Mediated contact Reflections on a piece of after-adoption intermediary practice

Although professional intermediary work to facilitate contact between people separated by adoption is a common aspect of after-adoption work, relatively little light has been cast on the nuances of this sensitive area of practice. Hitherto a service mainly used by adopted people seeking contact with their birth relatives, it is anticipated that there will be growing numbers of people seeking the help of intermediaries as a result of the Adoption and Children Act (2002) which, from January 2006, has extended official tracing and contact services to birth relatives. This article by Gary Clapton combines a practice account of intermediary work with a critical review of the literature on the use of intermediaries. It seeks to bring together what has been publicly written about best practice and identify questions in need of further discussion.

Introduction

In light of the recent commencement of the provisions in section 98 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 that extend tracing and contact services to birth relatives, a more public discussion needs to begin about the practice and role of intermediaries in after-adoption work. Although agencies have been active in this field for many years, this is not reflected in the sparse body of published literature. For instance, NORCAP’s booklet, Searching for Family Connections, has been updated several times since its publication in 1983 yet carries only one page on intermediary services. This undoubtedly fails to reflect the training materials, advice and guidance available to the public and professionals from agencies such as NORCAP [now NORCAP – Adults Affected by Adoption]. While the Review of Adoption Law (Department of Health, 1992) sparked a rise in interest and the passage of the Adoption and Children Bill in 2001 and 2002 drew forth debate on intermediary services, few of these discussions have been written up or are readily available.

What follows is an exploration of the literature on intermediary practice interleaved with a diary-style account of the process and content of the work involved in drawing together a 69-year-old father and 44-year-old son who were separated by adoption and had never seen each other. The mediator’s version of the story is drawn from my notes taken over a period of four months. Identifying details have been removed and the parties concerned are aware of this article. It is hoped that such a detailed account of the twists and turns of intermediary practice, combined with the insights from a literature review, will usefully contribute to the development of policy and practice in intermediary work.

History of adoption intermediary work

Information and discussion regarding the use of a professional intermediary have only publicly emerged relatively recently. In England and Wales, adopted people have only had the right of access to their birth names (and thus identifying details about their birth parents) since 1975; and although adopted people in Scotland have always had access to their original birth records, all of the small body of literature on intermediary work dates from this period. Undoubtedly, friends, relatives and private investigators have been used as intermediaries by adopted people in bids to make contact with their birth relatives; therefore the little that is accessible relates to the work of professionals, and even this has little empirical grounding.

Expressions of the desire to use an intermediary to establish contact between relatives separated by adoption were recorded in a study of 500 people who had accessed birth records following the implementation of section 26 of the Children Act 1975. This study found that ‘the great majority of those who intended to trace a relative’ planned to use an inter-
mediary (Day, 1979, p 24). In another study of adopted adults’ intentions some years later, Feast suggested that ‘the adopted adult in 99.9 per cent of cases will opt to use the counsellor or a partner as the intermediary’ (1992, p 51). The adopted people in Stanaway’s research felt that it was ‘crucial for the agency to act as an intermediary’ (1996/7, p 24).

The desirability of using an intermediary has been reiterated more recently (see for example, Feast and Philpot, 2003) and the little research that has been undertaken confirms the usefulness of engaging an intermediary, arguing that it ‘does give a better chance of ongoing contact being established’ (Armstrong and Ormerod, 2005, p 7). Two publications, one in the UK from the Department of Health (2000) and the other in Australia (Armstrong and Ormerod, 2005), have set out to discuss and articulate the importance of an intermediary for all parties. These substantial works have been immensely helpful in developing the discussion and will be referred to throughout this article. Both contain useful statements concerning the intermediary’s worth.

Why use an intermediary?

Despite recent UK government regulations that seek to regulate the provision of intermediary services (Crown Office, 2005), there is a distinct absence of material that explores the nuances and subtleties of intermediary work. The booklet and training pack published by the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) in Australia contains discussion of many aspects of the work of an intermediary and has this to say in justification:

> in many instances the parties appreciate the assistance of a neutral third party in reaching an outcome which best accommodates their varying needs. The neutral person works to assist each to appreciate the other person’s perspective, to prevent avoidable problems, to generate options and to empower the parties to make choices which balance their own needs with the needs of others. (Armstrong and Ormerod, 2005, p 2)

