note in the paper had been worded ... The way they put the names was [birth siblings] and recently re-united daughter Ruth, which was lovely – they couldn't have done it nicer. Because they didn't want to put me in the middle, because then people who knew him would be saying, 'Well who is that?' Not many people knew, but it felt really good ... well, to be acknowledged. And in the protocol of the funeral day, I was in the middle by age and we were all kind of in our seats by age, and things like that are important.

Ruth's birth family were clearing 'displaying' through the medium of their father's funeral notice and that she was sat with the family during the funeral itself, that Ruth was part of their family. By stepping back and not being involved in the arrangements Ruth allowed her birth siblings to decide and negotiate between themselves how she should be involved and seen by wider family and friends, and what the 'proper thing to do' should be.

Some participants had more difficult experiences in relation to birth family members, which profoundly affected the development of their relationships with birth siblings. In Dora's case, she was found by two of her birth siblings after another sibling who was adopted had got in touch with them. Dora's existence had been kept a secret, unlike the other sibling who was adopted, and caused the family to fracture. Their birth mother was resistant to being in touch and some of the sibling group supported their mother, rejecting Dora and the two siblings who wished to be in touch with her. Dora stated:

> Dora: *I know there was a lot of hatred because they [birth siblings] were the evil ones because they had found me. You know everybody had got together and [other adopted birth sibling] had done all the leg work so she fell out with them and so that made me feel a bit guilty.*
> Interviewer: Why?
> Dora: *Well if they hadn't have found me they would all have been speaking wouldn't they?*
> Interviewer: So you were saying about [two birth siblings], have they kind of split off from the family?
> Dora: *Yeah, because they won't speak to them because they found me.*

Karen's relationship with her birth siblings has also been shrouded in secrecy, but in a different way. She states:

> *I was introduced to [birth siblings] – who were sort of teenagers then – as the daughter of a friend of [birth mother] who she had worked with. She perpetuated that and she said, 'I am sorry I am asking you to perpetuate this, but I went to such lengths for people not to find out about what had happened and it would all be wasted now and I can't tell them.' I don't agree with her; I think that having met [birth siblings] they are so easy going, such nice people, that they would have no problem whatsoever, but in her mind that is the case ... Anyway, so [birth siblings] don't know to this day.*

By respecting her birth mother's wishes, her birth siblings have known Karen for the last twenty years as a close family friend rather than a sister. In negotiating the terms of her contact with her birth mother many years ago, Karen agreed to be known as a family friend to her birth siblings, but has now reached the stage of feeling that it is not working. As her mother becomes increasingly elderly she is concerned about being kept informed about her mother's health:

That is my other fear, if anything ever happened to her, nobody is going to tell me. [Birth siblings] wouldn't think, 'We had better ring Karen' ... They would let me know, but they wouldn't let me know straight away ... If she was desperately ill in hospital I don't know if they would have the presence to think that I might want to come over. They wouldn't, so that is a concern to me; but there is nothing I can do about that at the moment. But I am going to have another go, I am going to suggest we tell them and my reasons for saying so. That's what I want to do for her, because she beats herself up every day about it.

While Karen's initial negotiation with her birth mother still stands, she demonstrates here the need for re-negotiation throughout the relationship, and the care with which this has to be done. Again, by weighing up everyone's needs, Karen is trying to work out the 'proper thing to do' for everyone.

We just 'click' – building emotional ties

We just get on together and we have good laughs together. We just click. (Miriam)

Emotional ties have already been discussed in relation to how the participants defined who was a birth sibling, with feelings of emotional connection being seen as an important factor for some in defining their birth brothers and sisters, but also difficult to express verbally. Exploring how their emotional ties were expressed and 'done' in day-to-day life provides a lens through which to view the influence of emotional connectedness on the development and maintenance of their birth sibling kinship relationships.

Miriam's comment above about 'just clicking' with her birth brother expresses the views of many of the participants about the importance of liking their birth sibling and getting on with them, and that this assists the development and maintenance of their relationships. The fact of having a blood tie alone was often not enough to warrant, in their mind, investing time and energy into the relationship; there had to be something else there – often intangible and difficult to describe – by way of 'clicking' with the person, or finding some common ground. For example, Lucy has been in touch with her paternal birth siblings for the last seven years. She is very clear in her mind about the importance of liking her birth siblings as a foundation of her relationship with them:

You kind of have to like people to want to. If you grow up with someone, you like them because you have grown up with them, and you don't know any different; you would always like your sister and you would always like your brother. You might hate them at times, and you know them so there is nothing difficult about it, but when you don't know people, if there is not that connection, then it is going to be harder to get to know somebody.

Lucy grew up with adoptive siblings, so here is speaking from experience when describing the childhood foundation for sibling relationships, where emotional connection is present with her adoptive siblings through growing up with them in their family culture, whether or not they always got on with each other. This implies that liking a sibling is less relevant when you grow up together, and mirrors existing literature on the usual closeness and rivalry present in siblings who are related by blood and have grown up together (Cicirelli, 1995). However, Lucy is also clear that without having an emotional connection it is more difficult to establish relationships with her birth siblings, whom she met for the first time in adulthood and so did not have anything apart from their blood tie to base the relationship on initially.

Having things in common, or feeling that they are similar people, was also identified as being important in the development of emotional connections, and the birth sibling relationship. For those that found they had similar interests, similar values or similar family experiences such as having children, they found that this often helped to 'break the ice' initially, and gave greater foundation to their relationship. For example, Dora said of her birth sister:

We have the same interests: gardening, walking and everything. She likes gardening, being rough and ready just like me, and walking the dog and everything.

Here, Dora is validating the development and maintenance relationship through their perceived common ground. In a similar way, Janice highlights that searching for meaning through having things in common is something that is often looked for when adopted people meet birth relatives:

Now, bearing in mind I am quite obsessive about cats and I have two cats. He [birth brother] had just had his two cats at the same time, which I just thought that meant something: a commonality a similarity, which I think is what you look for.

In a different way, Mary strongly identifies with her birth cousin, Gill, as being like a sister. Given the importance of accepting participants' own definitions of who they see as a sibling, as discussed in the previous chapter, her views have been included here. Mary and Gill have a very powerful emotional connection, although do not share similar values in life. Mary states:

> *I mean, she has very different interests and a different lifestyle to me. She is the sort of woman who would spend £500 on a handbag; whereas I am like 'children are starving, that is an awful thing to do, you don't need to spend that much money on those sort of products'. So we are very different, but even though we have these very different philosophical differences about life and money and clothes and values, there is just something about us which is just very much the same. I don't quite understand, I don't know what it is.*

This illustrates that similarity of values, life-style and interests do not have to be shared to have a strong emotional connection, although this can help. It also demonstrates again the almost 'magical' quality about emotional connection which the participants struggled to describe when defining who their siblings were, which here Vicky describes as a quality of being the 'same'. In relationships where siblings have grown up together, these qualities of similarity and difference arguably have less significance over time, but for those who are adopted and removed from their family of origin, issues of sameness and difference seem to have more resonance, as being a part of searching for one's identity with birth family members.

Through sharing time together doing everyday things such as shopping, going on holiday together and going for evenings out, relationships with birth siblings also provided fertile ground for developing emotional connectedness in a way that acknowledged their shared generation. For example, Jane stated:

> *When I was on a course, I was in touch with [birth sibling] and said I was going to be in London and should we meet up? We went out for dinner and we had a great evening and then we went to a pub ... We had an absolutely superb time, and it is just an abiding memory of him and we got on great because he is just so easy going and we just had a laugh.*

Being able to relax together, have a laugh and share humour was something highlighted as important by a number of the participants, as this assisted them to feel comfortable and build emotional connections. Building shared memories was also significant, as Jane

stated, as a way of developing emotional connection over time, and is suggestive of assisting in the integration of dual connection.

Where birth siblings shared particular interests that crossed over into their professional lives, this also gave opportunities to develop emotional ties. Martin stated:

He [birth brother] is a professional musician, so he has taken a very similar career path to me, so we have got all of that in common. Anyway, we collaborated together and we have done a couple of performances.

Through collaborating with his birth brother on a professional project, Martin is actively 'doing' his sibling relationship through his work, which has provided a good opportunity for them to get to know one another better and further develop their emotional ties. Although this was rare in the sample, working with siblings as peers provided an additional element of emotional connection in their relationship that perhaps may not have happened so readily through the inter-generational relationships of adopted people and their birth parents.

The issue of time as an important factor has already been explored in considering how the adopted people in this sample defined their sibling relationships, and also how their relationships were negotiated. Time was also an important factor with regard to building emotional connections within the sibling relationship. While, as previously noted, some participants felt an 'instant' connection to their siblings, for others the development of emotional connections took time and effort. Erica has been in touch with her birth siblings for many years now, and here she comments on the importance of time and effort regarding the development of her relationships with them:

Well, I think we don't share those childhood memories; there is none of that childhood memory stuff to check out, so there is a big gap there. But we have built a history and a sort of sense of loyalty to each other from 32 onwards, so that is more than half of my life now that I have been connected to these people. I accept that there is a connection there and that now quite a strong one, but we have had to work on it really.

This case example illustrates that although lack of childhood experiences is a factor, it is possible to build meaningful and close connections in adulthood. It is interesting to note that previous studies on intact sibling relationships emphasise that closeness rarely originates in adulthood (Ross and Milgram, 1982; Cicirelli, 1994). In the absence of shared childhood experiences, many of the adopted people in this sample forged meaningful relationships in adulthood, which was perhaps reflective of 'starting again' and building their relationships from scratch as adults, rather than as children. So it is perhaps the formative stages of the relationship that are the key here, rather than the age at which the relationships start.

It was also evident from the participants that they had different relationships with birth siblings in the same sibling group. Ruth states the following regarding her relationship with one of her birth sisters:

> *With Sophie, we are definitely close, and that has developed and we see each other two to three times per year. They come up and we go down, and they love my son to bits and she was delighted to be his auntie. Yeah we are definitely close, I mean I worry about her if I think things aren't going very well and I check stuff out.*

Conversely, Ruth has a different relationship with her birth brother (also Sophie's brother), with whom she shares less emotional connection. The relationship also has a practical barrier of her brother living abroad, which has limited their contact with one another:

> *Phil [Birth brother], there again pretty remote really. He is always very friendly on the phone; we don't speak very often – a couple of times a year. He has just had a child, actually; in fact, he has just had two children in the last two years, so that gives us a little bit of something in common, but ... you don't really get much of a discussion out of him. I have never been in a position to pursue it; you know, we have called in and seen him for a couple of hours and then gone. I have never ever even stayed in the same house as him, so it's not had much chance to develop.*

The emphasis on being able to spend time together in person is significant here, and that this may have made a difference to the development of their emotional connection and provided more fruit for discussion given that due to geography their relationship is largely telephone based.

Like Ruth, a number of the participants emphasised that having children in common (and therefore being parents) was a significant factor in assisting the development of emotional connections. For example, Lucy and her birth sister have children who are similar ages, and she stated of their initial meetings:

> *I think she is quite an easy person to get on with once you have broken the ice, maybe the first moment or two. But then when you have got kids it is very easy, because the kids will go and do something daft, and you will have a laugh.*

For Lucy, their children helped to 'break the ice' in their relationship, and gave them a focus which is potentially unique among adoptive post-reunion relationships; that of sharing being parents. The experience of having children is a factor that promotes emotional closeness through the shared experience of parenting, as reported in the literature for siblings who have grown up together (Ross and Milgram, 1982), and this appears to have been mirrored by the participants in this study. However, they also had the additional task here of thinking about how their siblings' children should view their relationship with the adopted person and also with each other, given the absence of any knowledge or relationship with each other prior to adulthood, and their decisions powerfully illustrated the emotional connection they felt with their birth siblings and their status as 'brothers and sisters'. For example, Josie recalled a conversation with her birth sister about whether she should be called an auntie:

> *I said to [birth sister] 'What about the kids? Because I have said to [son] that they are cousins'. And she said she had told them all and her son kind of understands, but her daughter can't really understand it at all. A little bit later, when we were on our own, she said to me 'Are you my real auntie?' and I just said 'Yes, I am'.*

By agreeing that she was a 'real auntie', Josie was both demonstrating her biological connection to and membership of the family, and also perhaps laying the foundations for future emotional connectedness with her niece, and between her son and niece. Thinking about the basis of their children's relationships in the future also acted as a motivation to develop positive emotional connections in the present. For example, although Lucy's initial meetings with her birth sister, as described above, were helped by having the children present, they do not have a lot in common. However, it is important to Lucy that their children have the opportunity to develop a relationship with their birth cousins:

I have pictures of them on the fridge and the kids ask who they are, and I said that they were their cousins – you know, just trying to get my children to recognise that for them it will not be an issue, they will be cousins. So [oldest son] understands it I think, so he knows that families are quite different and some families have different parts of their families that aren't related to any of the rest of the family.

