I have no beginning and no end
The experience of being a foundling

Audrey Mullender, Anita Pavlovic and Victoria Staples report on the second stage of a study of abandonment conducted at the University of Warwick in 2002–03. Interviews with ten adults who had been ‘foundlings’ revealed a wealth of thoughts and feelings that were often significantly different from those of other adopted people. Abandonment is harder to talk about and perhaps harder to come to terms with than adoption alone. The profound ignorance about identity, encompassing such fundamental details as original name, ethnicity and date of birth, also marks out foundlings as having particular issues to come to terms with. Nevertheless, those interviewed had grown out of being angry towards their birth mothers and wondered what they must have gone through to do something so desperate. Birth records counselling and attempts at tracing back to the earliest months of life were of limited use. NORCAP had been supportive to a number but, again, could not get past the lack of information. Much more could be done to help in policy and practice terms, notably by extending the Adoption Contact Register in specific ways that would help foundlings. Beyond this, decriminalising and facilitating abandonment are major social policy questions overdue for consideration in the UK.

Introduction
It might be supposed that the phenomenon of abandonment had virtually disappeared. Although it is rare in the UK for a child to be left to their fate by a parent who is never traced, there are still a handful of instances like this every year in England and Wales recorded by the Office for National Statistics. For those adults who were abandoned as infants and who truly know nothing of their background, it is important to ask, firstly, what their experiences have been. Secondly, it would be useful to know the extent to which professionals can empathise simply by knowing about adoption or whether there are additional issues to bear in mind. Finally, if there are particular factors occurring in abandonment, then we need to think about their policy and practice implications.

There are no real answers available to the above questions because this is a grossly under-researched area. We do know, from adoption literature, that people who grow up adopted have a natural need to know about their origins as a part of determining their identity and of understanding who they are (Triseliotis, 1973; Brodzinsky et al, 1992). We also know that, since this need occurs in ‘normal, well-adjusted adults’, it is perhaps best seen as a question of ‘social identity’ (Haimes and Timms, 1985, p 76) and as an attempt to account for being ‘different’ (p 77), not as pathological or sparked only by a bad adoption experience. As time has gone on, studies of search and reunion have further confirmed that ‘having knowledge about one’s origins and understanding the reasons for being placed for adoption are important stages in the adopted person’s search for identity’ (Howe and Feast, 2000, p 187). We have learned, too, that most adopted people who pursue the possibility of reunion find it ‘satisfying and worthwhile’ because it can help ‘answer questions about origins, background, and the reasons for being placed’ (Howe and Feast, 2001, p 362). We have also made links with different but related...
areas of child care policy, such as assisted reproduction, where the need to know has hitherto been frustrated (Blyth et al., 2001). We might assume, then, that issues about the past and perhaps about themselves in the present might be to the fore for adults who have been abandoned as infants and for whom any possibility of finding out about their heritage, let alone of meeting their birth mothers or other relatives, is completely ruled out. This, in turn, would have implications for practitioners and policy makers in adoption and related fields because it would mean that, despite the small numbers, the particular experiences and needs of adult foundlings should never be forgotten or glossed over within wider considerations about adoption. Every tiny scrap of information or of connectedness to the past might be expected to take on additional significance in a context where almost nothing at all has survived.

Methodology
In 2002–03, a study of abandonment conducted at the University of Warwick, included an attempt to answer the questions stated above as to the particular feelings, experiences and factors involved in having been abandoned. Archival research with police records and with information held by key child care charities, notably the archive of the Thomas Coram Foundation, had already allowed the research team to build up a historical and contemporary picture of abandonment. We had become most interested in true ‘foundling’ situations where the child had been left and the abandoner had vanished without trace. The second stage of the research consisted of semi-structured telephone interviews conducted with ten adults who had been abandoned as infants, six recruited through people on the NORCAP Foundlings Register (by means of a general approach from NORCAP) and four in response to a BBC appeal following an item on the Radio 4 Woman’s Hour programme. Because abandonment is relatively rare and foundlings are often hidden in the population, this was of necessity a small sample. We attempted to make it purposive, however, by recruiting individuals of varying ages and both genders from around the country. They emerged, too, as having had differing experiences of adoption and of finding out about the past. Anonymity was offered to all respondents who wanted it; for example, the NORCAP members telephoned the interviewer on a Free-phone number and consequently did not have to reveal their names or contact details. Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed in full and manually analysed on a thematic basis in order to look for key aspects of the ‘foundling’ experience. This paper will outline the issues that emerged, the extent to which they appear to take us beyond our mainstream adoption knowledge and the lessons there may be for adoption practitioners.