At the very least, intermediaries can act as ‘buffers’, as well as sounding boards, and can assist the sought persons to deal with the issues one at a time, and at their own pace. (ibid, p 9)

Undoubtedly there was much that could be further discussed and explored in what Owen told me – in theory there was enough to suggest counselling or therapy, yet he made it clear that he had access to various supports and what he sought from a mediator was someone with experience of the job and the capability to act professionally and sensitively, should the situation require it. Owen’s eventual aim was to meet his last name to that of hers. Subsequently contact with her, according to him, had not been sustained – despite his efforts. Owen volunteered that perhaps not using a mediator to contact his birth mother may have been a factor in the failure to develop a relationship, thus his decision for help this time. My enquiries as regards Owen’s background and motivations were deep enough to establish that he had little contact with his adoptive parents.

Owen set the wheels in motion. He approached my agency with a request that his birth father be contacted on his behalf. He had searched the public records and found out what he believed to be his father’s whereabouts. Owen had all the information he needed to enable him to contact his father direct but instead had decided to use a mediator. The agency concerned is a well-established Scottish after-adoption charity with whom I have been associated since 1996 as a volunteer, qualified social worker and adviser. The decision to allocate the work to me was based upon my research and experience in working with birth fathers.

Owen had been born and adopted in 1961, was university educated, had been successful in local government and was active in the trade union and labour movement. Owen said that he felt it important to share with me that he was gay. After having traced and met his birth mother, he had changed
birth father, whose name was Adam. His short-term goal was to find a mediator he felt he could trust. Owen asked about how long I had acted as a mediator and what motivated me. In this matter, during our early discussions, Owen was assessing my potential as a mediator. Thus, and in my experience, it is frequent that the mediator also undergoes assessment; in addition to my experiences of outcomes of searches and contact, Owen’s questions regarding my credentials were both an expression of a natural need for reassurance and, it seemed, an effort to reduce the gap between expert and layperson.1

I told Owen of my personal connection with adoption. At the end of our discussion I indicated my willingness to act as ‘go-between’.

The role defined

Balancing needs

The Department of Health’s (2000) guidelines on intermediary services for birth relatives state that ‘The primary responsibility of the intermediary is to try to balance the needs, wishes and expectations of all those involved’ (p 27). Together with Intermediary Services in Post-adoption Reunion (Armstrong and Ormerod, 2005) from PARC in Australia, these publications represent the most comprehensive and helpful sets of discussion and guidance on intermediary work to date. The DH document sets out some key principles and aspects of the task, such as maintaining confidentiality, promoting partnership, negotiating how much information may be shared and discussing the possible duration of the work (2000, p 27). Stages are outlined and sample approach letters are provided. Similar principles and guidelines are contained in the Australian publication, with Armstrong and Ormerod adding the importance of impartiality and the promotion of safety (2005, pp 3–4).

Exploring support needs and assessing risk

Armstrong and Ormerod draw attention to a vital aspect of the intermediary’s role when they discuss the importance of support networks: ‘How much support do they [the searcher] have for search and contact?’ (2005, p 15). It is equally a responsibility to establish whether these exist for the person who is contacted and if they do not, to advise about how to secure help in coping with the ‘bolt from the blue’ (see below).

Armstrong and Ormerod go on to discuss another dimension of the intermediary role that has received little attention, namely risk assessment: distress that may be experienced by the person seeking contact if this is rejected, distress that may be suffered by the person being approached and the risk to either contacted or contactor of abuse (mental or physical) by the other party. Those of us who undertake intermediary work must (and do) recognise risk. Armstrong and Ormerod suggest that in some cases, if risk of abuse, fear or duress is detected by the prospective intermediary, ‘mediation may not be able to proceed’ (2005, p 4). The DH guidelines recommend in such cases that the counsellor should seek consultation before making any decision to withhold a service (2000, p 20). More recent regulations state that intermediaries ‘must have regard to the welfare of’ the applicant (and anyone else affected by an application for an intermediary service, including people under 18 years old) (Crown Office, 2005).

Contracting out?