Through having photographs on show of the children's birth cousins Lucy is 'displaying' their biological kinship connection to her own children, with the aim of explaining and normalising what is a complex relationship for the children to understand, in readiness for the future and for their contact with one another. So, although sometimes the adopted people in the sample may not feel particularly emotionally connected to their birth siblings, the opportunity for their own children to develop relationships with cousins or aunties/ uncles who are biologically connected to them provided an impetus to maintain contact and invest in their children's future relationships.

Building emotional ties is therefore seen as an important aspect of developing and maintaining birth sibling relationships. Having a good emotional connection can help develop the relationship positively and aid investment in the relationship, particularly in the absence of growing up together. Finding similarities in personality, interests and values and liking the other person can assist building emotional connections, but it also takes time and effort, with emotional ties changing and developing over time, and different levels of closeness and distance being present within one sibling group. Building emotional ties is also seen as an investment in the future for those who have children.

Having two families – integrating the past, present and future

Through developing and maintaining relationships with their birth brothers and sisters, the participants in this study were undertaking what Carsten (2000) describes as 'kinship time'; that is, attempting to develop a continuity of their past, present and future. Carsten notes in her study, which was primarily concerned with reunions between adopted adults and their birth parents, that the 'ruptures of time' through lack of

information, lack of sharing everyday kinship with one another over time and difficulty establishing emotional connections made it hard for adopted adults to gain a sense of continuity between their past, present and future. The previous section has already illustrated that it was possible for the adopted adults in this sample to develop meaningful emotional ties with their birth siblings, but what role did birth siblings play in them being able to integrate their past, present and future?

The data collected from interviews with the participants suggested that their relationships with birth siblings did allow for the possibility of integrating the past, present and future, and that birth siblings had a particular role to play here in a number of different ways. Firstly, through birth siblings sharing information, stories and insights about the adopted person's birth family, this assisted the adopted person to form a coherent life narrative about the past which had the potential to assist their sense of identity. This was particularly important for those adopted people in the sample whose birth parents had died prior to being reunited with their birth families, or in situations where birth parents chose not to engage with the participant. Birth siblings in these situations often performed roles in relation to sharing knowledge about the birth family that are normally reserved for birth parents. For example, Zoe's birth mother had died prior to her reunion with her birth siblings, and she said:

> *I wanted to know, I desperately wanted to know if my mother still remembered me ... It had never occurred to me before, but suddenly it became very important, and I wanted to know if she had forgotten she had me or whether she remembered. I actually said this to these sisters when we met and [birth sister] said that certainly not and [other birth sister] immediately said, 'No way'. [Birth sibling] said every January she'd go to the sales, because they all went and she used to buy the year's birthday cards. She always bought seven and [birth sibling] used to say to her, 'Why have you got seven?', and she said 'Well, I might lose one' and then [other birth sibling] said that was because she still obviously bought one for you.*

Her birth siblings therefore performed a very distinct role, given the death of their mother prior to Zoe being reunited with them, of learning more about their day-to-day lives and family culture alongside being reassured that she was never forgotten, something that would normally be undertaken by a birth parent.

In a related way, Judith's similarity to her birth father helps keep his memory alive for them all. She states:

> *Of the five of us, I am the one who is so like him [birth father], and the others, my sisters, will say that, and you know the expression, my sisters say that 'he will not be dead while you are still around! You are so like him' they say to each other, the ones I have contact with. They will say that's exactly what he would have done, and my daughters could see it. Our mannerisms were so much the same.*

Through her birth siblings and her daughter commenting on the likeness between Judith and her birth father they are all able to bridge the past and present, and hold his memory alive in the future through the obvious transmission of her biological roots, thus creating a sense of continuity in kinship time.

Ruptures in the past were also present for some of the participants in relation to their birth sibling relationships, which meant that they were not able to get the sense of understanding that they sought about their family of origin. Josie's birth mother had refused to meet her, but she did have contact with one of her birth brothers. She stated:

> *He was a disappointment, in that he said he could remember nothing from his childhood and he didn't really want to talk about his mother, which was a disappointment. I kept asking, 'What's she like? Does she like cats? Does she like gardens?'*

Josie remained dissatisfied, because she was not able to link her past with her present and future, and thus important aspects of her birth identity remained a mystery.
In another way, Martin found his birth siblings' lack of interest in his own history and current life difficult:

> *It is like you go back to your birth family and you haven't existed before then. You came out of their life and then went back, but they are really not interested in anything to do with my life, they really weren't and certainly none of my past.*

This also contributed to ruptures of kinship time because whilst he could make sense of his birth origins through their information about his birth mother, their lack of interest in his life before they met and in the present made it difficult to build up meaningful kinship ties and invest in the relationship for the future.

Secondly, through sharing everyday experiences with one another and public rituals such as christenings, weddings and funerals, the participants were able to build up their kinship ties over time, often moving from contact being a significant event to contact being more mundane and ordinary, and a more integrated part of their day-to-day life.

Karen recounts the development of her relationship with three of her birth siblings over the last three years, stating:

> *It was strange at the beginning – well, I was talking to strangers – but we have built things up as we have gone along, and we talk about gas bills and electric bills now. Just things in general.*

This illustrates how Karen's relationship with these three birth siblings has moved over time from getting to know one another (which happened through a combination of face to face meetings and phone contact) through to the commonplace minutiae of day -to -day lives, which in her case has also included her children. Through reaching this stage they have created a framework for 'ordinary kinship' and a degree of integration between both families, which takes account of the past, present and future.

Karen's adoptive parents are no longer living, and for her this has made the task of integrating her immediate family with her birth siblings more straightforward, as was the case for several of the participants, because in working out the 'proper thing to do' she feels that her adoptive parents would not have coped easily with the contact she now has with her birth siblings. However, her adoptive sister has developed a positive relationship with Karen's birth sister, saying *Julie speaks to my sister, they send Christmas cards to each other,* which illustrates the different levels of integration that are possible, and that relationships within the adoptive kinship network can also develop independently of the adopted person.

Josie's basis of the relationship, which is grounded in the everyday, means that special public occasions such as weddings retain their appropriate significance and are not used to test or assess their sense of belonging within the birth family network. For example, Josie's birth siblings have been invited to her son's wedding:

> *Like my youngest son is getting married next year, but she [birth sister] was only on the phone the other night, 'Book me a room in the hotel. I am staying the whole night.'*

This illustrates a normal interaction between family members when preparing for a special occasion, where membership of the kinship group is accepted and grounded in the everyday. However, other participants had different experiences of public family rituals where uncertainties about membership of the kinship network came to the surface. In Ruth's case, she had been invited to her birth parents' wedding anniversary party. She stated:

> *At the very end of the party it was really nice because dad said, 'You are a part of the family, so you are a part of organising and clearing up!' So I was like fully involved in all of that and it really felt like I wasn't just a guest.*

For Ruth, her birth father's comments reassured her and made her feel included as an ordinary member of the family, along with her birth siblings, confirming her place within the kinship group. Her comments also suggest that this issue remained an area of vulnerability for her, despite being in contact with them for many years, and highlights the potential fragility of these relationships for some adopted adults.

For other participants, attendance at special family occasions underlined to them the limits of kinship that were placed on them by their birth siblings. For example, Ann-Marie's birth niece was being christened, and she stated:

> *I was quite hurt that they didn't ask me to be Godmother to this child. I thought they might have done .. It would have been a more formal acknowledgment of who I was, I think. She asked two friends.*

Through being excluded from being a god-parent, Ann-Marie felt that her status as a birth sister was not being recognised, and demonstrates the vulnerability that can present for adopted people in developing kinship ties in adult with birth kin, whether or

not her wish was in any way realistic. In a similar way, Dora felt excluded from full family membership as a result of her birth nephew's wedding:

> *Oh, they invited me to my nephew's / their son's wedding. But it was a wedding that went on all day long, with the church and the reception. I was invited to the disco at night, and that felt really shoved beyond the edges stuff, you know it really did to me.*

Feelings of exclusion for Ann-Marie and Dora highlighted the 'ruptures of time' present here. A common feature for both of them was a lack of spending 'ordinary kinship time' with their birth siblings, which seemed to imbue these public rituals with greater significance, and greater feelings of being let down as a result. Both Ann-Marie and Dora's experiences could also perhaps be interpreted as their birth families 'displaying' to them the level of kinship membership that they felt to be appropriate, although further research with birth family members would be needed to explore this concept further.

The final area in which the adopted people in this study worked to integrate their past, present and future was the degree to which they showed care and concern for their birth siblings, both in the present and in preparing for the future. For brothers and sisters who grow up together, the cultural 'script' for their relationship is one of providing unconditional emotional and practical support for one another over their life-time; of permanence – being a sibling 'no matter what'. So for those who meet for the first time as adults, where the cultural script is unclear, to what degree do their relationships with birth siblings develop to become brothers and sisters 'no matter what', demonstrated through the mutual and unconditional care and concern shown for one another?

Expressions of care and concern for birth siblings were diverse across the sample, and included making provision for them in wills, ensuring that they had appropriate housing, loaning money, offering emotional support, supporting siblings with the care of birth parents, remembering birthdays, and thinking and worrying about them. For example, Ruth stated:

> *I have loaned various siblings money when they have been broke and they have paid me back, so that kind of builds shared trust; and reminders about birthdays – just little things, really, isn't it? I think it is something you have got to kind of work on.*

For her, showing care and concern about the everyday lives of her birth siblings in practical ways was not the result of already having built strong kinship ties to them, but an important part of the process of developing her relationships with them over time, something that for her took effort and consistency.

On the other hand, one issue that several participants raised was the level to which they felt a 'right' to give or receive care and concern from birth siblings:

> *If I needed help with something or needed to talk about something close to my heart, it wouldn't be them; that wouldn't be my choice. I don't have a history with them and I don't feel that 'right' ... that I would get from friends.*

For them, those unconditional rights and obligations that are present in the cultural scripts for siblings who have been raised together were not present, often through their lack of shared history from childhood, which meant that other people, often friends, met those needs in relation to care and concern. Whilst friends may naturally be chosen to fulfil some of these roles in adulthood, the difference here is that some of the participants did not feel they had a right to seek support from siblings. For them it was not an active choice to seek the support of friends over siblings, but an issue of what felt appropriate in the circumstances.

Levels of care and concern were also varied within birth sibling groups, so that the participants would often express greater or lesser degrees of care and concern about different birth siblings within one family. For example, Judith stated the following in relation to her will:

> *It is interesting because in a way I probably get on better with Trudy [maternal birth sister], but then Andrew [adoptive brother] and I have got much more shared past and, yes, it is interesting. When I was doing my will, I put in Andrew and his son and I have put Trudy in and I have put in my husband's brother and sister, but I haven't put in [paternal birth siblings]. Perhaps it is that those are the people I think are most important.*

Through an official document, Judith is 'displaying' and declaring her kinship ties to some but not all of her birth siblings, suggesting she has asserted her own level of choice regarding those she considers obligated to – siblings 'no matter what'. However,

it is important to remember other factors here that are relevant in making these choices. Judith has shared close emotional ties to Trudy over many years; she is a resource regarding her birth mother with whom she has not met; and their relationship has evolved to including ordinary kinship activities. She does not have the same level of closeness to her paternal siblings, who are a close family unit, and they do not have a relationship based on the everyday. She stated of them:

> *I had years and years of not seeing [paternal birth siblings], so maybe if we had started to get to know each other we might have built that up ... As I say, it is very pleasant, but it doesn't feel the same.*

So although Judith is asserting a choice by not including them in the will, there are other factors outside herself that are relevant to her decision, including different levels of mutuality and a lack of integrating the past, present and future through their limited contact.