Finding out
The way in which foundlings had discovered, firstly, that they were adopted and, secondly, that they had been abandoned and, secondly, that they had been abandoned had varied. Sometimes the two pieces of information had been imparted at around the same time so that abandonment formed part of that individual’s adoption story:

My adopted mother told me when I was small and old enough to understand, about sevenish . . . She did tell me that I was left. (Female interviewee)

More often, adoptive parents seem to have coped better with talking about, or admitting to, adoption than its background in abandonment:

My dad gave me a few documents, when I was getting married . . . I knew I was adopted . . . He said, ‘By the way, the adoption order, when you see it in the envelope, mentions the word “foundling”’. I said, ‘Thank you, Dad’, and put the document away. (Male interviewee)

Haimes and Timms (1985) point out how dependent adopted children are on their

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2 NORCAP (formerly the National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and their Parents) is the UK-wide organisation supporting adult adoptees and their families.
adoptive parents to impart information and, earlier, Triseliotis had noted that adopters might well need continual help with disclosure. Certainly, several of the older foundlings in the current study, both male and female, described how they had been denied information yet had been unable to ask questions because it was not done in the era when they were young. There was a hint that the issues of illegitimacy and/or unknown or (considered to be) undesirable background were key elements of what could not be revealed:

Well, I always knew I was a little ‘foreign’... nobody ever said anything and, they were so strict, you usually didn’t ask. (Female interviewee)

For one or two respondents, section 51 counselling was when the shock came of finding out the full truth. Here again, we see the separation between finding out about being adopted and the additional element of finding about having been abandoned:

I was anticipating that I was going to get a name... I would be able to trace somebody... You can imagine the huge disappointment that I actually got when he [birth records counsellor] eventually did present my birth certificate to me, as it had ‘Unknown’ where it said ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’... that was one thing I had never even dreamt of, that I had been a foundling, been abandoned. (Female interviewee)

Feelings about abandonment

The respondents talked quite openly about their feelings about abandonment. Mostly, this was in relation to a ‘need to know’ (see Triseliotis, 1973; Haimes and Timms, 1985):

I describe it as having a book with blank pages or having a story with a middle but I have no beginning and no end. I need to know the beginning of the story... and, of course, you want to know your family history... Foundlings know nothing at all and it is wanting... to build up a picture... (Female interviewee)

What foundlings wanted to know clearly overlapped considerably with the needs of adopted people more generally to know about their background:

I would like to know about my mother’s family. Was she happy at home?... Did she have brothers and sisters? Just the ordinary things that people take for granted. You are yearning to know. (Female interviewee)

We know from Haimes and Timms (1985) that ‘the background and circumstances of conception and birth continue to be of crucial significance in the present’ (p 2). There is another level over and above this, however, that emerged as peculiar to the experience of having been abandoned:

... underneath all that wanting to know... foundlings have this need to know: ‘Why was I abandoned? What were the circumstances leading up to it and the reasons behind that?’ That’s the most important question I think every foundling must ask themselves. At the end of the day, that is what you want to know. (Female interviewee)

Even though every adopted person wants to know why they were placed for adoption, for some adult foundlings we interviewed, the extremity of despair they imagined their birth mother going through did seem to exacerbate the desire to understand exactly what had transpired. This was further compounded by the absolute lack of information that could be passed on to them about her, and about their own earliest days.

