



UCD SCHOOL OF APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE

WORKING PAPER SERIES

2013

**Social Networking, Adoption
and Search and Reunion**

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WP31

May 2013

UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

BELFIELD DUBLIN 4

Social Networking, Adoption and Search and Reunion

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Abstract

Change is central to adoption practice, and this paper sets out to discuss how social networking is impacting in the field of adoption, especially in the area of search and reunion. The pace and manner in which social networking is impacting is so fast that empirical research has not yet caught up with the change.

As part of the discussion of this phenomena, certain aspects of Irish adoption practices, some historical and some more contemporary, are summarised briefly. The reasons why people engage in search, the shift from closed to open adoption and broad adoption trends are first explicated. These features are seen as central to understanding the impact that social networking is having on the multiple participants in adoption.

This paper is based on a review of the limited literature dealing with adoption and social networking, an examination of some web-based material and interviews with a select group of adoption professionals. Through this exploration, the benefits, implications, challenges and opportunities for adoption practice are considered.

Motivations for Searching

Searching is at the core of adoption. Since the introduction of legalised adoption in 1952, almost 50,000 children have been adopted in Ireland (Adoption Authority of Ireland, 2010). When both adoptive and birth parents, siblings and extended family members are considered, it is obvious that many people in Ireland have been or are directly affected by adoption. International research shows that a large majority of adoptees, birth parents and family members actively engage in search activities. (Mullender 1991; Sullivan & Lathrop (2004) Triseliotis et al 2005). The extent of search practice in Ireland is more difficult to gauge and, though some work has been done in relation to birth mothers (Kelly 2005), adoptive parents (McCaughran 2010) and sibling experience, (O'Neill 2012), there is need for greater research of this search and reunion context.

Adopted people search for varied reasons (Brodzinsky et al 1992, Gladstone & Westhus 1998, Howe and Feast 2001, Afleck and Steed 2001, Ayers-Lopez et al 2008, Pavao 2005, Passmore & Feeney 2009, Feast et al 2011). Some people simply want to know where they come from, who they look like, the circumstances that led to their adoption and who they are connected with. Others wish to find out more tangible information such as medical history and/ or related genetic material. For many it is simply seen as a basic human right to have such information. In this they are joining the multitudes who search for their ancestors, such as those who use the historic census returns to trace their lineage.

...it also taps into deeper themes to do with biology and upbringing, nature and nurture, identity and belonging, connectedness and family relationships.
(Howe and Feast, 2001, p.351)

Birth parents' motivations for searching are also varied. Beginning a formal search for the child placed for adoption enables some to honour a promise they made when they were parted; for others the search is a continuation of the inner yearning that they have lived with since parting from the child. Some birth parents are reaching out to a child that they felt pressurised into relinquishing. Through their search, birth parents frequently hope to find their child, to find out how they are doing in life - if they are happy, content and if they the 'good alternative life that was the basis for many of the adoption decisions' was realised in fact. For some birth parents, the opportunity to meet a long-lost child provides them with an opportunity to explain the circumstances of the birth and the adoption and to say 'sorry' for 'giving them up'. For many, the hope is to let the child know that they would like to have them back in their lives in some way.

Ireland, as has been well evidenced, did not have a supportive environment for many of the women that became pregnant outside marriage (Wilson et al 2004, Kelly 2005). The decision of birth parents to search is, for many, the first real power that they have had within an adoption process that they were often propelled into by virtue of their circumstances.

Outcomes of Search

The motivation to search, the search journey itself, and what is realised eventually is shaped by many variables. In 1986, Auth and Zaret first identified five possible outcomes for search and reunion. These include the one-time meeting involving a decision not to progress – one which is usually not mutual; the adopted person having an on-going relationship with their birth family while maintaining a primary relationship with their adoptive family; the adopted person having an on-going relationship with the birth family who are now considered the primary family by the adopted person; the birth parent not being found; and the birth parent rejecting the approach by the adopted person.