Although levels of closeness were seen to be important in the sample, so too was a sense of obligation, of 'doing the right thing'. As Judith said:

> *It was clear that [birth parents] didn't really have any secure accommodation and they were getting elderly and it was getting difficult, and I thought, 'Well, I have got this money I might as well use it,' because it was quite difficult to know what to do with it. So I bought a house for them and [birth sister] lives close by and is their carer at the moment. So that worked out really well and it is weird that I have arrived in the middle of this big family with this wad of money, but in a way it makes perfect sense to me because if I hadn't been chucked out of that poverty and in to a much more middle class family I would never have had that money, so in a way it seems perfectly fair that they are benefitting from it now a bit.*

Feelings of closeness were irrelevant here: the key factor for Karen was being able to provide for her birth family and ensure their future security, and she strongly felt this was the 'proper thing to do', particularly given her relative wealth compared to them. Through their shared concerns, there has also been an added benefit of drawing the sisters closer together through their mutual concern for their birth parents' welfare.

One element that needs to be explored further is that of choice in the participants' birth sibling relationships. The issue of relationships based on choice versus those based on obligations has long been debated within sociological literature (Weston, 1991; Pahl and Spencer, 2004), and is relevant here when considering how care and concern is expressed. Jones and Hackett (2011) also raised this issue with regard to their study of adopted children's kinship ties, arguing that 'choice' did not take account of other factors present in the relationships, particularly the power imbalance between birth and adoptive families and the complexity of inter-generational ties, alongside other more structural barriers. Their study was primarily focused on adoptive parents' experiences around contact for their children with birth family members; whereas in this study the adopted adults met their birth siblings as peers, which appeared to reduce some of the potential power imbalance. There was a strong sense, for example, of some of the participants choosing to set their own boundaries with regard to the level of the care and concern shown, suggesting that active choices were being made about their level of involvement with birth brothers and sisters. The following quotes show two different perspectives in relation to choice and level of involvement with birth siblings.

> *It feels I am as much a part of the family as I want to be, really, and I have got time to be.*

> *Even though we don't always get on and don't agree, we don't fall out and we have always been there for each other, and I have a very close relationship. I will always be there for her and I know she will always be there for me, no matter what.*

The first statement emphasises choice through the limits of what the participant wants and the time they have available to give to birth family members. The second emphasises that their birth sibling is a sister 'no matter what', with mutual and unconditional care and concern being expressed for one another. It could be argued that both these participants have made active choices about their level of involvement with birth siblings, and both present as being comfortable with their choice.

However other, more subtle power issues were often present that affected the ability to make choices and express care and concern within these relationships, as already discussed in this chapter, including the complexity of joining already established sibling groups, lack of mutuality, and the issue of who holds the power in negotiating the development of the relationship. While being of the same generation certainly reduced

some of the more obvious power imbalances that can be present in adopted person / birth parent relationships, there was nevertheless complexity in power relationships on both sides, which resulted in some of the participants feeling that their levels of choice were minimised or not present. The cultural and structural barriers that can also be present in the development and maintenance of birth sibling relationships, such as the impact of birth family culture and the limits of time or geography, mean that choice, and the limits of choice in relation to expressions of care and concern, must be understood within the context of the adoptive kinship network, as well as the adopted person themselves.

Birth siblings clearly have the potential to play an important and unique role, as peers, in helping adopted people to integrate their past, present and future and build a coherent identity, through the sharing of information and 'stories' about birth family members, partaking in 'ordinary kinship' lived in the everyday, and unconditional expressions of care and concern with their birth siblings. While barriers to this are also present, the potential exists for birth siblings to be present in the lives of adopted people over the course of their life-time, to be siblings 'come what may', and to be important and active members of the adoption kinship network, often acting as a bridge between birth and adoptive family members.

Summary

The participants in this study showed wide variations in the level of involvement with and connection to their birth siblings, which also included differences in meanings within the same sibling group. There was a lack of a clear cultural script to follow as a result of their very unusual position – having blood sibling relationships that were physically present in childhood but whom they usually knew nothing about, only meeting their siblings as strangers in adulthood. As a result, the participants had to find their own way to develop and maintain relationships with their birth brothers and sisters that were meaningful to them. Some developed more traditional notions of siblinghood with some of their birth siblings over time, while for others their birth siblings were less important and relevant to their lives. For some, considerable barriers were present in developing and maintaining relationships, including lack of mutuality, not growing up together, not having a relationship grounded in the everyday, not being in a position in their own lives to invest in the relationship and not feeling a 'right' to expect care or concern from siblings. While this could suggest a potential vulnerability of these

relationships, to say this could imply a devaluing of relationships that are meaningful to the participants, yet different from traditional notions of siblinghood. In the absence of growing up together, it is perhaps more surprising that some of the participants developed relationships that mirrored many of the traditional notions of siblinghood.

Chapter 10: Discussion and implications for practice

Introduction

The aim at the outset of this exploratory study was to ask questions about how adopted people's relationships with their birth and adoptive siblings were experienced across the life-span. The aim of answering these questions was to develop a greater understanding of the meaning and relevance of these relationships for adopted people and how they were 'done' day-to-day, particularly as very little is known about adopted people's sibling relationships over the life-span. Interviews with adopted adults were chosen as the appropriate approach in order to allow in-depth reflection on the past and present, and consideration of the future.

A wide-ranging review of relevant literature was undertaken, and several key issues emerged. First, the relevance of having an understanding of sibling relationships in general was highlighted in order to begin to understand adopted people's sibling relationships in particular. Further, the current emphasis in sociological literature on family practices (Morgan, 1996) and 'display' (Finch, 2007, 2011) provided a conceptual framework to begin to understand the experience and meaning of sibling relationships in adoption over time. Finally, anthropological ideas about kinship and the family, and in particular the influence of biological and social connections on how people socially construct their relationships, were considered.

The previous three chapters have explored how the adopted adults in this study defined, experienced and 'did' their birth and adoptive sibling relationships in everyday life, from childhood and throughout adulthood.

The adoptive sibling relationships in this study were rooted in childhood, where no blood tie was present. Their experiences were grounded in everyday family life, and the participants often drew on dominant discourses of 'siblinghood' and 'family' when considering their day-to-day practice and meaning, justifying their connectedness to one another through their social ties. However, discourses about adoption and the absence of biological connectedness pervaded narratives about their adoptive siblings in powerful ways. Given the lack of knowledge about adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span, it was important to explore the different factors that influenced them, and how they interacted with one another.

The participants' birth sibling relationships were usually developed in adulthood following reunions, often alongside or following reunions with other birth family members, although two participants had grown up with one birth sibling and apart from others. Most participants had no knowledge of the existence of birth brothers and sisters in childhood and adolescence, but some had wondered about this possibility. They therefore usually met as strangers for the first time in adulthood and had to find their own way, as Modell (1997) notes, without a cultural 'map' to guide them about how to be, act or think about these relationships. While they were related through 'blood', their relationship did not have a foundation in childhood, and was therefore missing a crucial element in the dominant cultural discourse of sibling relationships. In the absence of a dominant cultural 'script' of birth sibling relationships post-reunion, it was important to understand the different factors which influenced the navigation of these relationships, and how they might interact with one another, in order to develop such a 'map'.

Navigating sibling relationships across the life-span

The participants in this study drew on, were influenced by and made choices about four different factors when experiencing and making sense of their relationships with their birth and adoptive brothers and sisters. These factors have been brought together in a psycho-social model of sibling relationships in adoption presented below in Figure 10.1. Some of these factors were related to the participants' own beliefs, feelings, meanings and experiences, but others were what Howe and Feast (2000: 183) describe as the 'jokers in the reunion pack'. These were elements which were related to the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and experiences of their adoptive and birth family members, and therefore outside their immediate control.

It is important to highlight that, as with any relationship, the different factors in the model did not usually act in isolation from one another, but were influenced by one another. For example, the participants' cultural meanings of the relevance of birth siblings, who are related by blood but without a relationship foundation in childhood, influenced on a relating level their willingness to invest time and effort in the relationship. It was also important to understand the key influences that led the participants to have close, positive relationships with some birth and adoptive siblings and more hostile relationships with others.

Figure 10.1
Navigating sibling relationships in adoption: a psycho-social model
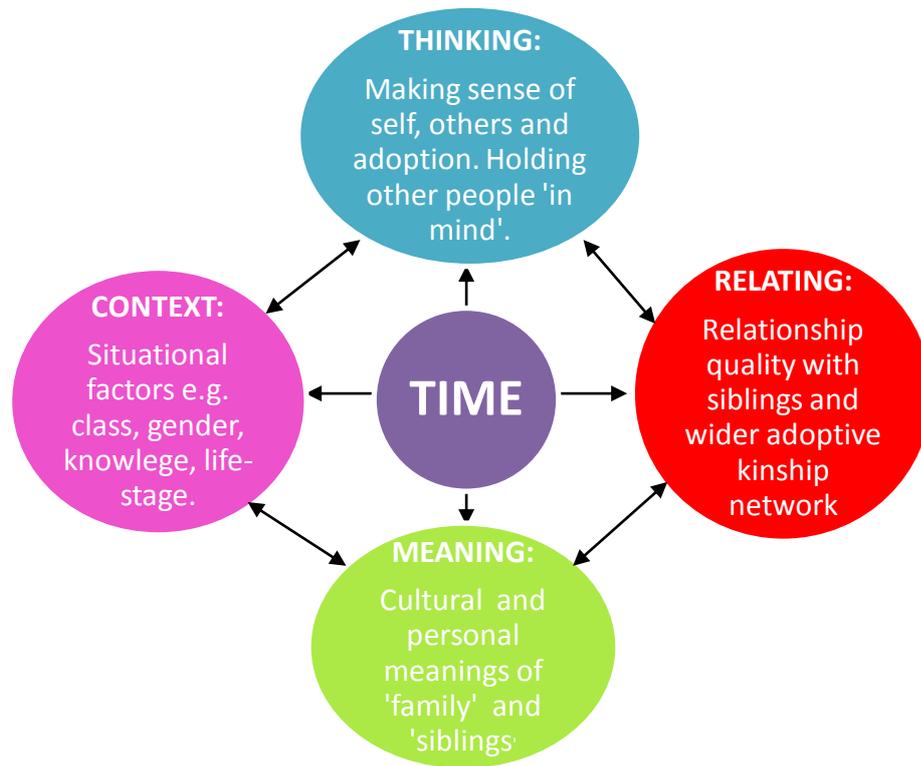
Thinking

The adopted adults in this study had a lot to think about in relation to their birth and adoptive sibling relationships. In particular, their experiences in their adoptive families seemed to affect how they thought about their own adoption, and influenced their ability to understand other people's perspectives and potential feelings, and hold them 'in mind'. This also influenced their relationships with their birth and adoptive siblings. This would appear to resonate with the concepts of 'reflective functioning' and empathy (Fonagy and Target, 1997). Although no formal measurement of these concepts was undertaken in the present study, the data was suggestive of these processes being present. Further, how their adoption was thought and talked about within the adoptive kinship network was influential.

Communicative openness in adoptive families – torn loyalties or mutual support?