The establishment of adoption support agencies under the terms of the new Adoption Act, which may be separate from adoption agencies (ie those that hold

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1 The question of how to respond when asked about personal details has been reasonably well explored in the literature on social worker–client relationships, if not so recently (Anderson and Mandell, 1989). In my experience it is a question that crops up very frequently in after-adoption work.
the adoption papers) raises the important question of the amount of information needed by an intermediary in order to undertake the task. If the adoption agency decides to undertake the intermediary function, much will be available to help the search and prepare the ground for contact. When the work is ‘contracted out’ very little information may be provided or available (Feast and Philpot, 2003, p 30). Perhaps more importantly, what if the intermediary has no access to records or information other than a name, a decades-old address or what the searcher may tell them? This last situation is not uncommon in current practice since any adopted person may decide to request an intermediary service at a crucial point in their search, or even after an earlier effort on their part has failed (for whatever reason). In such circumstances, the intermediary’s task may be recast as ‘acting for’ someone who has already done the work of searching and obtained the name of a birth parent and their home address. This ‘mid-journey’ decision by adopted people to seek help is not in keeping with the linear scenario laid out in the Adoption and Children Act regulations (Crown Office, 2005), which imagine an intermediary service application beginning from ignorance about a relative’s whereabouts and then working forwards. The realities of practice are more complex and therefore so are the challenges facing the intermediary.

Owen thought things over for a few days, then decided to proceed. We met to discuss what he knew of his father, his father’s relationship with his mother and other information, such as his father’s circumstances both then and now. The picture that emerged of Adam was that he was 69 and worked as a house painter. While he and Owen’s birth mother had been going steady at the time her pregnancy became known, they had separated. This was at Adam’s instigation according to the birth mother’s account received by Owen, and Adam had not been involved in either his birth or adoption. It was not even certain whether Adam knew the sex of his child. Owen had found out that Adam had gone on to have a second son and a daughter.

My letter to Adam was of the standard kind sent by mediators, ie it began with a hope that the right man had been contacted and went on to say that I was writing on behalf of someone who had been born in 1961 and who believed the letter’s recipient to be a relation. The letter gave a precise morning on which I could be contacted.

Adam called. He had ‘half known’ of a baby boy. According to him, he had been ‘kept out’ at first and decided that he ‘wasn’t wanted’. Much can happen in the space of the first telephone call. While the person who has instigated contact has gone through a process of readying him or herself, the person who gingerly, angrily or in a state of devastation picks up the phone to talk to the mediator has had no such preparation. Adam described my letter as ‘a bolt from the blue’. Adam had no support at the time of our first call, nor was this likely to become available. The fact that Adam responded was a major, if not the signal, that he was interested in knowing more about his son. After we had agreed that he was who we thought he was (‘aye, that sounds like me’), I then emphasised the more factual reasons for tracing and contacting him: What health matters ran in the family? Were there any traits Owen should be aware of? Who did Owen look like? Could Adam

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In May 2006, David Holmes, Chief Executive of BAAF, was quoted as saying that the new adoption support regulations may be having ‘unintended consequences’ (Community Care, 25 June 2006). The article concerned the pressures that independent social workers were coming under to register themselves as small adoption support agencies so that they could continue to carry out adoption assessments. However, the requirements for registration also affect intermediary work, some of which is undertaken by well-established individuals such as Ariel Bruce. Support agencies like the Natural Parents Network have had to debate whether to register or not.
help with some information about Owen’s social, biological and family heritage?

Whatever ice or caution there was at the beginning of our conversation disappeared as Adam freely answered these questions. He had brothers and sisters and a number of grandchildren. Owen had siblings. When I look at my notes from this telephone call, much is short phrases and lines on a page connecting Adam with the various details he was revealing. For instance, my scribbles are a mixture of fact (Northern Ireland/Cyprus for Adam’s tours of duty) and feelings – he had thought of his child ‘on and off’ and, of much significance to both Adam and Owen, just this year had been thinking of contacting the family of Owen’s birth mother ‘to find out about the boy’. As an experienced mediator I was aware that at the same time as Adam and I were trying to get to know each other, Owen would want to know the answer to the 64,000-dollar question: Was Adam pleasantly surprised? Was he interested to know his [first] son?

Conversations of the type that Adam and I were having are rarely repeated verbatim. What becomes the finished (that is, the transmissible) version is invariably selective. Equally, what I said to Adam in answer to his questions about Owen was not all that I knew. I left unsaid the matter of Owen being gay. Adam had asked whether Owen had children and I had replied that he did not. (Later Adam told me that the information that his son was 44, not married and had no children had begun him thinking about Owen’s sexual orientation.) So, Adam and I inched towards the first crucial decision: What next? My suggestion was standard: a letter exchange. Owen would probably have more questions than I had been able to ask on his behalf and he could put these in writing. Would Adam receive a letter? I had previously agreed with Owen that this ought to be the next step. (On only one previous occasion has my advice been rejected.) Then both father and son preferred me out of the picture as soon as possible and within an hour had, via me, exchanged mobile phone numbers and were talking to each other.