As research into outcomes has grown since this time in 1986, there has been a realisation that outcomes and the nature of the relationships that evolve are much more fluid and can and do change over time (Howe & Feast 2001, Pavao 2005; Wolfgram 2008). The distinction between search and reunion is important as there is an emergent view that people have a right to information (search) but they don't necessarily have a right to a relationship (Pavao 2005). Nonetheless, research tends to show that, irrespective of the outcome, the majority of people that search are happy that they commenced the journey. That, of course, is not to disregard the pain involved for people who have to come to terms with the reality sometimes being very different from what they had originally hoped for. To date the vast majority of research in respect of search and reunion has been carried out on the experiences of adopted people. A small number of studies have included birth parents but fewer have included the adopted parents or siblings.

From Closed towards Open Adoptions

Many of the people now involved in searching and tracing in Ireland were placed in an era when 'closed adoptions' were the norm. A 'closed adoption' is characterised by identity information not being shared between adoptive and birth families and no contact occurring between any of the parties after the legal transfer of the child is realised from one set of parents to another.

The belief underpinning adoption at that time was that the mother was given a 'clean start' and freed from the stigma of having a child outside marriage; the child could be reared as if they were born into the family thus freeing them from the stigma of illegitimacy. For the

adoptive family, tasks differed little from regular parenting, thus freeing them from their own pain and stigma of infertility and the difficulties of discussions with the adopted child. The closed adoption model was built largely on a wish for secrecy associated with shame. In this type of adoption practice, the adoption agency and its staff were central to every process and practice.

The notions underpinning closed adoptions were wide-spread across many jurisdictions. The reality of the adoption situation was, of course, very different and research into the various peoples experiences paint a different picture. Shifts in practices and beliefs began to occur, but at very different rates. Ireland could be seen to be slower to change than most other jurisdictions. The introduction of legalised adoption occurred in 1952; the incorporation of more openness did not occur until the late 1990's; legislation to regulate inter-country adoption in accordance with the Hague Convention was not passed until 2010. While there have been several pieces of adoption related legislation in recent decades none, including the 2010 Adoption Act, dealt with the issue of search and reunion.

It is likely that the Report of the Review Committee on Adoption Services, 1984, which called for 'a greater openness about children born out of wedlock' (p. 88) and its recommendation for birth certificates to be made available was instrumental in starting the move towards openness in Ireland. The Guidelines for Policy and Disclosure of Background Information: Adoption and Foster Care Placements was published in 1989. The term 'openness' in adoption may be traced back to the work of Kirk whose research highlighted the importance of acknowledging the difference between adoptive and non-adoptive family life and the need for open communication in relation to the adoption situation (Kirk, 1964; Jones and Hackett, 2007). However, legislation continued to favour the clean break from the family of origin within adoption (O'Halloran 2010). Some changes occurred in placement practice in Ireland from the late 1990's onwards, reflecting research and practice development rather than legislative drivers (Farrelly Conway 2000). Changes in practice led many adoption professionals to develop initiatives such as having birth and adoptive parents meet prior to the adoption plan and, in many instances, non-identifying information being shared as the child grew.

Nonetheless, for the vast majority of people touched by adoption in Ireland and likely to be involved now in search and reunion, such open practices were not the normal experience. The deficit in Irish Adoption legislation in respect of putting more open practices on a legal footing was recognised by The Law Reform Commission as early as 2000. However, such limitation still exists. On a practice level, openness in adoption is now understood as occurring along a continuum from open communication among the parties at one end to no contact at the other. Where such contact practices exist, they are negotiated on an informal basis and are not legally binding.

Search and Reunion Trends in Irish Adoption

Four issues are of particular note in relation to search and reunion in Ireland. These are:

1. Irish Adoption is now characterised by the extremely small numbers of children born to Irish parents who are relinquished for adoption. Thus, 'the small baby placed with strangers' which was the dominant features of adoption practice in the decades following the 1952 legislation is now over. Instead 'family adoptions' (predominantly step-parent adoption) and 'inter-country adoption' are now more much more prevalent. (Adoption Board 2010). However, in keeping with an international

phenomenon, there has been a decline in the rate of inter-country adoption over the past few years, coinciding with the passage of the 2010 Adoption Act.