In childhood, the adopted people in the study received messages about their birth family, either implicitly or explicitly, from their adoptive parents. These messages

included the stories they heard about their origins, and their adoptive parents' willingness to talk and answer questions about their adoption. Those whose adoptive parents seemed more communicatively open generally found it easier to contemplate searching for their birth families. Conversations about their adoption were more part of everyday life, and their adoptive parents were proactive in trying to answer their questions. However, many of the participants reported that their adoptive parents had been uncomfortable with the concept of their child having a birth family, despite often intense curiosity on the part of the adopted person in childhood. In adulthood, they often had significant torn loyalties when searching for birth family members. On the one hand, they wished to pursue the search for themselves; on the other, they wanted to protect their adoptive parents from potentially being hurt. Several of the participants never told their adoptive parents of their search, feeling that this was the 'proper thing to do' given their resistance in talking about adoption throughout their lives, and some waited until after their adoptive parents had died before they searched.

Communicative openness was also relevant with regard to adoptive sibling relationships. The adopted adults often reported differing levels of curiosity and willingness to talk about adoption in comparison with those siblings in the family who were also adopted. The adopted person's conceptualisation of 'family' was important here. In some cases, those who felt their adoptive family was their 'only' family did not see the relevance of talking about adoption, or felt uncomfortable with their adoptive identity. Others felt more curious about and connected to their birth family, irrespective of their feelings of belonging / difference in their adoptive family. They had a greater wish to talk about adoption with their adoptive siblings, particularly from adolescence onwards.

Within this qualitative study it was not possible to ascertain whether the level of communicative openness within the adoptive family influenced the adopted people's conceptualisation of 'family' and their comfort with their adoptive identity (including feelings of belonging / difference), or vice versa. However, the data suggests that both are important influences which also affected talking about adoption between adoptive siblings. This supports other research which highlights the dynamic processes present in adoptive family communication (Wrobel et al, 2004; Beckett et al, 2008). Levels of communicative openness were not fixed across time. A lack of communication about adoption within the adoptive family in childhood did not preclude increased openness

of attitude (from adoptive parents and adopted person) in adulthood. This could demonstrate changes in the dynamic process between parent and adopted person over time. It may be, however, that adoptive parents and the adopted person were more able to manage the reality of talking about and meeting birth siblings rather than birth parents.

In adulthood, talking with one another about adoption also led in some cases to adoptive siblings having a particular role in supporting the adopted person with the search and reunion process. Within this small study it was not possible to draw conclusions about whether unrelated adoptive siblings and birth children of the adopters took on distinctive roles here, but this could be explored in further studies of adoptive sibling relationships.

Communicative and structural openness in birth families – the power of secrets

Alongside issues of openness in adoptive families, the level of communicative and structural openness in birth families was influential in developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with birth siblings. Factors which assisted here were the birth siblings' knowledge of the adopted person prior to the search and reunion, and the birth family's communication style being reported to be open irrespective of prior knowledge of the adopted person. However, there were instances where secrecy prevailed and the stigma of having a child adopted was dominant. This led to birth parents either not telling the adopted person's birth siblings about the adopted person's existence, or not revealing their true identity. Working out the 'proper thing to do' in these situations was complex, but in order to respect their birth parent's wishes the adopted person often went along with this, sometimes fearing their contact would be cut off if they declared who they really were. This resonates with Smart's (2011) perspective on family secrets, which emphasises how reproductive secrets in particular hold considerable power. This goes beyond shame and stigma, as they have the potential to reconfigure families. Those who hold the power of the secret also have the power to transform families through sharing the secret. Here, avoidance of sharing helps to keep the status quo, but at considerable costs to all parties.

Birth siblings themselves sometimes played an important role in mediating between the adopted person and their birth parent, particularly in situations where the birth sibling had been the first point of contact for the adopted person. However, they were also reported as having torn loyalties at times, particularly in situations where their shared birth parent did not want contact with the adopted person, or where other members of the sibling group resented the presence of the adopted person. While time often mediated here, and communication gradually became more open, there were instances where families and birth sibling groups remained divided following reunion with the adopted person. This illustrates the sensitivity with which reunions and on-going relationships have to be negotiated, and the skills required in being able to 'read' other people's minds.

Thinking about adoption

How the participants thought about and made sense of their adoption, both in the past and in the present, appeared to be influential in relation to the future of their relationships with birth and adoptive brothers and sisters. Relationships with adoptive siblings usually reflected the level of stability and security they felt in their adoptive family. Those who reported integrated or differentiated adoption experiences tended to have secure relationships with their adoptive siblings which were rooted in permanence, irrespective of the perceived degree of closeness or distance in the practising of these relationships. They *felt* like siblings, as well as being defined as siblings.

However, there was a strong sense of fragility in adult adoptive sibling relationships for those who had experienced rejection and alienation in the adoptive family as children. There was no difference in fragility between those siblings who were also adopted and those who were the birth children of their adoptive parents. More often than not they lost touch with their siblings in adulthood, perhaps reflecting the feelings of rejection and sense of impermanence they had felt throughout their lives. These relationships, while being defined as siblings, did not often *feel* as if they were brothers and sisters.

There was a difference in terms of birth siblings who had an alienated adoption experience but grew up together in the same adoptive family. For them, their birth sibling represented a secure base: someone constant in their lives whom they loved and trusted unconditionally. For them, their birth sibling was conceptualised as their most important, and sometimes only, 'family' relationship.

The participants' experience of adoption in this study appeared to have some influence with regard to their capacity to understand other people's perspectives. Those who described integrated or differentiated adoption experiences, where secure attachments to their adoptive parents were present, were more often able to hold other people 'in mind'. They were able to think about the consequences of reunion and on-going relationships with birth siblings from their own perspective and those of others, recognising that these may not be the same.

However, some participants who had particularly unhappy adoption experiences were able to express empathy. Two possible explanations for this are the development of secure attachment relationships with a partner in adulthood, and the resilience factors that were present in their lives. Resilience involves 'a person faring better than might be expected in the face of serious adversity' (Gilligan, 2008: 37). This small group of participants all held down good jobs, had a network of friendships that offered one another mutual support, and interestingly all were women. These have been highlighted by Gilligan (2008) as some of the factors influencing resilience in young people in care, and had relevance to this sample of adopted adults.

The participants' ability to think about and reflect on their own perspective, those of others and their adoption, particularly in relation to their birth and adoptive siblings, was therefore not developed alone. They were influenced by the thoughts, feelings and actions of other people, particularly their adoptive families in childhood and their birth and adoptive families in adulthood. The following section explores these relational factors in more detail across time.

Relating

Any inter-personal relationship is, by its very definition, a two-way process. The adopted people and their siblings had feelings, opinions and experiences about one another which influenced what the relationships meant individually and how they were 'done' collectively. In addition, how the adopted person felt about themselves, their adoption and their conceptualisation of 'family' influenced how they related to their birth and adoptive siblings. Further, the navigation of these relationships rarely took place in isolation. Members of the wider adoptive kinship network influenced the relationship, either in the mind of the adopted person when they were working out the 'proper thing to do' (for example, in relation to sharing their plans / experiences with

their adoptive parents) or in actuality, through their spoken (and sometimes implied) opinions and feelings, and their actions.

Quality of sibling relationship

The quality of adoptive sibling relationships, which had a basis in childhood, was largely described within this study through dimensions of closeness and distance. The narratives emphasised the 'normalcy' of these relationships, with periods of closeness, hostility and rivalry seen as a natural part of growing up together. Dimensions which promoted closeness in childhood were similar to those for siblings who grow up together in intact families – proximity to one another, sharing common interests and friends and spending time together. The quality of adoptive sibling relationships remained very stable from childhood to adulthood. Those who were close as children tended to remain close as adults, particularly as greater maturity often reduced the power relationships present in childhood as a result of birth order.

Although these relationships were usually perceived by the participants as socially and legally legitimated through their adoption, their cultural 'scripts' also reflected their adoptive status. For example, birth children of the adopters were sometimes perceived to be loved more than those who were adopted, due to the strength of the biological bond. Equally, having a 'favoured' status through, for example, parental communication about the stories of their arrival in the family, or indeed being scapegoated and rejected by adoptive parents, often led to increased hostility between siblings. Although issues of favouritism and scapegoating are present for biologically connected siblings, being adopted did seem to add an additional vulnerability which could affect the quality and longevity of the sibling relationship. It also demonstrates how sibling relationships can reflect the dynamics of the adoptive family.

An emphasis on being very different people and having little in common was often commented on in the light of the lack of shared genes. Although biologically related siblings who grow up together also comment on this (Riggio, 2000), the narratives of the participants suggested that this had particular resonance and meaning as a result of their adoption, and was often used as a way to justify how they evaluated the quality of the relationship.

One of the most dominant features of the participants' narratives in relation to their birth siblings was the extent to which they liked them and perceived they had things in common. This was thought by many (but not all) to be one of the most important aspects of their relationship, and something which either drew them emotionally closer or led to more emotional distance between them. It also indicated a discourse of choice – as one has when meeting a stranger in adulthood, irrespective of the blood tie in this case. However, 'choices' are not made in isolation, but are constrained by issues such as personal biography, structural context and mutuality (Finch and Mason, 1993; Morgan, 2011). In the case of adoption, relationships with birth siblings who have not grown up together or had no prior knowledge of one another have a basis in their shared genes, but are not legally legitimated or socially normative 'family' relationships. It is therefore unsurprising that the adopted people in this study had to draw on other, more personal elements when considering the present and future of their relationship, such as liking each other and feelings of commonality (including their biological likeness to one another). Within the constraints of 'choice', these nevertheless allowed the relationship to develop meaningfully. Building a solid emotional connection over time strengthened the relationship, often through their shared interests or feelings of having common ground. Further, given the lack of a cultural 'script', participants drew on the discourse of closeness and distance in order to justify the quality of their relationships with birth siblings.

However, feelings about their individual birth siblings could not be considered in isolation. The participants also drew on their cultural notions of siblinghood, whereby the place and relevance of siblings were considered. For example, although some participants described themselves as not having much in common with their siblings, they nevertheless emphasised 'siblinghood' as a moral obligation. They felt committed to the relationship, and had feelings of mutual rights and obligations without particularly liking their sibling, mirroring dominant discourses about siblings and siblinghood. In these cases, meanings about 'family' and 'siblinghood' were more important than the relational factors of liking someone and having something in common.

Sharing time together

Adoptive sibling relationships usually had a sense of permanence which was rooted in their childhood, irrespective of their level of direct contact with one another. This permanence was expressed through thinking and worrying about their adoptive siblings, and through expressions of practical and emotional care and concern. It was not uncommon for adoptive siblings to hear one another's day-to-day news via their adoptive parents, although many did also have regular phone, e-mail or in person contact. However, the level of contact did not affect their feelings about the permanence of the relationship, apart from those adoptive sibling relationships which had broken down in adulthood. This contrasted with the participants' birth sibling relationships, where they met as strangers for the first time in adulthood. Sharing time with one another built the foundations of the relationship, but a sense of permanence was not always achieved or indeed thought to be relevant.

The ways birth siblings spent time together usually reflected their shared generation, which was distinctively different to reunions with birth parents and often promoted a sense of common ground and shared kinship. Further, how they 'practised' (Morgan 1996, 2011) and 'displayed' (Finch 2007, 2011) their relationships through their contact with one another provided insights into their meaning. For example, Facebook was used to maintain a level of contact with birth siblings, where they could be involved in each other's lives, but at a distance appropriate to the relationship's meaning and relative significance. In contrast, some of the adopted adults in the sample developed a relationship with at least one birth sibling which was characterised by expressions of unconditional commitment, care and concern – a sibling 'no matter what'. They developed 'ordinary kinship' based on regular and mundane contact with one another. Further, in these cases public 'displays' at family rituals such as weddings and funerals were not used to test out their sense of belonging in the birth family.

