Identity issues for looked after children with no knowledge of their origins: Implications for research and practice

In the area of child care policy and practice, the benefits for children who are separated from their birth parents of maintaining some form of connection with their family of origin is now widely accepted. The arguments in support of this are found mainly in research concerning adoption and stem from four inter-related themes: children’s rights to know of their heritage and background; parents’ rights to information about the well-being of their children; the benefits of having knowledge about origins; and concerns about the impact of not knowing. The effects on the developing identities of those who, for various reasons, are unlikely ever to know the details of their birth parent(s) is an under-researched issue. Karen Winter and Olivia Cohen use a case study to illustrate some of the gaps concerning knowledge in this area. They argue that there is much to be learnt from the development of research projects which have as their focus the accounts of children and young people, from a wide range of care arrangements, regarding identity issues where they have no connections with or knowledge about their birth parent(s).

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Introduction
The debates about the relevance, significance and importance of identity issues for children separated from their families of origin have gathered increasing momentum since the 1960s (Pugh, 1999; Smith and Logan, 2004) and now form a central consideration in all decisions made by professionals concerning children who cannot live with their birth families (Howe and Feast, 2000; Argent, 2002; Neil and Howe, 2004). The emergence of these recent debates occurs against a background in which policy and practice, particularly in the area of adoption, was underpinned by a ‘child rescue’ model, the simplified consequences of which included the removal of children from the perceived negative influences of their family of origin and their permanent placement with families of ‘better means’ (Haimes and Timms, 1985; Treacher and Katz, 2000). Within this context the practice of severing a child’s links with his or her birth family was motivated by a desire to protect the children in their new family situation from the perceived harmful effects of interference by birth family members, the need to provide the children with ‘a fresh start’ and to secure the stability of the new care arrangements for the children by protecting adoptive parents from potential difficulties in managing relationships with birth family members (Haimes and Timms, 1985; Farrelly-Conway, 1993; Fratter, 1996; Pugh, 1999; Howe and Feast, 2000; Smith and Logan, 2004). The finality of the adoption process, in severing connections, has been described as drawing ‘a veil between the past and the present lives of adopted persons and [making] it as opaque and impenetrable as possible; like the veil which God has placed between the living and the dead’ (Lawson v Registrar General, 106 L J 204, 1956 taken from Farrelly-Conway, 1993). At this time the issue of a child’s identity, when separated from birth family, was often not seen as a problem beyond an acknowledgement that there was, perhaps, a need to tell the child of their legal status at some point (Haimes and Timms, 1985). As Fratter (1996) states:

The practice of severing any form of birth family contact regardless of individual circumstances would suggest that in the recent past a sense of identity was seen as less important than a sense of permanence. (p 14)

Welbourne (2002) redefines this as a tension between the conflicting ‘needs’ and ‘rights’ of individual looked after children in which the welfare principle (the need for permanence) has predominated over the rights of children (the right
to name, identity and family). Today, the adoptive process operates within a framework in which these complexities for those adopted, their birth families and adoptive parents are acknowledged. A central concern has become the maintenance of connections with family of origin (Argent, 2002; Neil and Howe, 2004). As Argent (2002) states:

_Hardly anyone today would suggest that children can or should 'make a fresh start' when they join 'permanent' new families, however traumatic their past experiences have been . . . It is no longer a question of whether children should remain connected to their origins but rather how connections can best be preserved and how children can be protected in often problematic circumstances._ (p 2)

These changes have been informed by four main developments. Firstly, there have been several changes in the legal frameworks governing adoption, including the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), Children Act (1989), Human Rights Act (1998) and the Adoption and Children Act (2002). Debates about identity issues for adopted children and young people have most recently been observed during the process of the introduction, in England, of the Adoption and Children Act (2002). Debates about identity issues for adopted children and young people have most recently been observed during the process of the introduction, in England, of the Adoption and Children Act (2002). In this process, the legal right of adopted people searching for information on their birth families was hotly contested. The preceding White Paper (2000) acknowledged the rights of adopted people to information about their heritage and family backgrounds and proposed that legislation should cover their access to selected material held in adoption records. However, with the introduction of the Adoption and Children Bill (2001) a more restrictive arrangement concerning access to information was proposed which precluded the release of any identifying information and/or the birth certificate without the consent of the birth parent(s). These proposals were strongly contested by a range of adoption agencies and, as a result, the Government formulated some amendments. In practice, for adoptive adults this broadly means that they will be able to obtain details from the adoption agency that will enable them to obtain their original birth certificate and will have the right to specific documents from the court which made the order. The nature and parameters of these arrangements are outlined in a series of regulations due to be implemented in December 2005 (HMSO 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

Secondly, and as a result of the above, recent guidance (Department of Health, 2001) and practice developments (including the use of life-story books, post-adoption contact, intermediary services and the Adoption Contact Register) have all been underpinned by principles that include the requirement to consider a child's identity rights and the maintenance of connections with birth family (Welbourne, 2002; Smith and Logan, 2004).