I had gone through the options involved in introducing each to the other: more calls from me relaying questions from Owen; letter contact via me; direct letter (‘not yet’); or telephone each other (‘not ready for that’). Unlike Owen, Adam had no access to e-mail. I hesitated over communicating Owen’s wish to meet and decided that Owen could say this direct in a letter. Adam readily agreed to be guided (‘What usually happens?’, ‘You’re the boss’) and went along with the proposal for a letter to him in which Owen could ask fuller questions. I asked if he would like a photograph. Adam was keen to see a picture of his son and would reciprocate with one of himself. Communication lines had opened.

Owen and I discussed what he wanted to say in his letter to Adam. Aside from elaborating on some family history questions, Owen was for ‘not making a big deal out of the gay thing’ but definitely telling Adam. In the end, the telling became one line in a long letter. Another question that arose was whether or not to type the letter. Being used to word processing, Owen felt more comfortable in Times New Roman. We agreed that what mattered was legibility and clarity (especially about his sexual orientation). The next question was harder. How should he sign the letter? Owen and I joked that ‘your long lost son’ would not be right. Neither would ‘yours sincerely’. In the end the Scots phrase ‘yours aye’, with its mixture of formality and informality, was settled on.

The process of calibrating, adjusting and timing their trajectories had begun. From then on the communication process, while involving much delight and excitement on both sides, also required sensitivity to their different paces. Owen was clear about wanting to meet. By the end of the
first phone call between Adam and I, Adam had not been able to discuss his feelings about any future meeting. Some phone conversations later, Adam said, ‘Yes, I’d like to meet – sometime, not soon.’ This meant that Owen’s hopes about a meeting had to be reined back. Still a meeting between the two of them was now on the cards.

Making and sustaining contact

Method
Writing about approaching adopted people, Smith and Wallace note that ‘care and sensitivity are needed relating to the amount of information shared in the beginning, both in the initial letter and the first conversation’ (2000, p 22). It is suggested that this equally applies in first contact with birth relatives; they may be unaware of the existence of the adopted person or be ignorant of the search abilities of adopted people. In discussing the common skills needed in contacting adopted people or birth relatives, Armstrong and Ormerod stress the importance of letter rather than telephone contact, which is likely to be intrusive. Their agency (PARC) has found that if initial contact is established by telephone, the likelihood of rejection is increased by 60 per cent (2005, p 20).

Timing
What appears not to be discussed in the literature is the question of timing of letters; among intermediaries, anecdotally speaking, the Christmas period seems to be avoided because of its charged nature for many people involved in adoption. Christmas, with its underlying ambivalence surrounding family togetherness, can be a time when reactions to intermediary letters may not be the most favourable. Weekends are also best avoided for receiving letters because the recipient may have to wait (or ‘stew’) for 48 hours before having a chance to respond. Mother’s Day, like Christmas, may also not be the best occasion to find someone in a responsive mood.

Impact

Trinder describes the unexpected letter from a birth relative as ‘an unexpected and unsolicited approach that is highly likely to be a considerable bombshell’ (2000, p 20). Armstrong and Ormerod (2005, pp 21–2) provide a comprehensive list of emotions that may be experienced, ranging from shock to anger. They go on to note that some factors may influence initial reactions, including whether or not the adoption has been discussed, who else may be at home during the initial contact and current family circumstances, such as whether there is conflict, ill health or a bereavement. Armstrong and Ormerod also note that the ‘found person may not hear all that is being said in the initial phone call’ (2005, p 23).

Once contact has been established
According to Armstrong and Ormerod, ‘there are significant numbers of cases where the two parties have compatible expectations and are comfortable about commencing an exchange of information immediately’ (2005, p 34). With regard to after-contact scenarios, they provide a comprehensive discussion of the variety of developments that may occur (ibid, pp 37–41). These include disappointment, the influence (negative or positive) of relatives and differences regarding expectations of intensity and frequency of contact.