As well as the need to know, identity issues emerged. Grotevant (1997) emphasises the importance of identity and self-worth in adoption, and relates these to the

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3 Since 1975, adults of 18 years of age or over who were adopted in England and Wales have been able to apply to the Registrar General for access to their birth records. Section 51 of the Adoption Act 1976 stipulates that people adopted before 12 November 1975 should receive counselling before such access is allowed.
need to construct an identity through adolescence and into adulthood because of the adoption experience. In the present study, the extent to which this remained a live issue varied. For some, there had always been, and remained, a gap:

I . . . felt bereft and lonesome and quietly unhappy about who I was and all the rest of it. (Male interviewee)

Others were far less driven to try and access the missing information, thinking about it only occasionally or barely at all:

It’s not been a thing that’s been nagging and niggling at me. Yes, I’d love to find out more, of course, but it’s not going to drive me insane. (Female interviewee)

Here again, for some foundlings, there was a difference between coming to terms with being adopted and with having been abandoned:

I told very few people . . . It’s like ‘coming out’. I don’t know if it was because I was adopted. I think it was because I’d been found. (Female interviewee)

Having been abandoned, then, could sometimes be harder to cope with than adoption on its own.

Name
Having no name, in the sense of not knowing one’s original name, can be quite traumatic because this is such a fundamental part of human identity. It logically follows that naming an abandoned infant is a significant act, as is the choice by the adopters of whether or not to retain any part of an earlier naming by professionals:

. . . [after] my doctor’s mother – the doctor named me [name]. . . . We kept that, and my middle name is [name], which he named me after an Irish nurse who was looking after me in the hospital. Yes, I’m glad [they] kept my name. (Female interviewee)

Three of the foundlings interviewed had actually had their first name pinned to them when they were found but for none of the three, unfortunately, had it been used in childhood – in two instances because the adopters did not like the name and, in the other, because it was a foreign name that was changed in daily usage to something considered more pronounceable by a working-class English family. Two of these respondents reverted to their original first name in adulthood.

There can be, then, additional issues for abandoned people in relation to their names. Unlike other adopted people, foundlings have no known original last name so they tend to get named after some circumstance related to themselves and their discovery, such as the place they were found or the place they were taken to:

I was called [surname] because of the hospital, after [same name] hospital. (Female interviewee)

Ethnicity
Like their original name, ethnicity becomes a total mystery if a person’s origins are unknown, with only physical appearance to go on:

People do think I look a bit foreign, but they can’t tell what it is. It is a sort of indescribable Mediterranean. It could be some other – I don’t know. It’s just that I look a little bit foreign, myself. (Female interviewee)

Sometimes there were other clues but still no certainty:

I was found in a Jewish area, so I could be Jewish . . . I’m quite dark, but I could be anything really. From an Italian come over, anything . . . She could have had a fling with an Italian or a Spaniard. (Female interviewee)

Despite this, most respondents, including those quoted above, said they ticked ‘White British’ on official forms.

Date of birth
Date of birth was a major issue for our foundling interviewees and is clearly an issue that other adopted people do not
share because they have an original birth certificate:

I don’t even know when I was born, to be exact. All I know is that it was thereabouts the 28th April. (Female interviewee)

Only if the infant is virtually newborn and has the umbilical cord still attached, can medical staff be anything like exact in their assessment of age:

I was found on 30th [month, year] and they estimated that I was only a day or two old so my birthday is 28th [month], as far as I know. (Female interviewee)

Otherwise, the doctor has to make an intelligent guess. For the individual concerned, it would be worth professionals later explaining this because, otherwise, it may look like bureaucratic inefficiency:

There wasn’t a date of birth given. It just said, ‘Found on 19th December 19** . . . One or two of the documents say I was found on the 19th, so why my birthday is the 9th November, God knows . . . Why did they pick the 9th? It is so annoying that errors are made.’ (Male interviewee)

This degree of uncertainty leaves the foundling having to find a way of celebrating their birthday regardless:

I get all sort of – well it’s my birthday, so what do I care? (Male interviewee)

This man clung onto the one secure thing he could glean from the uncertainty – his astrological sign: ‘I am a Scorpio though.’