2. With the exception of the approval process for prospective parents and the registration of the actual adoption, the inter-country adoption process itself was largely unregulated until the Adoption Act 2010 gave effect to the provision of the Hague Convention. In this context, tracing, searching and reunion have been occurring which have been largely negotiated by the families themselves. While the services of a mediator/ translator (privately organised and paid for) are often used, the searching occurs outside the remit of adoption agencies, although they are often an early point of contact.
3. The lack of legislation in Ireland to facilitate adoptees to obtain their original birth certificates remains, despite the many years of political promises to deliver such change. Ireland lags behind countries where such enabling legislation was introduced including the UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. The legal limitation has not stopped people from searching, but the legal impediments cause huge levels of frustration and have primed a situation where many switched to use new methods and technologies.
4. There is very limited practice in Ireland whereby parental rights for children in care are terminated, compared to practices in the UK and the USA. This means that few children placed for adoption have experience of living with or having contact with members of birth or extended family members. Thus when people search in Ireland, they are usually starting from a low information and relational base.

A detailed exploration of the actual experiences of people involved in search and reunion and the context in which it operates is beyond the scope of this paper. However, certain features need to be understood as these are seen as shaping the use of social networking in adoption search and reunion. These are:

- The procedures and best practice guides for search and reunion have developed over time. These include the Standardised Framework for the provision of a National Adoption Information and Tracing Service (2007). This Framework is based on a number of key principles including the need for preparation, the importance of third party mediation between searcher and searched, respect for confidentiality and an awareness that the complexity of individual situations can require a range of different interventions;
- Search and reunion is being understood more and more as a process rather than an event (Pavao 2005) and, as such, contact can be negotiated and re-negotiated over time as the relationship shifts and changes;
- Many people involved in adoption have been dependent on poorly-resourced and much-stretched adoption agencies to obtain a service and/ or assistance. This, combined with an aging profile of birth parents, has led to a lot of frustration among people searching and, in many instances, has led people to use unorthodox and creative means to initiate searches and to try obtain their particular information;
- Following the setting up of a 'contact register' in 2005 by the Adoption Board, there has been a steady increase in the number of people searching but with a relatively low match rate (Adoption Auth of Ireland, 2009).

- People affected by adoption are becoming more vociferous in their demands, lobbying the political system for legislative change and generally becoming more visible about their demands following the disappointment at the exclusion of search and reunion from the 2010 Adoption Act. The Group Adoption Rights Alliance have been to the fore in these developments. There is a growing recognition, that obtaining one's background information is a human right.

Social Networking

In Section One of this paper, the reasons why people search, some of their outcome experiences and the features of the context in which search and reunion has been occurring were discussed.

The development of social networking has opened a whole new possibility for those concerned with tracing in adoption. This technology, which is now a firm feature of our society, has the capability to blow apart the carefully thought-out procedures for tracing, search and reunion which were developed within adoption. The profound impact of social media is seen on a daily basis in almost every domain of our lives and it is not at all surprising, therefore, that it has started to impact on adoption practices. The available web-tools have changed the manner in which people communicate and enable individuals to share details of their lives with many others today. The implications for adoption practice of this new social networking reality merits review. The shifts in the networking media, alongside shifts in social work practices, provide a starting point.

The use of social media has been revolutionised by the advancements brought by Web 2.0 capability. The main characteristic of post Web 2.0 capability, in comparison to previous technologies, is dynamism and participation. The content is dictated by the behaviour of the user rather than material being presented and remaining in a static state. Up to the development of Web 2.0 around 2003, the user could access the internet page, view it, but could not change it; in other words, it was a one-way system for accessing information. The technology could be used but the content couldn't be changed. People, by using Web 2.0 capability, can now actively interact, create content and collaborate rather than passively viewing content.

As a result, the possibilities for social networking through sites such as Facebook and Twitter and development of social narratives through use of blogging, wiki and social inquiry have been advancing in leaps and bounds. The enormous power of Google and other search engines have made previously unimaginable searching and linking not just possible but readily and almost instantly do-able.

The distinction between post-Web 2.0 and previous internet capability is somewhat akin to the changes in social work practices from the modern to the post-modern eras. This is a useful analogy to describe social worker practice in adoption. Within the modern era, the social worker, while embedded in a solid values and ethics base, was often seen by clients (and themselves) as occupying an 'expert' position. The social worker had more specialist knowledge by virtue of their training and education and experience in the field. They also had more power by virtue of their position in the agency and therefore had great capacity to enable change to occur while at the same time mediating the pace of events. The challenge from post-modernist thinking to this expert positioning in social work, and most particularly

in adoption, has been occurring since the early 1990's (O'Brien & Richardson 1998, Loughran & Richardson 2005).