Thirdly, the impact of the Government's drive to secure an increase in the numbers of looked after children who become adopted (Performance Innovation Unit, 2000) will result in changes to the characteristics of these children at the point of adoption, with an increase in their age and an associated likelihood of them having well-established relationships with their birth families (Welbourne, 2002; Smith and Logan, 2004).

Fourthly, several research studies have documented accounts of those who have been affected by the adoption process as well as their efforts to re-establish connections with their families of origin (commonly known as searching) and the outcomes of the searching process (Triseliotis, 1973; Haines and Timms, 1985; Anderson, 1988; Sachdev, 1992; Feast et al, 1994, 1998; Ryburn, 1995; Feast and Howe, 1997; Howe and Feast, 2000; Feast and Philpot, 2003). What this research highlights is the detrimental effects, for some, of the total severance from the birth family model previously associated with adoption practice and the desires of many adopted people (although by no means all) affected by this practice to re-establish their links with their families of origin. The research has also highlighted the emotional and psychological benefits to most (but not all)
adopter people of re-establishing these connections.

To date, research, policy and practice concerning searching and identity issues have been understood through the lens of adoption. In this article it is argued that a significant gap remains in terms of our knowledge about the meaning and significance of identity for those looked after children and young people who are living in a range of care arrangements outside of adoption and who, in addition, are extremely unlikely, for a variety of reasons, ever to have knowledge about or connections with birth family. This would include ‘foundlings’ (babies left by their birth parent(s), usually in a public place, to be found by someone else), children born of relationships where the details of the birth father are unknown (or known by the birth mother but never disclosed) and babies separated from birth families through war, civil strife, persecution and natural disaster. These children are in a range of different care situations including step-parent adoptions, intercountry adoptions, long-term foster care or residential settings and private fostering arrangements.

Through the use of a case study, this article will show that research exploring the accounts of this group of children is badly needed and is likely to provide a view of searching and identity issues very different from that which currently exists. We begin by examining in more detail what is currently known about searching and the constructions of identity within this. We then focus on the case study and emergent issues. In conclusion, the implications of the case study for future understanding, research and practice are discussed.

**Research on searching**

Currently there exists a fairly extensive research base on the searching process in relation to adoption which has revealed an increase in the numbers of those who search for birth family members (see Pugh, 1999; Howe and Feast, 2000; Smith and Logan, 2004). It can be grouped under four themes: who searches; why they search; what they are searching for; and, finally, the outcomes of the search process.

It has been found that in terms of who searches, more adopted females than adopted males search for birth relatives (Feast and Howe, 1997; Howe and Feast, 2000). There is also a relationship between the likelihood of searching and age at the time of placement, with older children more likely to search (Howe and Feast, 2000). Secondly, in terms of why searching occurs, there is a division of opinion between ‘natural versus pathological explanations for searching’ (Haines and Timms, 1985, p 75). McWhinnie (1967) and Triseliotis (1973), for example, established a link between mental health/emotional difficulties and searching. Triseliotis (1973) concluded that:

*The majority of adoptees searching for their origins conveyed a picture of alienations and poor self-image which they generally attributed to depriving experiences within the adoptive home.*

(p 75)

The implication here is that searching is connected with emotional and mental difficulties in later life.

Haines and Timms (1985) were concerned by these conclusions because they depicted those engaged in searching as unstable and maladjusted, with the result that the process of searching was essentially perceived as problematic. By contrast, they took the view that searching was not connected to emotional/mental difficulties but was a natural and normal process. They argued that ‘curiosity about family history is readily understandable; it is by no means curious’ (Haines and Timms, 1985, p 2) and stems from issues relating to self-identity. This quest for identity has been previously examined by Triseliotis (1973). His point is that, for the adopted people in his study, lack of connection (at whatever level) is detrimental to their well-being, resulting in his conclusion ‘that no person should be cut off from their origins’ (Triseliotis, 1973, p 166).

Other research has drawn attention to the fact that for most adopted people, although not all, there is a curiosity about discovering their origins which emerges into an active and often prolonged...
journey in search of birth family and which is not connected with a good or bad adoptive experience (Sachdev, 1992). Subsequent research has highlighted situational ‘life-cycle’ triggers including adolescence, marriage and childbirth (Feast and Howe, 1997) which may explain searching.