The issue of time does appear to have distinctive features in abandonment, over and above those in the broader adoption literature. This is because the focus is not only on the possibility that their birth mother will no longer be around but also – in the absence of any written record of who they are – that anyone who might know any information about their case of abandonment will no longer be available. There will then be no way of tracing possible remaining family:

. . . because of this issue that time is running out about finding information . . . asking questions and asking wider people what they do and don’t remember. Time will come when those people working at the places where people who were abandoned or left or cared for for some time no longer are working and they become harder to track down. (Male interviewee)

Time was also an issue in terms of the time frames: from birth to abandonment, to being found, to being adopted:

Found in ’42, adopted in ’43 but formalised in ’44. (Male interviewee)

At the beginning of all this was a lost period of time about which no one knew anything. Again, many of the foundlings had a sense of what, to them, were profound gaps in what little information they had:

I had been in a hospital that I had been taken to when they found me . . . Why I stayed there until I was eight months old, I don’t know. (Female interviewee)

The common, but incorrect, assumption that abandoned infants are all newborn, adds a further sense of mystery for those adult foundlings who knew this was not the case for them.

All of the above aspects of abandonment had elements that were different from straightforward adoption.

Place and circumstances

The issue as to whether an infant can be said to have been ‘left to be found’ is a critical one nowadays for the police, in
deciding whether or not to treat an abandonment as a crime. It was vital, too, for the adult foundlings interviewed in our study:

*I wanted to know: Was I left to be found or left not to be found?* (Male interviewee)

Having been left somewhere where they were likely to be found became a highly significant factor in the way they had managed to come to terms with their early history and, of course, one they did not share with other adopted people:

*She must have wanted me to be found or she wouldn’t have left me safely.* (Female interviewee)

Being left in a place where someone was bound to come along took on a major importance. Even a woman who, as a baby, had been left in a telephone box took comfort from the fact that it was ‘somewhere dry and safe’ and ‘used a great deal’. And one person we talked to had a story with definite overtones of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, perhaps the most famous foundling story in literature since Moses:

*I was placed, well dressed, in a first-class carriage, so I suppose she had some hope that somebody first class . . . somebody wealthy would find me.* (Female interviewee)

Evidence of previous care-giving, or any object left with the baby that was meant to protect or provide, also appeared to give comfort and to reinforce the idea that the abandonment had not been cold-hearted:

*I was quite well dressed, apparently. Little leggings and booties. There was a bottle and a little packet of feed.* (Female interviewee)

All of these elements were different from adoption and made it particularly important to foundlings to have any objects from the past:

*I’m . . . upset that the shawl I was wrapped in wasn’t kept. I don’t suppose anyone thought to keep it.* (Female interviewee)

Feelings towards birth mothers

Triseliotis *et al* (1997, p 235) noted that the adoption experience would naturally give rise for adopted people to questions about ‘the circumstances of the loss of their birth parents’. In the present study, on the whole, adult foundlings’ feelings towards their birth mothers were certainly full of unknowns but were typically forgiving in nature:

*I don’t hold a grudge about it . . . [I’d just] like to know what her reasons were.* (Female interviewee)

Part of the ability to be sympathetic rather than vengeful rested on an attempt to imagine themselves in their birth mother’s own shoes:

*I’m just very sad for her – it must have been a very lonely time. When I had my children, I had so much support . . . I can’t imagine doing it alone.* (Female interviewee)

It was almost as if it was easier to recognise that a woman abandoning a child must have been *in extremis*, as opposed to one placing a child for adoption who is commonly assumed to have had choices (even though the latter is not necessarily true; see, for example, Inglis, 1984; Wells, 1994):

*I can actually feel sympathy for her because I feel that this was done out of sheer desperation and possibly fear . . . I don’t feel any resentment or bitterness toward her at all, I really don’t.* (Female interviewee)

Some respondents had been angry as children but had grown out of it when mature enough to see the situation from their mother’s point of view:

*I was incredibly angry with the woman who had left me. She couldn’t be a real mother – it wasn’t natural to not want a baby. Of course, my feelings have*
changed over the years and now I mostly just feel sympathy for whoever she was. She must have been desperate to have done such a thing. (Female interviewee)

The foundlings who expressed sympathy for their birth mothers had constructed, in some cases, quite elaborate possible scenarios that might have led to their abandonment:

I can imagine her creeping out of a house somewhere, probably within walking distance... in my situation, your mind does tend to go into overdrive and [you] have all these different things that you imagine that might have happened. You haven’t any proof. (Female interviewee)

At least three respondents mentioned having a feeling that their mother might have watched until they were safely discovered.