Practices and the social worker / client relationship have changed, in part influenced by post-modern thinking, not only in adoption but across many settings and are now attuned to more collaborative ways of working. There is a preference for strengths-based and empowerment practices (Witkin 2012). In other words, the era where social worker 'knew best' has been challenged and changed. This change has been welcomed by many social workers but the reality of shifting from an expert stance to sharing power is not without difficulties. Similarly, the advancements of the internet are welcomed by many but are not without their difficulties and challenges. The intersections of these changing contexts are now explored.

Impact of Social Media on Adoption Practices in Search and Reunion

Fursland (2010) and Pavao (2011) were to the fore in calling attention to how social media is impacting in adoption. Pavao used her clinical work to underline the rapidly changing landscape in adoption. Fursland, through a discussion of experiences, went on to offer a guide to adoptive families to assist them in their understanding of using social media in adoption.

Through the research conducted for this paper, it has become clear that many of the experiences with social media within the adoption community are now also relevant to people in what are termed by Pavao, as complex blended families (2005). Children, young people and adults are searching and finding one another across a range of situations. The ties that connect across the generations through blood, marriage, and kinship is propelling a lot of searching. Social media now offers opportunities to people to make these much sought connections. The implications of the change are already featuring in popular culture. In a current storyline in *Coronation Street*, the long running TV soap opera (www.cbc.ca/coronation/), a young girl who was adopted from the care system has searched and found her father through Facebook. Unknown to her adoptive parents, she has already started to meet him.

Among the parameters that can impact on the search process and outcomes are the pathways to adoption, the extent to which the adoption is court-mandated or involves relinquishing (this is never a neutral position, however), the age and developmental stage of the people searching, the extent to which adoptions are open or closed and how this may have changed over time. These same factors can also shape how social networking may be used.

Curiosity in respect of one's origins is a normal reaction for children, irrespective of the pathway to their adoption. The process of children and birth family members searching and finding one another raises many issues. This is the case not only for the people directly involved, but also for the adoptive family parents and other family members, as well as the professionals who, up to this point, may have been involved as facilitators or working in a supportive / therapeutic capacity.

In the UK and the USA, many adoptions occur following the termination of parental rights by the courts. In many of these instances, the consent of the parents for the adoption is not given voluntarily. The circumstances of such adoptions can leave strong feelings (Neil 2007, 2009), and a sense of injustice sometimes becomes a central part of the family member's narrative.

In such a scenario, the lack of openness about the social networking engagement, as well as adoptive parents and professionals decisions to withhold full disclosure to the child of the circumstances that led to the adoption, can exacerbate an already complicated situation.

The following example (details changed to preserve anonymity) is intended to show the intersection of social networking, openness, searching, connections, child protection and adoption planning as well as the complexities involved in managing decision-making and relational processes.

A 13 year old girl, Alice, was adopted at 8 years of age, having entered care when she was 6 years old. She has a sister 15 years of age, whom she meets intermittently and who was also adopted. Alice found on Facebook a 16 year old cousin, with whom she previously had a close relationship, but all contact had ceased on the adoption. Through this initial facebook contact, Alice was very soon in communication with many of her extended family members. Although the adoptive parents permission to Alice to go on Facebook, had involved agreement about privacy settings and allowing them to regularly monitor activity, her cousin encouraged her to set up a different facebook page, separate to the one that her adoptive parents had allowed her to have. All the safety features that they had instituted were circumvented as she used her new page that was reserved for birth family contact. Facebook's requirement, forbidding the use of a false identity, did not stop her. The situation only came to light when the strain of the situation led to serious difficulties in her school.

Social networking can also impact where the pathway to adoption is different and already involves openness. In the next example, the child was relinquished by her parents and there were no child protection concerns surrounding the placement.