The adopted people undertook a variety of practices with their birth siblings which could be distinctively termed 'doing family things' (Morgan, 1996), which demonstrated their care and concern for one another, and showed commitment to the relationship. However, the extent to which the adopted people classified these practices as 'doing family things' varied, and was influenced by their cultural meanings of siblinghood. For some participants, birth siblings were seen as irrelevant to their lives (through their lack

of contact and thought about them) and were therefore not counted as 'family'. For others, their cultural notion of siblinghood encompassed their birth siblings as 'kin' through their day-to-day contact with one another and practices of care, concern and commitment. In these cases, levels of emotional closeness and distance were less relevant than feelings of commitment and obligation.

As with any relationship, the level of mutuality was crucial in the practice of these relationships. If one party wanted (or needed) more than the other, then careful negotiations needed to be made, which were affected by their level of empathy and negotiation skills, and initially remained at the 'lowest common denominator': that which was acceptable to both parties (Grotevant, 2009: 313; Affleck and Steed, 2001). However, time was an important factor here, and levels of mutuality were seen to change over time, usually in a positive direction.

Meaning

Adopted adults in the sample usually drew on dominant cultural 'scripts' of siblinghood when considering the meaning of their adoptive sibling relationships. They emphasised the foundation of the relationship in childhood, and its rootedness in adoptive family culture and values. They also emphasised its permanence and stability in the ways they expressed their commitment, care and concern for one another, irrespective of their levels of emotional closeness and distance. In many ways the relationship was 'as if begotten' through blood (Modell, 1997), although based on social connectedness.

For some participants, the lack of a biological connection appeared to have greater meaning when thinking about the quality and permanence of these relationships. This was particularly so in terms of differences in temperament and interests between siblings, and was sometimes used to justify why the relationship felt fragile or less meaningful. While biological siblings may also have these discussions, it appeared that some adopted people placed particular meaning on them, feeling something was 'missing'. Although these participants could draw on their shared history with adoptive siblings, the lack of biological connectedness was still thought about in ways which suggested vulnerability.

For those few participants who had lost touch with their adoptive siblings, the meaning of their relationship was also rooted in biological connectedness. In many ways their

lack of shared genes gave them permission to justify their lack of contact, emphasising the continued dominance of kinship being based on biological ties. These participants often conceptualised themselves as having no 'family', given the rejection they had felt from their adoptive parents (and often adoptive siblings) while growing up. For them, the social and legal ties of adoption were not fixed and permanent, and gave them room to reject the adoptive family as 'their family'.

Given the lack of a cultural 'map' to assist the participants in the navigation of their birth sibling relationships, they drew on a number of cultural discourses in the everyday practice and 'displaying' of these relationships, often subconsciously. It was only when reflecting on their birth sibling relationships while being interviewed that many of their unconscious meanings about their relationships became consciously expressed. These included how they conceptualised 'family', 'siblinghood' and therefore their birth sibling relationships, and the relative importance placed on biological and social connectedness. These in turn influenced their sense of moral obligation to their birth siblings.

A sense of vulnerability was present in some of the relationships, which was around the vulnerability of the right to 'family' status. Meeting their birth siblings for the first time in adulthood led some of the participants to feel that a crucial aspect of their relationship was missing – having a foundation together in childhood. They did not share memories of growing up together or seeing one another regularly, and struggled to develop meaningful connections with them. While they felt very committed to the relationship, and showed care and concern for their birth siblings, they often felt that they did not have the 'right' to name them brothers and sisters, although their practices with them could be termed 'doing family things'. As time progressed, however, particularly for those who had remained in contact with their siblings for some years, the lack of childhood experiences sometimes became less important as they built their own memories and stories together. They developed a greater sense of integrating past, present and future in their relationships, and for some they felt that they, as well as their birth siblings, had 'earned' the title of brother or sister.

As Finch (2011) notes, 'displays' of family are snapshots – moments in time – and time played a crucial factor in how power was used and 'displayed' in these relationships. The greater the length of time the adopted person and their birth siblings had been in touch, the more likely it was that 'displays of family' which were somewhat ambivalent about their status or served to exclude at the start changed in a more positive direction over

the years. However, it is also important to remember that the adopted person interpreted these 'displays' within their own personal, social and cultural frameworks. Vulnerability or stability in the relationship was therefore not just about that 'moment in time'. It was inextricably linked to personal biography, their ability to be reflective and empathic, the relationship history, and cultural meanings associated with siblinghood and mutuality. Further, the adopted person also modified their own 'displays of family' in light of what they felt was the 'proper thing to do'. For example, while they may have felt fully included as part of their birth family, there were occasions when the participants modified their 'displays' to avoid potentially hurting their adoptive family. They achieved this in various ways, including keeping both families apart, or modifying their behaviour with birth family members on occasions when the adoptive family was present.

Rosnati's (2005) work considered internationally adopted people's ideas about family, and raised the notion of adopted people belonging to this family *or* that, or this family *and* that. In this study, those who had a cultural belief of 'family' being their adoptive family only were less likely to develop a relationship with birth siblings based on traditional notions of siblinghood, and more likely to develop, at best, 'friendship' based relationships. They were also more likely to view their birth siblings as less relevant in their life. Those whose beliefs were around belonging to two families (this family *and* that) had more flexible notions of siblinghood, which encompassed birth siblings 'belonging' as family members within their adoptive kinship network.

Over time it was possible for those who had quite 'fixed' boundaries initially about birth siblings not *feeling* like brothers and sister, to move their position. As meaningful kinship ties developed through spending time together and building emotional connectedness, so too did their ideas about who *felt* like a sibling, with a greater opening up of their cultural ideas of siblinghood and family. Equally, time also consolidated other participants' views that although they shared biological connections, this did not mean they had to develop a meaningful relationship, or one where they felt obligated to their birth siblings as 'family'.

The process of working out the 'proper thing to do' with regard to their relationships with birth siblings was complex, and highlighted how the adopted people were 'moral actors' (Williams, 2004) within their adoptive kinship networks. They had to work hard weighing up their own needs and wants alongside those of others, and think through

the consequences of their actions. This was clearly seen in the delicate and sensitive negotiations between the adopted person and their adoptive kinship network over time. Deciding when and how to contact birth siblings, if to broach the subject of their reunion with adoptive parents, and undertaking delicate and sensitive negotiations to introduce birth siblings to adoptive family members were some of the examples highlighted by the participants. The level of consideration of others was very striking, and many of the participants waited a long time (some were still waiting) to get their own needs met, putting other people's needs (usually those of adoptive parents) first. Those who managed this more successfully had greater ability to be reflective and had empathy with other people's potential views.

Context

A recurrent theme in the narratives was the influence of situational factors on the development, maintenance and practice of adoptive and birth sibling relationships. In particular, demographic characteristics such as class, gender and birth order were influential. For example, birth order influenced the 'doing' of adoptive sibling relationships in terms of perceived power relations in childhood, although this seemed to reduce in adulthood with the benefit of maturity. Gender appeared to influence how birth and adoptive relationships were 'done' in practice. Brothers tended to 'do' their relationship through different activities, while sisters tended to spend more time talking on the phone or in person, and offering one another emotional support. Brothers and sisters would often 'do' different activities together, with their relationship being based less on 'talk', although there were exceptions.

Most participants were adopted from situations of poverty into more affluent circumstances, and often felt that there were considerable cultural barriers to overcome with birth siblings initially, particularly if they had remained within their family of origin. In addition, the adopted people often had to deal with resentment from siblings who were 'left behind' in the family. In these cases the birth siblings conceptualised the adopted person as being the 'lucky one', although the adopted person may not have felt this way. Careful and sensitive negotiation skills were needed to foster mutual understanding of one another's viewpoints.

In adulthood, sharing time with adoptive and birth siblings was influenced by their life stage, and generally mirrored the experiences of biological siblings brought up together

(Cicirelli, 1982; Connidis, 1992). Factors such as geographical proximity and being focused on a career and family in early / middle adulthood affected the frequency of their contact with one another, and sometimes their level of closeness.

Geographical distance was seen as both a benefit and a drawback for birth and adoptive sibling relationships. For some, their geographical distance was a barrier to developing closer relationships based on 'ordinary kinship'. Others were quite happy with geographical distance, feeling that their relationship was at a level acceptable to them, without the pressure of geographical proximity.

Adoptive and birth siblings had particular roles to play regarding 'family' knowledge. Older adoptive siblings were able to contribute 'stories' about the person's arrival in the family and what they were like as young children. As adults, and particularly when their adoptive parents had died, they were resources for one another about family stories, and served to reinforce continuity in (and sometimes challenge) their life narratives. Birth siblings served a similar role, which was of particular significance if birth parents did not wish to engage with the adopted person or had died prior to reunion. In these cases, birth sibling often tried to fill in the gaps in the adopted person's life narrative, sometimes providing powerful and reassuring insights into the reasons for their adoption and the reality of family life.

Summary

The varied factors which were present in the development and maintenance of adoptive and birth sibling relationships interacted in different ways. This meant that the adopted adults in the sample often had very different relationships with different siblings in the same sibling group. This in itself is unremarkable, since siblings often have different relationships with one another (Cicirelli, 1982; Buhrmenster, 1992). However, the psycho-social model articulates what these different factors are, and how they interweave in different ways. Furthermore, these factors held for birth and adoptive sibling relationships. This might suggest that the over-arching principles of the psycho-social model may also have resonance for understanding how sibling relationships are navigated outside adoption – although additional research is needed to explore this further.

During the process of developing and testing the psycho-social model against the data, several patterns became apparent regarding the influence of the different factors on the adopted people's 'practice' of their birth sibling relationships. A typology was therefore developed, described below, which attempts to capture the different patterns of relationships that were present between adopted people and their birth siblings post-reunion. A typology of adoptive sibling relationships has not been included, but will be the subject of further research on a larger sample.

Typology of adopted adults' birth sibling relationships post-reunion

This typology is based on self-reports of the fifteen participants who had in-person reunions with some or all of their birth siblings. They number of siblings they were reunited with varied from one to six, and the total number of birth siblings was fifty-seven. Each birth sibling relationship was discussed during the interviews and considered in the development of the typology. However, given that this is a qualitative exploratory study, the number of birth siblings within each relationship pattern is not given, as it does not add to their meaning. Further, changes over time were also reflected to demonstrate the patterns of relationship development.

Siblings 'no matter what'

Adopted people thought of these birth sibling relationships as being stable and permanent. Feelings of life-long commitment and mutual and unconditional rights and obligations were present. The relationships had been negotiated sensitively and empathically over time, and there was a pattern of regular contact. The participants' cultural meanings of siblinghood encompass strong ideas of the strength of the biological bond and belonging to this family *and* that. There were high levels of 'ordinary kinship' present here. For those who had children there was also a strong wish to invest in the relationship for their own children's future. Contextually, differences in class and issues of birth order were acknowledged and worked with proactively.

Feelings of closeness were usually, although not always, present. This mirrors traditional notions of siblinghood, whereby the biological bond and mutual rights / obligations are seen as the primary factors in the relationship, although feelings of closeness certainly assisted the development of these relationships. In addition, while there were strong

feelings of similarity due to their biological bond, differences in outlook, temperament and class were accepted and managed as part of 'being' brothers and sisters.

While open communication across the adoptive kinship network assisted and supported the development of these relationships, this was not always present and its absence did not prevent the development of these types of relationships. Indeed, they sometimes developed without the knowledge or support of adoptive and birth parents. In some cases, participants were clear that if their adoptive parents had still been alive, their loyalty and sense of 'family' would have remained with their adoptive family.

Close and special friends

Birth siblings in this group were thought of through the lens of friendship. The key feature here was the close emotional bond between the siblings, who liked each other and felt they had things in common. They usually had regular contact with each other, which had been negotiated over time with the adopted person showing empathy and sensitive negotiation skills. Issues of torn loyalties were sometimes present, and in these cases, particularly for those who felt that their adoptive parents would struggle with their birth sibling being defined as a brother or sister, there was a sense that defining these relationships as friendships was the 'proper thing to do'.