Being found
One thing that most of the adult foundlings we talked to did seem to have — and, again, this is special to them and not shared with other adopted people — was knowledge of the person who found them. One person found the family of this man, who had discovered her in his vehicle, via media appeals when she was actually looking for her mother. Most of those who knew who had found them also knew their names. In one case, this was written on the birth certificate. All of this group also knew in some detail where they had been found: the town or city, the area and the type of location (the garden of a house, a telephone kiosk, and so on).

For the only two people who did not know where or how they had been found, this appeared to relate to having spent time in institutions in their earliest months. One woman, for example, had been adopted from a former children’s home, the whereabouts of whose records were unknown. This left particularly large gaps in their knowledge:

I don’t even know if I was found round here or somewhere else. I didn’t think to ask about that. (Female interviewee)

Background information
Perhaps because three-fifths of our sample were recruited via NORCAP, most had already been through section 51 counselling. Two noted that their birth records counsellors had experienced particular difficulty in working with them:

... she made an appointment — she kept cancelling it... she was so worried [in case] I didn’t know that I was actually a foundling. She kept putting it off and putting it off. (Female interviewee)

I remember the look on the social worker’s face... relief. Relief that I knew there wasn’t a name, that I already knew I had been found. (Female interviewee)

Fewer had yet searched other official records of any kind:

I really must make it a thing I do, because I would like to get hold of those records. It would be interesting to read. It probably wouldn’t come up with much but, you know, it’s part of my life. (Female interviewee)

Several had been given old newspaper cuttings or had searched contemporary media records. Again, this is something that is not relevant to adopted people. Because of their profound lack of early information, a number of the adult foundlings had tried to trace the staff of the hospital or children’s home where they had been cared for, or other professionals involved with their case, but all had met with dead ends owing to the lapse of time:

It was so disappointing for me that everything [police file] had just gone — was thrown away, discarded. (Female interviewee)

More than one person talked, in precisely the terms that adopted people more generally often tend to (Haimes and Timms, 1985), about not wanting to seek more information while their adoptive parents are still alive:
I would have felt, really, that I was betraying him to have wanted to have looked . . . I wouldn’t have wanted him to think that he hadn’t have been good enough or had not been a good father. (Female interviewee)

NORCAP had been very supportive and informative to those who were members, with useful leaflets and, often, personal contact with the organiser of the Foundlings Group:

NORCAP have done a lot for me . . . they were wonderful. (Female interviewee)

The information that they sent me was very helpful . . . this list of things to do, which I followed. (Female interviewee)

The only disappointment was that NORCAP could not do more in the complete absence of linking information:

How can I find anything out now, because I have absolutely nothing to go on? I’ve no name, I’ve no clue at all. (Female interviewee)

Just one person, after extensive use of the local media in the area where she was found, thought she had traced a birth family member and was in the process of following this up with a DNA test. Her possible half-sister had always known that her mother had had another baby before her, and had spotted a remarkable family resemblance when the adult foundling concerned was featured on television. Also, this respondent had been found within walking distance of where her possible birth mother had gone to live after being thrown out of home for being pregnant. This potential reunion was a wholly exceptional eventuality, as opposed to being the norm nowadays for many adopted people (albeit still an emotional one).

Telling family and friends
Talking to others about being a foundling was a difficult issue for nearly all of those interviewed:

I’m not ashamed of it, but it’s not something that I think should be told to everybody. (Female interviewee)

It is a complex topic to discuss and raises many questions that are difficult, both in terms of not having the information and of the strong emotions aroused. This was particularly true where fiancés and spouses were involved:

I never spoke to anybody about it, really, until I got married and then I told my husband about it. That was difficult and I knew that I couldn’t leave things as they were. (Female interviewee)

Some respondents had felt awkward telling their children:

I didn’t even tell him until it was in the paper because I was waiting for the right time to mention it. (Female interviewee)

Another had told hers only in adulthood:

Yes, my children know now, but I only told them a few years ago, when I decided to start looking . . . I thought it was time they knew . . . I thought [my daughter] . . . would be angry with me for not telling her sooner, but she was incredibly supportive and understanding. (Female interviewee)