A 17 year old girl, relinquished by her parents and adopted, receives a photo of her birth mother and her half siblings. The photo is received as part of an agreement made at the time of the adoption for a yearly update of non-identifying information. The girl posts the photo on a social media site, with a request for help in finding her long lost family. The names and addresses of the people in the photo are with the young person within 36 hours. Neither the adoptive parents nor her birth family know that this request was made. Ironically, the first they knew was when they were alerted by other people using social media.

Even with awareness of issues, there can also be unforeseen consequences when agencies try to control social networking processes in their adoption plans.

A mature, 17 year old long-term foster child, Sarah, is living in a family in Ireland. She had a strong relationship with siblings in the UK, aged 11 and 10, who were placed for adoption after entering care in that jurisdiction. The sibling relationship was always honoured by the foster family. As part of the adoption plan for her younger siblings, the 17 year was told that letter contact would not be facilitated unless she signed a contract stipulating that she would not use social media to make contact with her siblings. This adoption plan was not welcomed by Sarah, as she was being excluded hugely from their lives and the draconian, legalistic nature of the wording in the proposed contact infuriated her...Sarah had only limited knowledge of her sisters' whereabouts but she was tempted to use it to find ways to continue having contact, irrespective of the expectation that she would sign the agreement....

Parenting Challenges and Possibilities

Situations like those described in the three examples above are being encountered on a regular basis by families and professionals working in this arena. People are asking: What should we do? What can we do? Is it preventable? Is it inevitable that social networking will be used to some extent or other, sooner or later? The answers to these questions may lead to a conclusion that parenting approach may need to be adjusted? Also, there may be a need to rethink the carefully worked-out arrangements for openness (largely letter writing) that may be in place?

Social networking also invites complexities and issues that challenge even the most resilient, wisest, best prepared members of the adoption circle (Siegel 2012). While the tools/ sites used as well as the type of adoptions involved shape the specific challenges, nonetheless, there a number of general issues. The days when the adults could control a child's access to birth information are, for all practical purposes, over. The likelihood is that adoptions will become even more open and, with this, the complexity of managing the situation will increase. While the child's best interest may be seen to drive more open arrangements, the lack of specific research and evidence to underpin contact plans remains a limitation in the field. There is huge variation in practice surrounding decision-making in areas such as the reasons for, duration of and frequency of contacts. The changing developmental needs and abilities of the child, and the knowledge, skills and supports they required as well as those of both adoptive and birth parents, impact on professionals and organisations as they try to manage the complex network of relationships.

Post-adoption support in Ireland is extremely limited for adoptive parents and they are, by and large, very resourceful in finding help. Nonetheless, this social media era is bringing new challenges to the already-challenging world of parenting and adoption. Many adoptive parents are turning to these same social media networks for advice, support and to share information. A small amount of literature is emerging and the work of Fursland (2010), Pavao (2011), Siegel (2012), and the Child Welfare Gateway are offering advice in respect of mediating social media impacts in adoption.

At the centre of the challenges is the need to keep the child safe, while realizing that not all birth families represent a risk. There is a fresh need to appreciate that relationships among all the parties involved in adoptions are sacred (Pavao 2012). However, the risks and needs as well as the protection resources need to be assessed in each individual case.

As a first step, adoptive and birth parents should be aware of the networking tools and the rapid advancements that are being made. They need to know what the social media are, how they work, how they can be used and perhaps critically how they may impact on their adoption situation if ground-work is not done. Writing advice is one thing, but enabling people to keep up-to-date with both the technological capabilities and the user applications is not without its challenges. The rate of change in the past decade is nothing short of amazing!

Adoptive parents need to start or continue talking to their children about these issues (Fursland 2010). A key message may be to let the children know that they will support them to find out as much as they can but at the same time to introduce ideas like it is important that

‘things will need to happen in a certain way, with a certain pacing and in a certain time frame’ (Pavoa 2011). Parents, as the adults in the situation, are still the ones that will need to be central to the decision-making, but letting their children know that they are prepared to help find answers to their identity questions is an important step.

Adoptive parents nonetheless need to understand that curiosity is normal (Feast and Philpot 2005) and anticipate perhaps that children will search more in this era of social media. Therefore, they need to ensure that the children have as much age-appropriate information as possible to help them deal with their identity questions. The shifting contexts of adoption mean that pressure is being put on what would have previously been regarded as closed adoption to be opened. This may be seen to be in the child’s interests but the process by which this is to be done is not always clear. Fundamentally, there is a need for both the adoptive parents and birth parents to build respectful, empathetic and collaborative relationships. For some people involved in closed adoption, this may be unimaginable. Yet there is a wealth of emergent information already available from those that have developed different types of openness already (McCaughren 2010).