Feelings of obligation and care / concern were present, but these were not perceived as a 'right' which they chose to exercise; rather, it was seen as a privilege of their friendship. Usually, if the participant needed practical or emotional support, they would call on other people first rather than their birth sibling, although they were happy to give support if asked. There was a clear differentiation between the role of siblings and friends, with their birth siblings being defined as close and special friends but without the cultural obligations of siblings. Strong feelings of loyalty towards the birth siblings were also present.

There was a sense of permanence and security in these relationships, and that both parties were reported to be mutually invested in the relationship. However, there was also a sense for some that being close and special friends was a process of transition to becoming siblings 'no matter what', and that with the benefit of time and shared experiences this would be possible. This was particularly evident in the care through which they thought about and actively identified birth siblings as aunts and uncles for

their children. There was an acknowledgement of their status as birth siblings through the blood tie, although they did not 'feel' strong bonds of siblinghood, as defined in the traditional sense.

A sense of vulnerability in the relationship was, however, present for some, often because they wanted more, or their birth sibling wanted more, and so their relationship was negotiated at the level of comfort of the 'lowest common denominator'.

Cordial but superficial

Adopted people thought about these birth siblings as less relevant to their lives, and they were not immediately defined as being either 'family' or 'friend'. The lack of shared experiences as children was emphasised, and their construction of 'family' was largely based on social connectedness. They nevertheless liked their birth siblings, but often felt they did not have much in common, and this was one of the major factors that defined this group. In addition, differences such as social class were felt more keenly.

They met up rarely, usually only on family occasions, and sent birthday and Christmas cards to one another. The use of Facebook as a means of staying in touch was more common with these birth siblings, and the relationship had not developed beyond this rather superficial level. Intimate personal details were not shared with one another, and the adopted person would not consider asking them for practical or emotional support.

The adopted people often had limited time or opportunity to develop the relationship as a result of their own busy lives, but emphasised that even with more time, they would be unlikely to invest it in their birth sibling.

Wanting more

These relationships were thought about as special and meaningful, but were characterised by unresolved needs. While the everyday practice of these relationships generally mirrored the 'cordial but superficial' relationships in terms of level and type of contact, the over-riding feature for the adopted person was of wanting more from the relationship.

Often, these unresolved needs were a result of different levels of mutuality in the relationship. The adopted people who had this relationship pattern with a birth sibling were usually able to understand other people's perspectives and potential feelings. They

emphasised the possibility for longevity in these relationships, and were able to understand that whilst they may want more, their birth sibling may not. Strong feelings of obligation and commitment were usually present, with comments frequently being made about 'being there' for their birth siblings, but understanding that their birth sibling may not call on them for support. Positive changes did occur over a number of years, with adopted people reporting that some of their relationships had shifted in a positive direction.

Constructions of 'family' and 'siblinghood' were flexible and encompassed biological and social connectedness. Issues of torn loyalties were, however, a particular feature of these relationships. Keeping the birth sibling relationship cordial but at a distance was sometimes perceived as the 'proper thing to do'. This was often in response to feeling that their adoptive parents would be hurt by any contact with birth family members. Equally, their birth siblings may also have torn loyalties to their parents, and not wish to, metaphorically speaking, 'rock the boat'.

Situational factors were also relevant here. Issues of geographical distance often prevented the development of birth sibling relationships in a meaningful ways, particularly if one party was living overseas. Further, some of the adopted people who had busy lives with a family, career and children expressed regret that they simply did not have the time or energy to invest in the relationship, even though they wanted to.

Strangers in a foreign land

The key feature of this relationship was a profound feeling of difference towards their birth sibling. This was often as a result of significant cultural and class differences and / or feeling that there was no common ground or similarity on which to develop a relationship.

Feeling as if birth siblings were like 'strangers in a foreign land' was not unusual at the point of reunion, and many relationships went on to develop in positive and meaningful ways. An important aspect here was the degree to which the adopted person recognised why these differences may be present, and acknowledged how their birth sibling may be feeling. Additionally, for some participants their profound feelings of difference interacted with differences in their respective expectations and needs / wants, which

compounded the difficulties. The profound differences were often used to justify why birth siblings felt less relevant to their lives.

More usually, contact dwindled rapidly and did not continue, although where the adopted adult was in contact with other birth family members they met at family occasions. There was no independent contact outside these family events.

Irrelevant

Adopted people here thought about their birth siblings as being unimportant and irrelevant in their lives. This was most often related to the adopted person's cultural meanings about 'family', with the primacy of the social connection with their adoptive family being dominant. The adoptive family were usually seen as the only 'family'. Contact with the birth sibling was usually brief, being neither hostile nor friendly, and served to provide information that the adopted person wanted about their background or medical history. In some cases, contact with birth siblings was seen as a means to facilitate contact with or information about a birth parent, and no interest was expressed in developing an on-going relationship with the birth brother or sister. Where there was on-going contact with a birth parent, the adopted person met the birth sibling at family occasions only, and they had no independent contact. Here, the purpose of search and reunion was largely to gain relevant information about their birth origins. Sometimes, the expression of feeling that a birth sibling was irrelevant could be linked to feelings of rejection when the birth sibling did not want a relationship to develop. The 'story' the adopted person told themselves was perhaps their way of coping with it.

More rarely, the adopted person had already developed a close and meaningful relationship with another sibling in the same sibling group, and felt that the other siblings were irrelevant. This situation tended to occur when the other siblings had no knowledge of the adopted person or of the reunion that had taken place.

Hostile

These relationships were marked by hostility, which in this study was not from the adopted person but from the birth sibling. The hostility was often in relation to resentment about being left in the birth family, jealousy that they had lost their status as the eldest sibling, or through being protective of their birth parent. Conceptualisations of 'family' and 'siblinghood' were very varied here, as the hostility was a 'joker in the

reunion pack' (Howe and Feast, 2000: 183); something that was not in the adopted person's direct control initially.

Those who lacked the ability to understand their birth siblings' perspective at the time of reunion were often very hurt by this hostility and did not pursue the relationship further. Others worked hard to maintain contact, and showed great patience and fortitude in the face of the hostility. Generally, hostility to the adopted person was not shown by all members of the birth sibling group, and the adopted person often found allies there in negotiating and managing the relationship. Experiencing hostility from a birth sibling affected the everyday 'practice' of the relationship. Direct contact tended to be infrequent, or changed more positively with the benefit of time, effort and mutual negotiation.

Summary

This typology does not aim to represent the full range of 'types' of birth sibling relationships post-reunion, simply those that were present for the participants in this study. One relationship was not seen as better than another, just different – with qualities and characteristics as a result of the interweaving of the thinking, relating, meaning and contextual factors present throughout these relationships.

Further research is needed to test and refine this model. First, different participants in different studies may contribute additional relationship patterns. Secondly, this model was developed from the viewpoint of the adopted person only. Further work could be undertaken to capture the relationship patterns both of adopted people and of their birth siblings.

Implications for social work practice

Navigating sibling relationships in adoption is complex, and this study has contributed to increasing knowledge about the experience, practice and meanings of adopted people's birth and adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span. Legislation requires social workers to consider the impact on a child of removing them from their birth family (Children Act, 1989), alongside the life-long implications of adoption (Adoption and Children Act, 2002). They also have to specifically consider the child's sibling relationships, with the view that children should be placed together or maintain contact

with one another unless it is not practicable or in their best interests: Children Act (1989); Adoption and Children Act (2002). Social workers have a lot to think about when placing children for adoption, and it is understandable that their priority is to achieve permanency with adoptive parents. However, this study's emphasis on the longitudinal impact of adoption on sibling relationships raises clear implications for social work practice today, particularly because many issues do not present themselves until years after the adoption. These implications have been arranged to reflect as far as possible the chronological process of a child's adoption journey from childhood into adulthood.

(1)   Understanding who children regard as a brother and sister

Participants in this study had clear views about who they 'counted' as a sibling, and these ranged from full and half siblings to those individuals (such as birth cousins, step-siblings and foster siblings) who were 'siblings by association'. It is vital that social workers undertaking work with all families take the time to think flexibly about who children define as their brothers and sisters, if they are old enough to express a view. This could be achieved through talking with children about who they regard as a sibling while undertaking core assessments, and noting this information in the case file via the production of a genogram. If children are too young to express a view, social workers need to hold in mind what the child's perspective might be in the future. If this work is not undertaken, important relationships, which have a life-long potential, could be overlooked or seen as irrelevant.

(2)   'A half sibling is not a half relationship' – conceptualising siblinghood

Consideration needs to be given to social workers' values and judgements about the relative importance of the blood bond. Recent work by Saunders and Selwyn (2011) underlines the fact that social workers tend to place greater emphasis on children who are full siblings rather than half siblings, particularly in terms of adoptive placement and on-going contact. The findings from the present study strongly support the view, expressed powerfully by one participant, that 'a half sibling is not a half relationship'. While there is no doubt that having a full birth sibling was seen as being particularly special for some participants, many others saw this as irrelevant: a sibling was a sibling, whether they shared some, all or more rarely any genes. Their relationship was defined

by the fact of their biological connection (or their connection to one another through a birth parent, in the case of step-siblings), but the development and practice of these relationships was not. Other factors, such as liking one another and being able to spend time together, were also important. Social workers therefore need to think about their own conceptualisation of siblinghood when making decisions about children in sibling groups, and the value they place on sibling relationships. Biological connectedness is certainly one factor, but it should not be treated hierarchically, with full siblings being given greater status. Shared genes are one aspect, but only one, in the myriad of factors which make up sibling relationships.

(3)   Understanding sibling relationships psycho-socially and longitudinally

In order to carry out robust assessment and decision-making of sibling groups where adoption is the plan, this study has highlighted the importance of having a comprehensive psycho-social understanding of sibling relationships across the life-span, and valuing their potential. Without this, social workers run the risk of making decisions about siblings based on part of the story rather than the whole, which can have life-long implications. For example, in this study birth sibling relationships were strongly valued by the participants, whether or not they had known about their existence in childhood. Many also went on to have positive and satisfying long-term relationships, although the lack of childhood knowledge and contact impacted on this. Furthermore, the participants went through periods of closeness and hostility with their adoptive and birth siblings in childhood. Capturing the state of their relationship at 'one moment in time' may run the risk of ignoring the normal developmental trajectory of the relationship, and the changes which can occur over time. It is also important to highlight that for those participants who had adoptive and birth sibling relationships grounded in childhood, it was very rare for them to lose touch. When this did occur, the roots of hostility were strongly related to their experience of family life, suggesting that the context of the sibling relationship needs to be taken into account.

Current assessment models of sibling relationships emphasise the sibling relationship in the 'here and now' (see, for example, Lord and Borthwick, 2008), and are very psychologically focused. This runs the risk of devaluing the socio-cultural factors of these sibling relationships, both in the present and longitudinally, such as the

meaningfulness of their kinship connection and the potential for mutual support across their life-times. Making decisions about whether to place siblings together or apart, and consideration of on-going contact post-adoption, could usefully be considered using the principles of the psycho-social model outlined above. For example, social workers could reflect longitudinally on how children might be supported to think about their adoption and their siblings in order to promote positive adjustment; the factors which might influence relationships with siblings; how the adopted child's dual connection can be supported; and which contextual factors might influence sibling relationships in the longer term. Taking this approach would encourage a more longitudinal perspective, where the emphasis is on recognising and valuing the life-long potential of sibling relationships. Failure to do this can have life-long implications for sibling relationships, whereby the sibling relationship itself can be impaired or lost. Social workers may benefit from further practice guidance being issued which takes this life-span approach.

(4)   Adopted people's knowledge of birth siblings in childhood

Most participants in this study usually did not know about the existence of their brothers and sisters when growing up in their adoptive families, and this influenced how they thought about and conceptualised their birth family as children. In particular, having no knowledge about siblings affected their identity and influenced their life narrative. Although the participants in this study were adopted many years ago, more recent work has highlighted the current lack of information about siblings for adopters and adopted children (Neil et al, 2010). This has the potential to be challenging, particularly if birth siblings are born in circumstances where the local authority is not involved in the child's life (for example, subsequent children born to birth fathers). However, where it is possible to have this information, it is important for two reasons. First, it would support adopted children's identity development and their life narrative; and, secondly, it would enable more straightforward tracing of birth family members in adulthood. Reliable information in adoption files was reported to be rare in this study, particularly in relation to birth fathers and their families. An accurate genogram detailing the child's sibling group could be placed on the adoption file, which includes who the children themselves perceive to be siblings, if they are old enough to express a view. Any subsequent siblings born could be added to the genogram, providing the local authority is aware of them.