With younger children, one of the fears was that learning about an abandonment and adoption so close to home would create insecurity:

He said, ‘I’m yours, aren’t I?’ and I said ‘Oh, yes’. (Female interviewee)

However, others had told their children naturally and easily and could not now even remember when or how. One man’s children had always known and had shown little reaction until he wrote out all his experiences, with all the documents that he had, in a little booklet and gave it to his adult son and daughter:

I gave it to my son to read . . . and he was absolutely overcome with emotion about it . . . then I gave it to my daughter who’s
never, ever shown any interest in it at all . . . and . . . she broke down totally after that. (Male interviewee)

There does seem perhaps, then to be an additional layer of concern, embarrassment or emotion for some people in revealing abandonment to their children, as opposed to talking solely about adoption.

**Foundlings’ views on policy and practice issues**
We asked about a range of policy and practice issues that are peculiar to abandonment. Respondents appeared more likely than the general public to know that abandonment is still a criminal offence, but many had only learnt this through NORCAP or only recently. On the whole, they thought it should be decriminalised:

*I don’t think punishing these women would help. I think it should be made more clear that there is help available and that women don’t have to leave their babies in the first place . . . it could put some women off coming forward, even if they want to, in case they are prosecuted . . . it would be awful to think that a mother didn’t come forward just because she was afraid of what might happen to her.* (Female interviewee)

but with residual powers to take action in extreme cases:

*If a baby is left . . . safely, then I think the mother should be able to come back without fear of getting into trouble and with the support of social services. But, if a woman leaves a baby somewhere where it is in danger of not being found or isn’t well dressed and left out in the cold, then I think there should be a penalty for that.* (Female interviewee)

Most of those asked were ambivalent about facilitated abandonment, for example the well-known Hamburg ‘baby flaps’. This was seen by several as perhaps going a step too far because it might make abandonment too easy and would not meet the needs of the child:

*The baby box, where you can just dump unwanted children? Yes, I’ve heard about that and . . . I can see that [children can be left safely] . . . but it doesn’t help the child to understand why their mother can’t look after them . . . [and] I think we would have many more children left if we had a system like that in England.* (Female interviewee)

The ideal for most would be to help only those who were really unable to care, although one woman was more sympathetic:

*I think it [facilitated abandonment] is an excellent idea, yes . . . I think that other countries should certainly give it a trial to try it out. I think it is better than the options that exist now . . . for the baby’s sake, if nothing else. If we can find any way at all of keeping them safe and giving them a chance in life, then we’ve got to do it.* (Female interviewee)

Several of those interviewed were shocked and even condemnatory that abandonments were continuing to occur, despite all the advances in contraception, abortion, adoption and social attitudes towards unmarried mothers:

* . . . there is no need for it to happen . . . It makes me angry . . . I find it very difficult to get my head round that it is happening these days.* (Female interviewee)

Respondents were also asked what more could be done to help foundlings. Information was top of the list:

*Their records should be kept up to date and with much more information about what decisions were made and why. The people who are involved should be named, and little accounts written explaining how they knew the child or what they did for them. I also think any pieces that appear in the papers should be kept so that they can look at them when they are bigger. Anything, really, that would take away the need to be a detective.* (Female interviewee)

This begins to connect into the issue of
keeping things safe for the foundling:

. . . the thing that I find very good now is that they are keeping the clothes that he [recently abandoned baby] was found in and anything connected with him. They are keeping a diary . . . which is wonderful . . . I feel it is vitally important . . . that anything, any scrap of information is kept. (Female interviewee)

The same respondent also explained why this mattered so much:

. . . what people in my situation need is that contact with the past. It's the past you want to know about. Any link that you can find is vitally important. (Female interviewee)

There was support for extension of the official Adoption Contact Register to cater properly for foundlings and the mothers who abandoned them, as NORCAP is currently trying to do:

Very definitely, yes. I think that's something that should be looked into and should be made available for foundlings. The mothers that have left the babies – if they could come forward without being prosecuted, if there was some way that they could come forward and they could join a register, if it is was confidential . . . if they knew there was . . . somewhere they could contact where they could leave their details where they could be matched up with foundlings who give their details, I think that would be all to the good. It's not just from the baby's point of view; I think it is from the mother's point of view as well. I am sure that there are women out there who are desperate to find out. (Female interviewee)