Many of the issues identified such as identity, openness and communication are at the core of good adoptive parenting and have been recognized as such for the past twenty years or so. What is new is the speed with which social networking is bringing these issues, and the connected processes, to the fore. Nothing can be done to turn back the tide of the phenomenon of social networking and managing its impact in relation to adoption seems to be the only answer therefore.

Adults Use of Social Networking in Search and Reunion

Many adults touched by adoption, as distinct from children’s situations discussed in the previous section, are hugely involved in social networking. Adults use social networking not only to search for people lost to them through secretive and closed adoptions but, increasingly, they are using it to give and obtain support, to look for and share information and as a means of mobilizing for social, political and legislative change.

The first generation of on-line adoption support communities was based on internet pages and e-mail lists (eg listserv). Adoption communities are now using a wide range of social media including discussion boards, blogs, on-line forum, private and public message board systems, information resources, personalized interactive features i.e. skype, web-cams, and mailing systems.

Sites to provide people with information have been developed by multiple stakeholders including state / public, community and private agencies ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_adoption_agencies), Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011). Some are geared towards specific groups including adopted people, birth parents, adoptive parents and professionals, while others do not specify a membership category. Some sites operate as contact registers, either on a fee per search or free basis. Other sites such as forums and discussion boards can either be an open or have a private or membership only section. There are sites that offer reviews to aid people make a more informed decision as to the usefulness, helpfulness and accuracy of different sites <http://social-networking-websites-review.toptenreviews.com>. Many sites make their mission statement explicit.

Generally, sites geared towards the searching process aim to provide dynamic up-to-date information which can negotiate the labyrinth of adoption law, procedures, policies and

practices. As evidenced through the Child Welfare Information Gateway, some sites are geared towards international searching while others are more national in their orientation. Many sites offer very good advice that fit with ethical and best practice guidelines. An example (Craft 2012) of advice aimed at birth parents undertaking searches points to the need to :

- Identify your expectations;
- Keep consistent in your contact;
- Find a pace for reunion that works for you and the adoptee;
- Educate yourself on issues;
- Work on your own healing separate from building the new relationship;
- Enjoy the process.
- Remember there are other people involved in the experience

While there has been a significant research effort in the broader health field (Wang et al) to explore motivations and use of online support groups as well as the types of supports exchanged, and outcomes associated with participation in such groups, the research in relation to such forums in adoption is extremely limited (Smith 2012; Sigel 2012). The need for research in respect of social media and adoption is compelling.

However, notwithstanding the limited empirical research, it is known that adults are finding and been found through social networking sites. Many are happy that they were found while for others, they were less welcoming when it happened. The timing, circumstances and the continuation of the secrecy surrounding the adoptions are cited as some of the reasons (Smith 2012).

The Benefits and Challenges of Social Media

The use of social networking sites is likely to increase as the Facebook generation ages, broadband connectivity improves and older people are encouraged to make the leap. Yet, as we have seen, the research in relation to benefits and challenges of adoption social media is limited.

Smith (2012), who conducted a qualitative study of use of nine adoption discussion boards, asked participants to comment on what they saw as the benefits and hazards of such sites. The support offered, the regret that such sites were not found earlier, the opportunity to meet like-minded people and to develop friendships, the opportunity to link with people that shared adoption experiences rather than working only with professionals, the ability to open up in an anonymous context and the availability of people online, irrespective of the time of day or night, were some of the main benefits cited by the adult respondents.

Summarising other literature and the findings from interviews undertaken with professionals for this paper, it is apparent that social networking offers a way to bridge physical distances and offers chances to search without having to spend huge resources on travel. Many sites are free to join, including Facebook itself, and there is reduced expenditure on intermediaries. Social networking offers a chance to find people quickly and, depending on privacy settings on a Facebook page, it is possible to connect with a whole host of extended family and not just with one family member. In some cases, when more traditional avenues were tried and no progress was made, people were found through these sites. Social networking has enabled many international adoption which, by definition were remote, to be opened up. Many, who

carried life-long stories of having practically no birth family information due to their early abandonment, have found family and kin on line. Even the smallest amounts of information, combined now with the power of social media, can open other channels of information leading to fruitful searches.