Here it should be noted that in correspondence between parties (as distinct from that involving the intermediary), the matter of how to address someone and be addressed, what titles to use are recurring dilemmas. This is especially so in initial communications. The intermediary can be engaged in long discussions revolving around whether to sign a letter ‘your mother’, ‘mum’ or to use a first name. Clearly, the issue is not simply a technical one of nomenclature but, rather like most discussions in after-adoption work, involves ‘opening the can of worms’, for example, how a birth mother has (privately) thought of herself in the years since the adoption of her child.

When contact is rejected
The stages in mediation cannot simply be
seen as a means to an end. Sometimes the only contact achieved may be one telephone conversation or a letter to the intermediary from the person who has been traced. The information gathered during a contact such as this may be all that someone is willing to divulge. So if an overture to contact is rejected, is there a Plan B? A photograph, the possibility of a call at another time or non-identifying information might be better than nothing (Department of Health, 2000, p 31); see also Armstrong and Ormerod (2005, p 15 and p 32) regarding being prepared for rejection.

In conversation between us two weeks after our first telephone discussion, Adam suddenly said that he had changed his attitude towards Owen’s contact. My concentration level suddenly leaped. ‘I’ve changed from wanting to help out – a son ought to know something of his father. Now I want to find out about my son,’ said Adam. In other words, we’d got to the point where no longer was anyone (father) doing anyone else (son) a favour. Adam and Owen’s trajectories towards contact and meeting had come into alignment. My contacts between Owen and Adam had consisted of posting, receiving and passing on letters, shuttling to and fro on the phone (‘What did Adam think of the letter?’ ‘What did Owen think of the reply?’) and giving reactions to photographs (I couldn’t see immediate likenesses, they did). After one letter to Adam from me, six e-mails from me to Owen and 12 phone calls between myself and them, now a meeting could be talked of in terms of when and where. ‘Meeting’ rather than reunion seemed the right thing to call their forthcoming encounter. In the case of Owen and Adam, they had never been united and as such talk of a reunion felt inaccurate.

There was a second reason for deciding to call Adam and Owen’s coming together a meeting. This was because both of them were better relaxed by being helped to regard their meeting as one with ‘no strings attached’, in the sense that it could be a one-off event. Should one or other later feel or decide that one meeting had been enough then so be it. I even advised Owen to take a camera on the grounds that he may not have another opportunity to be photographed with his father. Such a conscious lowering of expectations perversely allowed their next step to be less laden with expectations that this was the start of a relationship.

Both men were thus freed to plan the details of their meeting on a Saturday on the platform at Perth railway station. In the run-up to the meeting, all three of us comfortably swapped train times and platform details. After the emotional rollercoaster of the early discussions – Adam’s answer to Owen’s trepidations about coming out to a father he’d never known was that he preferred ‘straight-talking’ and that one of his best friends was also gay – talking about trains was a relief.

My advice to Owen and Adam was firstly to meet somewhere neutral so that neither would feel as though they were in the other’s home town or patch; secondly, to agree some time boundaries concerning how long their afternoon would last. A train to catch home could be a reason for putting a ceiling on how long they planned with each other. Such a limitation operates in the event of their not hitting it off. An end would be in sight. Alternatively, a time limit would be useful because if they were doing well they would both need a break at some point. Such a suggestion might seem to be taking the spontaneity out of the event but if times can be agreed, then the parties are freed of fretting about whether the other might have a shorter or longer session in mind. A third piece of advice was that they didn’t bring a friend/spouse/relative. This may seem obvious but in my experience, anxieties provoked by contemplating a meeting of this sort sometime result in having a husband or wife in tow who, despite being supportive, can make the other party
feel out-numbered. When both parties bring along support the event can prove difficult to manage and be awkward and unsatisfying for all.

Adam and Owen took what they needed from all of this and had a successful meeting, at the end of which they exchanged phone numbers and contact details. Not only did talk of ‘meeting up’ smooth things in preparation, so too did my suggestions about the format of the day. These may not work for everyone and such ‘rules’ are regularly broken, but having a set of guidance seemed to provide assurance for a forthcoming event that was like no other for Owen and Adam.

Meeting
In my experience and to my knowledge, the kind of guidance I provided is regularly made available by mediators, but this advice-giving activity concerning first meetings has been rarely studied or discussed in the after-adoption literature. Regarding who is to be present at any meeting, Feast suggests that ‘most do not wish an intermediary present during a meeting’ (1992, p 48), although there are reports of adopted people requesting that their counsellor be there (Feast and Philpot, 2003, p 33). Indeed, any or all of the parties may bring friends and relatives to the meeting (or have them waiting around the corner or arranged to show up at an appointed time in case things ‘peter out’).