For those siblings born without social services involvement, the situation is more complex. A possible solution may be related to the handling of siblings born through anonymous donor insemination in the United States of America. They have a unique identifier linked to the donor which they can access to trace one another; and it might be helpful to give some thought to whether an adaptation of this concept could be used in adoption.

(5) Recruiting adoptive parents who have the potential to actively embrace children's dual connection

Within the study, adoptive parents who were reported as being able to accept and positively promote children's dual connection to their birth and adoptive families fostered an atmosphere of openness within the family about adoption-related issues. Conversations about adoption were accepted and part of everyday life as and when needed, and the participants usually grew up comfortable and confident with their dual identity. This was unsurprising, because an ability to understand, empathise and support a child's interest in their birth origins has been directly linked with positive adjustment in adopted children (Brodzinsky, 2006; Hawkins et al, 2008). In this study, communicating about adoption also appeared to have an impact on how adoptive siblings communicated with one another about adoption and their adoptive identity.

It would be valuable to explore potential adopters' views of the meaning and importance of sibling relationships during the assessment process. Supporting and educating adopters to recognise the value of promoting sibling relationships post-adoption is essential, given the control they retain over contact post-Adoption Order.

(6) Supporting adoptive siblings in their relationships with one another

This study highlighted the strength and longevity of adoptive sibling relationships across the life-span, but also the difficulties which can be present. When difficulties arose, these tended to reflect relationship dynamics in the adoptive family, and had life-long implications – in some cases, leading to the relationship being lost. Children today are usually adopted at an older age than the participants in this study and have particular needs resulting from difficult life experiences in their birth family (Rushton et al, 2001). It could therefore be argued that there is a greater need to actively support adoptive sibling relationships than was recognised in this study.

(7)   The case for meaningful connections in childhood

One of the most striking findings from this study was the longitudinal impact of not knowing about or having contact with birth siblings in childhood. Meeting as strangers for the first time in adulthood, without a childhood foundation for the relationship (be it in mind or in actuality), meant that it was more difficult to establish a relationship. Although positive and meaningful relationships did develop over time, the sense of loss about 'missing out' on knowing about or seeing one another as children was sometimes quite profound.

Although it is not always possible to place siblings together in adoptive placements, there appears to be less emphasis on what happens next post-adoption in relation to sibling contact. For example, direct contact between siblings following adoptive placement remains the exception rather than the norm (Saunders and Selwyn, 2011). The participants in this study demonstrated the complexity of developing and sustaining relationships with birth siblings when there was no childhood basis for the relationship. Greater emphasis therefore needs to be placed on supporting separated siblings to develop meaningful connections with one another in childhood, which would make it less likely that they meet as strangers in adulthood.

Meaningful connections would normally imply contact with each other that is regular and consistent, which provides a vehicle for memories that are concrete and significant. It does not mean meeting once a year for a couple of hours – which, as one participant in the study who had that experience noted, 'didn't mean anything'. In situations where direct contact would not be possible, through genuine concerns about safety, meaningful connections could be built through indirect letter contact, where the siblings at the very least know about each other's existence.

It is recognised that placing children for adoption is a complex process, and that children have a range of needs which have the potential to conflict. A careful balance needs to be achieved which recognises the importance of the child adjusting to their adoptive placement alongside their assessed need for contact with birth family members. There may be logistical implications for adopters / carers in relation to contact, such as children living a great distance from one another. Further, the child's sibling relationships may also be valued more highly by some adopters / carers than others. Neil et al (2010) highlighted that social work agencies sometimes assumed that sets of adopters / foster carers had the same viewpoint about sibling contact and could

cope with complex sibling contact without on-going support, although this was not always the case. The present study also confirms that adoptive parents were reported as having very different views about who 'counts' as family. Effective planning and support pre-placement is therefore important in order to assess needs and support adopters to recognise and promote the potential value of sibling relationships; understanding also their complexity and competing needs. A mechanism for periodic review of contact arrangements should be considered post-Adoption Order. This would acknowledge and reflect children's changing needs for contact as they mature over time, and also the complexity of managing many of these arrangements. Periodic review would also provide opportunities to support adopters with on-going contact arrangements and consider how to positively manage children's dual connection.

Giving separated siblings the opportunity to develop meaningful connections with one another in childhood also gives them the opportunity to make informed decisions about the future of their relationship. No relationship remains static, and a flexible approach is required, acknowledging that for most adopted children there will be periods when they wish to see their siblings and periods when they do not, and equally some children may not wish to see their siblings at all. However, their choices would be grounded in reality rather than fantasy or distant memories, as they progress through childhood and into adulthood. They would also be able to exercise their own agency over these decisions, rather than having the possibility of choice removed from them. We must remember that in many cases sibling relationships in adoption seem to fall victim to circumstances within social services departments, such as fears about retaining the anonymity of adoptive placements if contact is maintained with siblings in foster care or who are already adults (Saunders and Selwyn, 2011; Neil et al, 2010). Balancing the needs and rights of everyone in the adoption kinship network is very difficult, but the opportunity for siblings to develop meaningful connections to one another in childhood should not be overlooked, given the relationship's potential across the life-span.

(8) Birth sibling relationships post-reunion

This study has particular relevance to adoption agencies working with adopted adults and birth relatives, given its life-span approach. Post-adoption counselling and intermediary services for adopted adults searching for birth relatives could usefully focus on the typical 'tasks' of the reunion process which have been identified. While they focus on birth siblings, they also have relevance and application for wider birth

family members, such as promoting awareness of dealing with differences in birth family culture and the process of negotiating relationships. Furthermore, the four domains of the psycho-social model would be helpful in working with adopted adults about the thinking, relating, meaning and contextual processes that are present for them and their adoptive kinship network in navigating post-reunion relationships in the long-term.

The study's findings could also be used by birth relative intermediary services to promote understanding about the relevance and significance of birth sibling relationships, and the influences present in adopted people's conceptualisation of them, for those birth relatives seeking to trace adopted people.

There is also a legal issue in terms of who, legally, birth relative intermediary agencies can work with. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) defines 'relative' through biological connections, but this excludes siblings by association / affinity (such as step-siblings). In contrast, the Children Act (1989) definition of relative includes those by affinity. Given the wide and flexible definitions of 'sibling' used in this study, it would be helpful for this disparity to be addressed.

Limitations of the study and further research

This study has the following limitations and recommendations for further research:

(1)   The sample was initially designed to increase knowledge about the meaning and experience of birth sibling relationships across the life-span. It was therefore essential that all the participants at least had knowledge of the existence of birth siblings. Given the reports in the interviews about the participants' lack of knowledge about birth siblings until they searched for birth family, it was unavoidable that the sample was biased towards those who had an interest in their birth sibling relationships. However, a range of views was achieved within the sample, as can be seen in the typology, about the meaning and relevance of birth sibling relationships. It is also important to consider that at the time of adoption it is not possible to predict whether very young children will have an interest in their birth sibling relationships. However, if the possibility of building and maintaining these relationships is not considered, this is likely to lead to difficulties for some people later on, as this study has demonstrated. Further research

which takes a prospective approach, tracking the progress of adopted children's birth sibling relationships longitudinally, may assist here.

(2)   The study looked in-depth at adopted people's longitudinal experiences of birth and adoptive sibling relationships. It was therefore possible to report only on their perspectives. Further research which considers paired perspectives (adopted person and birth sibling) would potentially produce a more rounded picture.

(3)   Most participants in this study were relinquished for adoption as babies, and did not experience abuse or neglect within their birth families. The reasons for adoption are significantly different in contemporary social work practice, and practitioners may assume that this study has little relevance to children being adopted today. However, this is not the case. Recent work has highlighted that most children continue to be placed apart from at least one sibling (Saunders and Selwyn, 2011; Neil et al, 2010). Direct contact post-placement continues to be rare, with most children having only letter-box contact with siblings, and there are on-going problems gaining accurate knowledge about siblings (Rushton et al, 2001; Neil et al 2010). Managing contact can be challenging within the adoptive kinship network (Lowe et al, 1999; Saunders and Selwyn, 2011), and family communication about adoption has been shown to be influential with regard to children's adjustment (Brodzinsky, 2006; Beckett et al, 2008). The present study's findings clearly resonate with these contemporary findings, and highlight the fact that issues which were present for the participants are continuing in contemporary adoption practice. This study therefore adds a valuable longitudinal perspective which can contribute to social work practice in adoption today.

(4)   The study is retrospective, and relied on the memories of the participants. Although this provided very rich data, it would be helpful to carry out a prospective study which tracked sibling relationships post-adoption as they happen.

Conclusion

This study has been grounded in the importance of continuity between the past, present and future for adopted people with siblings; in knowing who you are, where you are from, where you are going next and why. The findings underline that adoption has life-long implications for adopted people, their birth and adoptive siblings and the wider adoptive kinship network, which need to be considered in social work practice today. Social workers have a legal obligation to consider the life-long impact of adoption, but

what does this mean in practice? In the case of siblings, this means going beyond the 'here and now' when carrying out assessments of sibling groups and making decisions about their future. It means thinking about and anticipating their future needs, understanding that many of the consequences of permanently removing children from their birth families do not reveal themselves until long after the child has been placed in their adoptive family. It also means thinking about how those caring for sibling groups can be supported, not just initially but in the longer term. Fundamentally, sibling relationships have the potential to last a life-time, and this study has demonstrated that adopted people can develop, manage and sustain positive and meaningful connections with their birth and adoptive siblings throughout their lives. Social work practice now needs to actively address how adopted people can know about and develop meaningful relationships with their birth siblings in childhood, so that continuity between past, present and future can be achieved.

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APPENDIX 1

Centre for Research on the Child and Family

UEA — University of East Anglia

ADOPTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research project. My name is Heather Ottaway and I am a PhD researcher in the Centre for Research on the Child and Family, which is based in the School of Social Work and Psychology at the University of East Anglia, Norwich.

This information sheet is designed to tell you a bit more about my research and what you can expect if you choose to take part in the study.

What is this project about?

My study is looking at how adopted adults experience their birth sibling relationships, whether you have grown up together or apart from your birth brothers and sisters. I am also interested in your relationships with any adoptive siblings you may have in your adoptive family.

Why is this important?

The voices of adults who have been adopted are very important, because we can learn a lot from your individual experiences. This study will be very valuable in helping policy makers, social workers and adoptive parents to understand more about birth and adoptive sibling relationships for adopted people.

How is this study being carried out?

I am planning to interview approximately 20-25 adopted adults who have grown up either together or apart from their birth siblings. All participants will be interviewed once by myself for approximately 1½ - 2 hours, either in their own home or at a mutually agreed venue. During the interview, participants will be asked to reflect on growing up in their adoptive family, and their knowledge and experience of their birth siblings from childhood through to the present day. The interviews will be taped so that I can listen to them again in order to accurately draw out the key themes of the interview.

What will happen to the information collected in the interviews?

The research study will be written up as a PhD thesis, and in addition I hope to publish my findings in academic journals and through conference presentations.

I may quote some of the things participants say during their interview when I write up my study. These quotes would not be used without the participants' permission, which is given by signing a consent form to agree to take part in the study. To ensure that your personal identity is protected, I will not report any of my findings using your real name, nor include any personal identifying information. Once the interview has taken place, if participants decide on reflection that they no longer wish to be involved in the study, then they are welcome to contact me up to two days after the interview and withdraw their participation in the research.

I hope this has helped to answer any questions you may have about this study. If you would like to take part, or have any further queries, then please contact me either by phone (07862 254946) or via e-mail: h.ottaway@uea.ac.uk.