Thirdly, in terms of what is being searched for, some adopted people are seeking information, others face-to-face meetings and others the re-establishment of relationships (Howe and Feast, 2000). All of these factors, as well as the differences between those who search and those who do not, are explored in the research by Howe and Feast (2000) and Feast and Philpot (2003).

Fourthly, in terms of the longer-term outcomes of the search process, research by Howe and Feast (2000) (based on a study of nearly 500 adopted people) concluded that:

... love and affection between the adopted person and his or her parents does not, for the vast majority, falter when there is openness about adoption or where contact has been established with a birth parent or other birth relatives. (p 93)

It, like other studies (McWhinnie, 1967; Kornitzer, 1968; Triseliotis, 1973,1983; Fratter, 1996; Ryburn, 1998), has also drawn attention to the emotional/psychological benefits for adopted people of knowledge about their origins and access to their birth records.

Overall, three key features can be observed in the research discussed. Firstly, most of the research focuses on the retrospective adult accounts of those who have been adopted. This has meant that the participants have usually found the ‘identity’ for which they have searched and thus the concept of identity has never been a serious problem. Secondly, in the existing research ‘identity’ is assumed to be a fixed entity which is there to be found. This is evidenced by the fact that, once reconnected, the individual’s problem of ‘identity’ has been solved. Thirdly, much of the research is underpinned by psychological or psycho-social assumptions about identity development. Thus, awareness of identity issues and the subsequent process of searching are assumed to emerge from an individual’s internal disquiet, especially in adolescence and young adulthood. However, the concept of ‘identity’ is more complex than this, as will now be explored.

The concept of identity

A useful definition of the term ‘identity’ is provided by Smith and Logan (2004) who state that it refers to:

The construction of a sense of self, and personal uniqueness, through awareness of particular physical and psychological characteristics that both differentiate individuals from each other and link them together. Achievement of identity requires knowledge about social and genetic antecedents and the ability to incorporate personal history into a continuing narrative as self-awareness is mediated through new experiences, relationships and social contexts. (p 12)

Identity building and the construction of self therefore rely on four inter-related components: (1) nature (physical attributes or genetic identity); (2) nurture (relationship between self and social contexts including the family, community, school, peer group relations and religious institutions which will reflect a particular class, ethnic and/or cultural positioning); (3) cognition (the meaning one attaches to one’s own experiences); and (4) time, in the sense that the development of self is a dynamic and life-long process in which identity ‘evolves over the life span’ (Howe and Feast, 2000, p 175).

Hence, as Triseliotis indicates, the term ‘identity’ is a complex, fluid and multi-faceted concept with the notion of self comprising a number of identities such as ‘personal, social, physical, genealogical, racial or ethnic’ (Triseliotis, 2000, p 90). In addition, the often used terms such as ‘firm identity, stable personality or positive self-image’ (Triseliotis, 1973, p 79) do not readily capture the social processes by which identity is shaped, experienced, lived, worked and
re-worked in different social contexts over time. Triseliotis (1973) captures the essence of these social processes when he states that:

... the 'I' of the present is an accumulation of all the 'I's of yesterday and yester-year and can only be understood in the context of family relationships, relatives, origins, environment, culture, etc... All of these experiences are interrelated by the growing individual and eventually form the core of [one's] identity. (pp 80–81)

It is within this context that Triseliotis (2000) has raised two points yet to be researched in relation to searching and identity issues: firstly, that identity is not fixed, innate or static but is fluid, open, and time and context specific and, secondly, that the development and fulfilment of some aspects of identity may compensate for the absence of others. The focus on the social construction of identity (rather than as an innate, internal and fixed entity) allows for the debate to be widened and for consideration to be given to the ways in which children and young people are actively involved in the construction, negotiation and understanding of their own sense of identity.

The next section includes the account of one person's experience (namely that of the second author) as a looked after child, of never having knowledge of her family of origin and the impact of this on her sense of identity. This will be used to draw out implications for future research and practice.

A personal account of unsuccessful searching

I was raised within the care system through children’s home and foster care and have never met or known any of my birth family. I have agreed to write a little about my experience in an attempt to give further insight into this area of identity and hopefully to positively influence practitioners in their day-to-day contact with families raising children in foster care, residential care and adoptive placements.