But what to term the meeting? This has been discussed elsewhere (Clapton, 2003) and a recent publication has repeated the observation that for some the word ‘reunion’ may be problematic (Trinder et al, 2004). In publications by Armstrong and Ormerod and the Department of Health, the term ‘reunion’ is used uncritically. Elsewhere, but never taken up, the phrase ‘restored contact’ has been used (Feast and Smith, 1993, p 40). To suggest a reunification may not be the most helpful in many circumstances. Brother and sister is one of the obvious pairings where ‘reunion’ does not seem an appropriate fit, yet Armstrong and Ormerod use just such a term for meetings between siblings (2005, p 46). Even in the arguably most tenable of situations, that of a meeting with a birth mother, the term ‘reunion’ can lend a layer of needless expectations and signals to an already supercharged event.

Duration of support
Where does intermediary work (even more to the point an intermediary ‘service’) start and stop? The literature suggests that reaching some adjustment to contact takes a while: ‘The process of adjustment to restored contact may be complex and lengthy’ (Feast and Smith, 1993, p 40). In a later evaluation, the same authors suggest that ‘people may need access to counselling over a period of years and not just at the point of contact’ (Feast and Smith, 1995, p 23). For Smith and Wallace, ‘Following contact, the counsellor will be available to provide support and assistance to all parties as needed’ (2000, p 18). Rather than years or an open-ended arrangement, Armstrong and Ormerod talk of months: ‘. . . the mediator may feel it sufficient to telephone both the parties for a follow-up after several months’ (2005, p 34). The length of involvement may be more of an issue when after-adoption support agencies are engaged. When record-holders do this work it may be that a more open-ended commitment is implicit as a result of the agency’s responsibilities to the adopted adult. However, if a service (counselling, intermediary work or a combination of both) is purchased or contracted for, limits necessarily become an issue.

Further discussion points
Power
How does the question of who initiates the work impinge on the dynamics? Is the intermediary service ‘purchased’ by one person but a service for two people? The issue of control emerges here. Armstrong and Ormerod refer to the found person being ‘likely to strongly sense a prior alliance between intermediary and searcher’ (2005, p 5). They also acknowledge that ‘initially there may be an element of advocacy’ if the intermediary has to press the case of the searcher, for instance, if there have been previous
unsuccessful attempts to make contact (ibid, p 43). Adopted adults have regularly complained about being treated like children. Feelings of powerlessness are seen as rooted in the adoption process itself (‘No one asked me’, ‘I was moved around like an unwanted parcel’). Additionally, knowledge of their adoptive status may be withheld or treated as an unpleasantness to be mentioned once, then never discussed. When adopted people become adults, it seems to them that they must revert to childhood and jump through hoops to gain access to information about their roots from children’s services teams. It is not uncommon for adopted adults to be referred to as the adopted child, as if, somehow, the act of adoption froze them in a permanently infantile state (Grimm, 1997; Robinson, 2005, p 12) – hence the necessity for the utmost care and avoidance of being and sounding partisan. In a study of the views of adopted people on search and contact, the feeling was expressed that ‘the agency should act as a body committed to safeguarding the interests of every party’ (Stanaway, 1996/7, p 27). The power dynamics are subtle and need to be acknowledged and negotiated in good intermediary practice because ‘it is again the responsibility of the intermediary to balance the various wishes of those involved to try to agree a way forward’ (Department of Health, 2000, p 32).

Go-between or counsellor?

It is widely acknowledged that intermediary work will raise sensitive issues for the parties involved and that in many cases counselling will be required. In the words of Feast and Smith (1993, p 38), ‘The role of the counsellor is to help each party explore the issues and possible outcomes renewed contact will present’ and ‘to ensure that all parties have considered the risks versus the opportunities’ (ibid, p 39). Armstrong and Ormerod are in no doubt that ‘counselling skills are needed’ (2005, p 40). Recent regulations issued in connection with the enactment of section 98 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 are clear that counselling must be made available (Crown Office, 2005).