This could not be done through names, as with adoption, since these are not known (which is why the Adoption Contact Register does not work for this group), but would be feasible based on shared knowledge of other facts:

I think there should be a Foundlings Contact Register . . . I know that I was found on a doorstep in ******** on such and such a date . . . and . . . my maternal mother . . . would know the same information. (Female interviewee)

One woman stressed the importance of advising foundlings to start searching for information early in life because of her own experience of places having closed and people having moved on. There were particularly strong views that it was important to stop there being any more children who did not know anything about their family origins:

I think they should leave something about themselves, but the child shouldn't find out, except with a certain amount of counselling or something. (Female interviewee)

There was also a suggestion of a service to help mothers who had abandoned infants to re-establish contact in later years:

I think something might be put on the internet. I know it's a long shot . . . but it would be nice to be given as much help as possible. (Female interviewee)

One respondent thought that facilitating abandonment could help birth mothers who might change their minds and, hence, help their children:

. . . in Germany, where they can leave these babies in these chutes, if you will, and they have up to eight weeks to come forward afterwards . . . maybe if there was that sort of a system whereby mothers might have second thoughts after they had done it and if they knew that they could claim that baby without any recriminations or prosecutions, maybe that would help. (Female interviewee)

Discussion
As might be imagined, adults who were abandoned talked about many of the same issues we would have expected from adults who were simply adopted. There are clear overlaps in terms of things like lifelong feelings of loss and the need to know (Triseliotis, 1973; Haimes and Timms, 1985). On the positive side,
abandoned people, like adopted people, seem to be able to use compensatory experiences to overcome a good deal of potential trauma; thus we interviewed one woman who talked about a very happy childhood that had tempered her need to know more about her past. Most foundlings do, of course, go on to be adopted so they share the adoption experience with others.

Where abandonment is concerned, however, there are some issues that more closely resemble an earlier era of adoption practice because of the additional shame or embarrassment that may be felt in relation to having been abandoned or adopting a child who was abandoned. This was true in our sample both of past generations, as with an adoptive parent who had been unable to talk to his foundling son about his background, even though the adoption itself was not concealed, and of more than one respondent in the present who was holding back from telling his or her own children because of the connotations still carried by abandonment. Linked to this additional layer of feelings is the fact that an adult foundling who does not know about his or her background, when going for birth records information, will have an unanticipated shock, even when he or she has come to terms with being adopted.

Foundlings do seem to face a whole set of issues on top of those raised by adoption. Foremost among these is the lack of any knowledge about their identity in the form of birth date, original name, ethnicity and so on. For some, though by no means all, this might make it harder to construct a secure sense of identity and self-worth (Grotevant, 1997), although the present small-scale, qualitative study cannot cast reliable light on a ‘cause and effect’ question such as this. Foundlings also have a lost period of time, before they were found, that may cause them distress and confusion. A major issue for those who were abandoned is whether or not they were left somewhere where they were virtually certain to be found and whether or not there was any other evidence of thought or care in the circumstances of their abandonment. These snippets of information are prone to be elaborated into ‘abandonment stories’ that can take on the same significance as adoption stories. Foundlings also have an additional question in relation to their search for information about their origins. While all adopted people can be assumed to wonder at some time or another why they were placed for adoption, asking why one was abandoned is of a different order. Abandonment is an unsanctioned, still illegal and clearly desperate act that cannot help but raise profound questions about the woman who was driven to do it or to collude with it. Paradoxically, in our sample at least, while this caused deep-seated curiosity and yearning to know more, at the same time it appeared to engender feelings of sympathy for a birth mother who was forced to take such an extreme way out of her dilemma.