An important aspect of my job as a family placement social worker is to train potential foster and adoptive carers. One of the training exercises is called ‘What’s in a name?’ Invariably when it comes to my turn I have to admit that I don’t know how or why I was called Miranda (not my real name). I also find that I am the only one who has to acknowledge my ignorance of my name’s history – and this is just my first name. From this, I have concluded that for those of us who know how we got our names the exercise appears mundane. People give a look of surprise or resignation when asked to participate in the exercise. For those like me, however, ‘What’s in a name?’ can mean everything. It is vitally important for our sense of who we are to know the most simple and taken-for-granted issues in life. Our sense of belonging is tied up in these familial traditions, such as being named after our grandparents, ancestors and people of importance to our families.

Not knowing my surname compounded my lack of sense of identity, made even worse by several placement moves while in foster care. Personally I have inherited three surnames from my time in foster care and, although I have often had fun with so many names, deep down I longed to be somebody that only belonging to a mother and father could have afforded me. Not understanding all the feelings I was having, from anger to gratitude, confusion to powerlessness, all I could do was act. I always had this feeling of being alone. I also remember having an overwhelming feeling of loss coming on me at various times. Without warning and for no apparent reason I would think my foster mum was dead. Even as an adult this same overwhelming loss remained with me, expressing itself in a dream of my foster mother’s death. Then I would wake up praying, ‘Dear God, please don’t let my mammy die! Dear God, don’t let my mammy die!’ This dream continued until five years ago.

I also remember that in foster care I felt that inside me it was as if I lived in a world of my own. I fantasised about
my birth mother to such an extent that even the Virgin Mary would have been inferior or, at least, have had great difficulty in matching my mum. All my life was lived in conflict, calling myself by my foster family’s name only to feel I was betraying my true name and my mother. I also lied incessantly about myself. I told friends that my mum and dad were rich and lived in America. My imagination knew no boundaries.

As I didn’t have contact with my birth family (and know only that my birth mother was a ‘wee little girl’ but couldn’t take care of me) and because I was never sure of my surname, I also lost a sense of myself. I became lost in foster care. I even changed my first name once. It didn’t mean anything to me. It was just another name. When an individual doesn’t even have this essential rock of a name to cling to while they grow and mature, they develop a sense of ‘only the now’ matters. At least I did. I didn’t have a past to cling to and, as my present was so turbulent, I dared not think of tomorrow or the future. I was only able to cope with the now and this is something that has remained with me to this day. I have written a little story of a ball called ‘In Out All About’ which, for me, accurately conveys the sense of weightlessness and lack of grounding that I experienced from not having a name, not having contact with my birth family and of growing up in care.

I have felt feelings of anger spreading to others because of mistrust, misunderstanding and a very real sense of being ‘nobody’ and existing for anyone. My journey of self-discovery was not only necessary for me to survive but to live. Sadly I am still unable to answer the question ‘Who Am I?’ The feelings of my childhood remain with me today.

Implications for research
This personal account provides a story regarding the narrator’s lack of knowledge about her origins and the effect of this during childhood and into adulthood. It is only one account and, as such, it cannot be used for generalisation to others in this situation. However, its ‘stand alone’ status should not detract from a consideration of the broad issues it raises, particularly with regard to future research and practice in this area. At the outset it is clear that the account confirms the results of other research which highlights the feelings, for some, of incompleteness, lack of genetic continuity, not belonging, feeling rootless, loss and low self-esteem as a result of the adoption process and the severing of links with their families of origin (Triseliotis, 1973; Haines and Timms, 1985; Howe and Feast, 2000; Feast and Philpot, 2003).

Beyond this, the account raises a series of issues which research could usefully explore. Firstly, it suggests that the lack of connection with origins has had an impact on other areas of identity and has led to persistent feelings of dislocation. Research could usefully explore whether these experiences are common to other looked after children and young people who have never had knowledge of family of origin. It could help provide answers to questions such as: How is identity experienced, understood and constructed by looked after children and young people in the absence of birth family connections? Can the development of certain parts of identity, for example social aspects, compensate for the absence of other aspects? Is identity, in terms of connections with birth family, significant or not? Are there contexts in which the significance is diminished or increased?

Secondly, the account also indicates an awareness of identity issues at a young age and the development of related coping skills, such as the use of fantasy with a reference to ‘the imagination knowing no boundaries’. The author, for example, draws attention to the feeling of a ‘divided sense of loyalty’ between birth family and foster family regarding the use of names (even when birth family was unknown) that resulted in the feeling of living perpetually with considerable conflict. It also points to feelings of loss and the trauma associated with this, as illustrated in the recurring nightmare that persisted into adulthood. These are important aspects of the account because
it is often assumed that identity only becomes an issue for children when they reach adolescence. The use of alternative, particularly sociological, models of identity formation to underpin research with children on their own perspectives would provide practitioners with insight into children's own abilities and capacities regarding identity formation and provide a greater understanding of their own experiences on this issue. While some research reflects these principles and addresses what looked after children wish to know about their birth families (Harper, 1993) and the perspectives of adopted children regarding their experiences of the adoption process (Thomas et al., 1999), the issue of identity per se is not addressed.