Respondents in Jones 2012 study identified a number of hazards including experiences of on-line bullying. This can arise especially if people do not share the more normative views held by people on the site and, combined with a belief that social media offer anonymity, can bring out the worst in people. Emotions can run high where there are very different belief systems and there may be a tendency in sites that only allow certain categories of adoption participants to join to become very oppositional in their views of other parties. The following views were also shared by respondents in the interviews. The immediacy of the information that can be found, the lack of structures to put more timely responses in place, the immediacy by which responses can be made thus cutting down on time for reflection, the lack of privacy to make more informed decisions and the general exposure to the world of others when vulnerabilities and emotions are running high.

Implications for Social Work Practice

It is attractive to hypothesize that adults' dependence on professionals to enable them to find birth relatives is almost over, but the evidence for this is not yet available. It is likely that the professional will continue to have an important place in assisting the process, but this is likely to be more on the terms of the person requesting the help. This is to be welcomed.

If we accept the evidence that adoption is a life-long process and not an event, the challenge of enabling birth and adoptive parents to put relationships in place and keep them open, empathetic and respectful remains. A high level of skill and knowledge is required in such complexity. An ability to draw from more dialogical and systemic practices may be useful for social workers, especially when some birth parents may be hurting badly as a result of the adoption plan (Ayers-Lopez 2008).

The influence of post-modern thinking as discussed by Witkin 2012 will assist professionals in the transitions associated with the revolution in adoption practice caused by social media. Social Workers will continue to have a role in adoption education. It is generally accepted that this role is augmented hugely when co-delivered with people from the adoption circle. Some families will continue to need therapeutic intervention, others support and further education in dealing with the parenting issues associated with adoption issues. Open communication will continue to be key to this endeavour. Dodsworth et al (2012) conclusion that 'information and communication technologies provide an additional dimension to relationship building between foster carers and social workers, and that it is as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, existing modes' is an important finding. This aspect needs to be explored as part of future research in the adoption field.

As social workers, we must endeavour to keep up to date on the developments in social networking. The shift from the modernist 'expert' approach to a more post-modern practice as discussed provides practitioners with the opportunity to enter dialogues with different participants involved in adoption. The following questions could be useful in this process:

What is the help you may need in the search and reunion process given the changing context and influence of social networking? Social work professionals need to up skill to ensure that we are up-to-date .and yet the advances in social media leave many of us behind. The generation gap is evident.....

What are the theories, principles and practices that may be helpful in enabling people to navigate the complexity of the situations in which they find themselves?

How can the research findings and evidence-informed practices in other areas affected by social networking be used within the area of adoption?

How can social workers keep up to date about changes in the adoption field and use social networking to assist adults, young people and children involved?

What skill sets do social workers use to manage the complex situations that arise in their search and reunion work, especially where people are likely to be at very different stages in the process?

Conclusion

This paper set out to demonstrate and discuss how social networking is impacting in the field of adoption, especially in the area of search and reunion. The pace and manner in which social networking is impacting is such that empirical research has not yet caught up with the change, and there is limited advice and support available for those involved.

The legal provisions in Ireland for search and reunion is desperately out of synch with practice. While many people are frustrated with the lack of progress in legislative reform, there is a growing cohort of people who are undertaking searches and getting results through social media, irrespective of what the law does or doesn't provide for.

All the indications are that the social networking trends seen in the past decade, will be amplified, as Web 3 capacity is just around the corner apparently. While there is no certainty about what lies ahead arising from the capacity of the internet, what is known is that social networking has changed the landscape of adoption. The concept of closed adoption and the central role of the professional have been severely challenged, if not quite fully dispatched to historic concepts.

The challenge for all will be to adjust to the new reality of life in the rapidly changing age of social media, and for professionals to embrace this changed landscape with a view to entering more dialogical spaces with those in the adoption circle, to celebrate what we do know, and to engage in greater self reflexivity. We can use the web to help us do all of these things!.

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