Finally, all of the foregoing is exacerbated by the complete lack of hope foundlings have of ever gaining access to further information. No one can tell them what their mothers went through, what happened to them personally during their earliest hours, days or sometimes weeks, who they are related to, or even, in most cases, when precisely they were born. No one can inform them how old they are, what their ethnicity is or what health problems they are likely to develop. The only real hope of finding out any of this is the fluke of someone coming forward who knows about their case – and even that slim hope fades seriously over time. This, in turn, compounds the significance of the passing of time because the foundling is dependent solely on people who may still be alive for information, there being no official records to turn to. It makes the lack of knowledge that is shared with other adopted people, such as information about inherited health concerns, particularly poignant because there is no way of ever answering the questions.

Implications for policy and practice
The first implication for the practitioner in all of the above is to reinforce what we already know about adopted children. They have a profound need to know as much as can be known about their background history and to have a very sensitive
handling of any gaps that remain. Since there inevitably will be gaps for children and adults who were abandoned, both their social workers and their adoptive parents will need to handle this most carefully. For example, there will be issues if a foundling is placed in an adoptive home with another adopted child when the latter child seeks their birth records information. This will forcefully remind the foundling of what they cannot have.

Everything we know about ‘telling’ is writ large for abandoned children. They have two issues in their lives that may lead to unfortunate playground or adult revelations if information is not conveyed at the earliest possible time: adoption and abandonment. Also, as we saw above, a failure to explain what little we do know can add to individual confusion and distress. Much can be made, quite legitimately, of apparently tiny facts. A blanket left with a baby can imply a whole world of caring and can help the foundling to cope with the profound question they face as to what on earth their mother went through that forced her to resort to abandonment. Talking about being left to be found, having been cared for, having had any objects left with the infant (where this applies), can all be very helpful. An explanation of professional practice can fill in gaps that may otherwise seem bizarre, like vagueness about a birth date. For birth records counsellors, anticipating the shock that learning about abandonment may cause is essential and gleaning every little snippet from the file in advance of the session with the adult foundling is also likely to be helpful.

We need to do far more for foundlings and for their birth mothers. There should be an official Foundlings Contact Register, operated like the Adoption Contact Register but using the known facts of the abandonment as linking information to make a match. There seems little doubt that abandonment should cease to be a criminal offence since the fear of prosecution could prevent some mothers from coming forward. Presumably other charges could be brought where an infant came to harm or had been placed at undue risk. This leads on to the question of facilitating abandonment. By far the most straightforward method is the French one, whereby a mother can give birth anonymously and simply leave the hospital afterwards. Hamburg appears to be making a switch to this system, in fact, despite having become famous for its earlier ‘baby flaps’ in the walls of child care institutions. The French approach ensures that both mother and baby receive care and that basic health information, at the least, can be passed on to the child, although it remains controversial because the child concerned, when adult, cannot have access to birth records information (Feast and Howe, 2004). This may be seen as a violation of identity rights as part of the fundamental rights of the child (O’Donovan, 2000). In view of the other benefits of facilitated abandonment – the mother can, for example, change her mind if she wants to, without recrimination, and she does not face the threat of prosecution as remains the case in England and Wales – the idea could perhaps be varied in the UK to encompass the holding of other information for the child to receive in adulthood, akin to our current birth records practice for adopted people. Above all, as is indeed reflected in most current practice with the rare cases that do occur, all known details of the abandonment and the period immediately following, and of course any objects left with the baby, need to be preserved and passed on to the child. Keeping the name given at the time of being found as part of a name given later, by the adopters, may also be warmly welcomed by the foundling.

Conclusion

There are particular issues throughout the work with a foundling, from the moment they are discovered to the help they seek in adulthood (for example, in relation to birth records), that do not arise from adoption practice or study but that require additional awareness and knowledge. In particular, there is a real need for professionals to show sensitivity to what it feels like to have a complete lack of background heritage and identity:

Because I don’t know that there is anybody out there . . . I hope that I have got a
mother out there. I know it sounds silly.
(Female interviewee)

We have a duty to adult foundlings to think through what this means and to be ready, when one of these comparatively rare cases does occur, to place particular emphasis on any scraps of information or any items that connect with the past. We can also, if we encounter foundlings in our practice, show understanding of their particular experiences, the profound gaps in their knowledge about their origins and background, and the probable hopelessness of their desire to find out more. We can help them construct an identity in other ways and, meanwhile, we can argue for policy changes that might prevent such cases from occurring in the future or, at least, make access to information about the past more possible.

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