Lastly, the account describes the circumstances of someone who was not adopted and whose identity development and search were conducted in a context lacking in the knowledge base, support systems and resources which were then more readily available for those who had been adopted. A handful of research projects (Pugh, 1999; Kirton et al., 2001; Malloy, 2002) have drawn attention to issues concerning identity and searching for people who have previously lived in foster/residential care by documenting the adult accounts of those who sought information about birth family and by providing a quantitative analysis of the characteristics of those engaged in this process. But, again, this research does not address the perspectives of children/young people in various care situations regarding the issue of identity as related to birth family origins.

In summary, it is argued that further research could usefully examine the accounts of looked after children and young people living in a range of care arrangements concerning their own constructions, understandings and experiences of identity in the absence of information about birth parent(s).

**Implications for practice**

On one level it could be argued that there is little a practitioner can do if birth family members cannot be identified. However, our personal and professional experience has shown the contrary. Two perspectives have informed our practice. Firstly, the identity of an individual should be treated as if it were a treasure trove comprised of a myriad of stones, each representing a different facet to that identity, be it physical, social or genealogical. Each part, though different, belongs to the whole. Some parts may be attractive, others may not. For other parts it will be the case that 'all that glitters is not gold'. The job of the practitioner, therefore, is to recognise the potential value of identity to the beholder, to collect as many of the different stones as possible and to make these available when/if requested. Secondly, the starting point for the practitioner should be the assumption that at some stage an individual may wish to discover their origins and imagine the ‘worst case’ scenario, for the searcher, in which no information is available or, even worse, that there is no record of the attempts made by others to establish details of these connections.

In practice, the right of an individual to knowledge of origins and the right of birth family to privacy and confidentiality can conflict. There is a balance to be had and the parameters of this are often determined by recourse to the decision of a judge as, for example, in the case of searching and tracing birth parent(s) in intercountry and step-parent adoptions. Within that framework there are useful pointers to good practice that will not be unfamiliar to those working in this area:

- **Be inquisitive** – If told that birth family members’ details are unknown and cannot be traced, examine what has been done, what has not been done, what could be done and by whom.

- **Be committed** – Leave no stone unturned. To be told, for example, the name of someone but that they have since disappeared ‘off the face of the earth’ requires further time and effort to establish whether this is indeed the case.

- **Use all available resources** – Practitioners have at their disposal particular networks, knowledge and resources to facilitate the search for and the collation of any information about someone’s
origin. These same tools may be unavailable to the individual embarking on a journey to establish their connections. It will be helpful to the individual involved to know what has been done, by whom, when and with what results.

- **Keep records** – Written records detailing attempts to make connections may represent the nearest an individual will get to understanding their history and they may be the only existing record. Their importance cannot be underestimated. Aside from the detail these records may contain, they take on a symbolic importance representing the value that someone else has attributed to the identity of another. This may be significant in terms of the future self-esteem of an individual.

- **Record forensically** – Record anything and everything that does or does not come to light. Keep anything that might be of relevance. Again this cannot be underestimated. In the case of ‘foundlings’, for example, what can become of enormous significance are the exact details of the circumstances in which they were found and by whom, what they were wearing, what they were placed in, whether these items were kept, whether anything else was found with them, whether they were asleep, crying, warm, cold, clean, dirty, what they looked like, and so forth.

**Conclusions**

The aim of this article has been to draw attention to those who have no connections with birth family and who, despite searching, remain unconnected. It has sought, through a case study of someone previously looked after, to explore the relationship between these experiences and identity issues. In conclusion, what is being argued is the need for further research which examines the meaning of identity for those who do not have information about and connections with their families of origin. Beyond this, what is also being argued is the need for research which focuses on the accounts of looked after children and young people living in a range of care situations regarding their own constructions, understandings, experiences and perspectives of identity issues, particularly in situations where connections with the family of origin are lost and/or unknown. It is argued that this work would provide practitioners with insights into the significance and importance of different aspects of identity to children and young people. It would also establish their capabilities in the social construction of their own identities in different social contexts, as well as help answer difficult questions concerning the meaning of identity in the permanent absence of information about origins. Lastly, it is argued that practice (in word and in deed) should reflect the rights to and the potential value of identity for the looked after children and young people with whose care they are charged.

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