Many thanks once again for your interest in this study.

APPENDIX 2 – INFORMATION FOR AGENCIES

SIBLING CONNECTIONS: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS OF ADOPTED ADULTS

This PhD research project is supervised by Professor Gillian Schofield and Dr Beth Neil at the School of Social Work and Psychology, University of East Anglia. The researcher is a qualified and experienced social work practitioner who has considerable experience and skills in working with children and adults affected by adoption, including adoption panel membership. The research project has received full approval through the University's research governance and ethics process.

Aims

The voices of children and adults who have been adopted have been powerful within the research literature and influential in the development of adoption policy and practice. However, few studies have examined adopted adults' perspectives in-depth in relation to their birth siblings, which is a significant gap. The aim of this study therefore is to examine the meanings and experiences of birth sibling relationships for adopted people across the life-span who have experienced growing up together or apart from their birth brothers and sisters. I am also interested in their relationships with any adoptive siblings they may have in their adoptive family.

Methods

The researcher plans to interview 20-25 adopted adults who grew up with some or all of their birth siblings in adoptive placements, and those who were separated through adoption (with or without contact). It is intended that the sample group will be as diverse as possible, including those adopted adults who have approached adoption agencies for birth records counselling and possible contact with their birth siblings and those who have not, adopted adults who experienced some level of contact (direct or indirect) with their birth siblings throughout childhood, and those who had no contact.

The research participants will be interviewed once by the researcher for approximately 1 ½ - 2 hours either in their own homes or at a mutually agreed neutral venue. The participants will be asked to reflect on their experiences of adoption and their birth/ adoptive sibling relationships from childhood to the present day. All identifying information, interview transcripts and published data regarding the adoption agencies and individual research participants will be anonymised in order to protect confidentiality. Further, informed consent will be gained in writing from each participant prior to their research interview, and they will be given the option to withdraw from the research if they so choose following the interview.

It is intended that this study will be of value to all those involved in working with sibling groups who require permanency planning, in order to assist practitioners to more fully understand sibling relationships through the life-span for adopted people, and how to translate this into informed and comprehensive decision-making and support post-placement.

Contact Details

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APPENDIX 3 - CONSENT FORM

My name is Heather Ottaway, and I am a researcher within the School of Social Work and Psychology at the University of East Anglia. I am undertaking a research project on:

The experiences of adopted adults and their sibling relationships.

The research is for a Doctorate and is being supervised by Professor Gillian Schofield who can be contacted at: School of Social Work and Psychology, Elizabeth Fry Building, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ. Tel: (01603) 593561.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study.

Before we start I need to tell you that:

- The interview will be confidential
- You will remain anonymous at all times
- You are a volunteer
- You do not have to answer any question if you don't want to
- You can stop the interview at any point if you wish to do so.
- You can withdraw from the study at any point

The interview will be kept strictly confidential. With your permission excerpts may be used in the final thesis and research papers but under no circumstances will your name or identity be divulged in these documents.

Please sign the form below to confirm that we have discussed the above and that you are in agreement for excerpts from your interview to be used in the final reports.

Signed...

Name...

Date...

Would you like to be informed of the outcome of the research?   YES/ NO

If yes, please give an address for forwarding:

Thank you.   Heather Ottaway

APPENDIX 4 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

<u>**Scene Setting**</u>

Firstly may I thank you for agreeing to talk to me. As you know I am doing some research on adopted adults' experiences of their birth sibling relationships. I am also interested in adopted adults' experiences of growing up with their adoptive siblings. I would like to listen to your experiences in this regard from childhood through to the present day, as at the moment we don't know much about adopted people's relationships with their siblings, and it is really helpful talking to adopted adults who can tell us about it in their own words.

I will be doing a number of interviews, and everybody's stories will be different, but I am hoping that when I look at them all together there might be some identifiable key points in people's experiences which will help social workers understand more about sibling relationships for adopted people.

The results of the research may be published, but the information will be anonymised and you will not be identifiable, as I explained in the consent form. I also want to remind you that you do not have to answer any question you would not rather answer. I would also like to tape the interview to make sure that I have got down exactly what you say, and not just what I think I heard.

Are you happy to go ahead?

<u>**Introduction**</u>

I want to discuss your experiences of your birth siblings, but it would really help me to understand more if we could also talk about your adoptive family. I would like to ask you about your experiences of your birth and adoptive family, and specifically your sibling relationships, from early childhood through to the present day, if that is ok with you.

I most want to hear about what you feel is important, so please tell me what <u>you</u> think are the important things. I also want to remind you that you do not have to answer any question you would rather not, and you are free to stop the interview at any time – although of course I hope you will feel able to continue with it until the end.

Can we begin by me asking how old are you, and what are your current life circumstances?

<u>Experiences prior to adoption</u>

- Where were you born?

    If older, can you tell me about the kind of house you lived in?

- Who was in your birth family at that time?

    Can you tell me about any memories you have of your birth family, or events you can remember? What would a birthday be like? Christmas? Holidays?
    Can I ask you to describe your relationship with your birth brothers and sisters before you were adopted?
    Can I ask you to describe your relationship with your birth parents?

    What are your happiest memories?

    What are your saddest memories?

- If the participant was fostered, ask the same questions as above.
- Can you tell me about what you know of the reasons for your adoption?
- How do you know this information?

<u>Childhood experiences post adoption</u>

- You came to live with your adoptive family when you were _____ . Where had you been living before you moved to live with them?
- Who was in your adoptive family when you moved to live with them?
- Did anyone else join the family after you were adopted?
- Can I ask you to describe your relationships with your adoptive siblings as a young child?

    Who were you closest to? Why? Why not?
    Can you take a moment at think of five words to describe your relationship with your adoptive brothers/ sisters when you were a child?

Can you tell me why you chose those words, and perhaps give an example or incident that illustrates that word?

Would you think about your birth siblings/ birth family as a child? When? What did you think about? Who?

- Can I ask you to describe your relationship with your adoptive parents as a young child?

  Who were you closest to? Why? Why not?

- How did you describe your adoptive family and birth family to other people as a child? What words did you use?

- What would a day in your family life be like (when you were about 5)?

- What are you happiest memories as a child?

- What are your saddest memories as a child?

- At what point in your life did you know you were adopted?

  How were you told?
  What were you told?
  How were your birth siblings/ birth family talked about?
  Did you have photographs?
  Can you tell me about what you knew about them as a child?
  Can you tell me if you were curious about your birth family as a child? Why?
  Did you have any form of contact with them when you were growing up? How? When? How was this organised? Can you tell me a bit about it?

- Is there anything else you think is important to know about your childhood?

Adolescent years

Can we talk about your teenage years now?

- Can I ask you to tell me about your relationships with your adoptive siblings as a teenager?

  Who were you closest to? Why? Why not?
  Can you take a moment at think of some words to describe your relationship with your adoptive brothers/ sisters when you were a teenager?

Can you tell me why you chose those words, and perhaps give an example or incident that illustrates that word?

- Would you think about your birth siblings as a teenager? What? When?
- Would you think about your birth parents as a teenager? What? When?
- Can you tell me whether your thoughts and feelings about your birth siblings and/ or your birth parents changed from childhood to when you were a teenager?

- Can I ask you to describe your relationship with your adoptive parents as a teenager? Who were you closest to? Why? Why not?
- How did you describe your adoptive family and birth family to other people as a teenager? What words did you use?

Happiest memories?

Saddest memories?

Is there anything else you think is important to know about your adolescence?

Adulthood

Can we talk about your adult years now?

- Can you tell me about your relationships with your adoptive siblings as an adult?

    Who are you closest to? Why? Why not? Has this changed throughout adulthood? How? Why?
    Can you take a moment at think of some words to describe your relationship with your adoptive brothers/ sisters in early adulthood? Now?
    Can you tell me why you chose those words, and perhaps give an example or incident that illustrates that word?

- Can you tell me about whether you decided as an adult to search for your birth family?

  > What do you think made you want to search/ not search? Why? How old were you?
  >
  > Do you think anyone or anything influenced your decision?
  >
  > What was in your mind at the time you were searching?
  >
  > What happened?
  >
  > How did your adoptive family feel?
  >
  > Prompts – how did you go about finding your birth relatives?
  >
  > What was it like for you when you met them?
  >
  > Who do you look like?
  >
  > Best memory?
  >
  > Worst memory?
  >
  > Did you receive any support with your search? From where?
  >
  > What help/ support would you have liked?

- Can you tell me what has happened since you first met them?

  > What, if anything, would you say you have gained by tracing your birth relatives? Why?
  >
  > What, if anything, would you say you have lost by tracing your birth relatives? Why?
  >
  > Did your decision to trace your birth family affect your relationship with your adoptive family? How? In what way?

Current circumstances:

- Are you still in touch with any of your birth relatives? Why/ why not?
- How do you now describe your adoptive family and birth family to other people? What words do you use?

Ending

What advice would you want to give a social worker today who was making decisions about brothers and sisters who could not remain living with their birth parents?

APPENDIX 5 - INTERVIEW SUMMARY SHEET

Name (code name)
Transcript number
Date of interview
Place of interview
Ethnic origin
Age
Age when adopted
Age knew adopted
Age starting searching
Searching for
Age at reunion
Tim since reunion
Contact post-reunion
Number of birth siblings
Number of adoptive siblings
Employment
Marital status
Children

Reason given for adoption

Knowledge of adoption as a child

Curiosity about birth family

Adoption experience

Experiences/ feelings about adoptive sibling

Motivation to search

Experience of searching/ reunion with birth family

Experience of on-going relationships with birth siblings/ birth family

Ideas/ meanings of 'family'

Ideas/ meanings of 'sibling'

Main themes/ issues raised

Impressions of participant

Informal observations of interview setting

APPENDIX 6 – CODING AND ANALYSIS PROCESS FOR 'MEANING' CATEGORY

Open Coding (examples)

Feeling different
Feeling like an outsider
Feelings of obligation
Sharing genes
Don't share a history
Feelings of belonging and difference
Earning status of sibling
Connection through similarity
Time builds history
Time builds rights and obligations
Time builds loyalty
Kinship based on biological ties
Kinship based on social ties
Family is where you grow up
Family is who you're connected to
Family is being connected through 'blood'
We're siblings, blood aside
Like a stranger in a foreign land
Instant connection through looking alike
Integrating the past, present and future
Working out the 'proper thing to do'
Feeling included or excluded

Focused Coding – 4 categories

- Conceptualising 'family' – meanings of being adopted and having a birth family.

- Conceptualising 'siblings' in 'family life'

- Personal beliefs about biological and social connectedness.

- Moral notions of kinship – the 'what is the proper thing to do?'

'MEANING' – Cultural and personal meanings of 'family' and 'siblings'

APPENDIX 7 - Diagrammatic development of psycho-social model

Thinking

- Ability to reflect on and make sense of the past and present. For example:

Evaluation of adoption experience, thinking about dual identity, expectations of relationships, evaluation of reunion experience

- Ability to be empathic and keep other people 'in mind'.
- Communicative and structural openness in adoptive and birth families.
- Influence of adoptive and birth family's perspectives – mutual support or torn loyalties.

Relating

With birth siblings:

- Liking the birth sibling
- Having things in common/ feeling similar to sibling
- Shared experiences over time
- Extent of sharing 'ordinary kinship'
- Levels of mutuality and power
- Expressions of care and concern

TIME

Context

Situational factors:

- Class, gender, birth order
- Age at adoption
- Presence or absence of adoptive and/ or birth siblings
- Presence or absence of adoptive and/ or birth parents

Knowledge:

- Knowledge of birth siblings
- Knowledge of birth history

Stage of life:

- Having children, caring for elderly parents, having a career. geographical distance

Meaning

- Conceptualisation of 'family' – meanings of being adopted and having birth family.

- The relevance of siblings in 'family life'

- Personal beliefs about biological and social connections.

- Moral notions of kinship – the 'proper thing to do'