If counselling is necessary before and after meetings, how is this to be done and by whom? This is not addressed by Armstrong and Ormerod (2005) who, together with Feast (1992), Feast and Smith (1993) and Smith and Wallace (2000), assume that counselling and intermediary work are virtually synonymous and will be undertaken by the same person. Intermediary and counsellor roles are often used interchangeably. While Armstrong and Ormerod discuss the distinct skills of professional mediation in non-adoption work, they opt for the catch-all term of ‘professional go-between’ (2005, p 1). The DH (2000) guidelines are helpfully clearer on this matter and suggest that counselling, searching and intermediary work are all separate tasks and may be undertaken by different people or agencies (p 21). However, they include follow-up support in the intermediary’s remit, which rather extends into post-contact counselling. Furthermore, it is clear from the description of some of the intermediary’s possible tasks that counselling comes with the territory (ibid, p 33). The new regulations make it clear that counselling may indeed be contracted out by an intermediary agency (Crown Office, 2005).

This work may also overlap, for example in the course of organising a first contact. This raises the prospect of a variety of agencies and people becoming involved in one person’s search for another because the work involved in locating identifying information, tracing, counselling and acting as an intermediary may all be undertaken by different people and agencies. The ‘one-stop shop’, in which an adoption agency provides a search and go-between service as well as counselling, seems the gold standard (and all done by one person), yet this may be difficult to achieve, for instance in cases where the adoption agency has ceased to exist and the papers are held by a local authority that lacks the skills needed to undertake the various elements of this work.

Cost

What of the financial costs incurred in bringing Owen and Adam together? The total cost feels incalculable without
having started off with a sand-timer to measure the professional hours and minutes spent. Undoubtedly, the agency fee of £30 charged to Owen is a huge underestimation. This fee has been in existence for years since it was first calculated on the (even then underestimated) basis of a letter and two or three telephone calls. While acknowledging that the present fee is ridiculously low, whatever it may be set at in the future it feels unethical to charge the person being approached. (Adam’s first reaction could justifiably be that he did not ask to be contacted.) Yet charging a more ‘realistic’ fee might price many out of receiving an intermediary service. Those who run such services or are planning to do so will need to recognise that intermediary services of the type described will not pay for themselves. In this context Stanaway’s reference to making a ‘small registration charge’ might be both conservative and the shape of things to come (1996/7, p 28). A detailed scrutiny of the recent regulations that have accompanied the introduction of section 98 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 clearly indicates that costs can pile up. Aside from a charge for counselling, the information needed to locate someone from the adoption agency, the Registrar General or the courts may incur fees. If the intermediary agency also decides that a prerequisite of any search is that the searcher has registered on an adoption contact register, the registration fee for this will also have to be included – to the possible detriment of the searcher.

The intermediary

Nowhere in the literature does there appear to be a discussion of the emotions of a key third party in intermediary work: the intermediary. While the process of contact and meeting may be an emotional rollercoaster for adopted people and birth relatives, it would be wrong to imagine that the intermediary is always emotionally neutral. For example, great frustration can arise over differences in intensity of interest from one or the other parties. Then there is your inner voice that declares a barely suppressible ‘result!’ when an intermediary letter receives a positive response. Additionally, as can be seen from the practice account, issues of sexual orientation and gender may be raised. There is insufficient space to explore such questions as whether male intermediaries may be more appropriate in certain cases, in the way that a black intermediary may be better placed to facilitate contact where an adoption has involved a black child. Suffice to say that more research is needed here. Until the literature base develops, it is important to state that matters of the emotions of the intermediary, such as over-involvement or identification with one party to the detriment of the other, and issues concerning differences like those of gender and ‘race’, must be a matter for careful supervisory monitoring.

Conclusion

The role and practice of those working as intermediaries with birth parents and other relatives under the terms of section 98 of the Adoption Act 2002 will undoubtedly continue to develop with experience. But at this stage it is suggested that such activity will include elements of current practices on behalf of adopted people, namely:

- search and detection activity in relation to information that will allow an intermediary approach to be made;
- a set of counselling tasks before, during and after contact relating to the parties involved and requiring negotiation as to depth and duration;
- assessment (of support available to and risk for those involved);
- the navigation (or apportionment) of the various roles that arise in the course of the work. These will vary from the type of role that has a contractual-like quality, as in where a solicitor ‘acts for’ their client, to one that contains the responsibilities of the social worker who works for the adoption agency holding the case records, and to the new breed of intermediary – adoption support agencies.
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