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Adoption and narrative in the digital age: How are social and digital media changing adoption?

Julie Samuels

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of The University of Sussex
for the degree of Master of Philosophy

September 2015

School of Media, Film and Music
The University of Sussex

Abstract

This thesis explores some of the twenty-first century social networking challenges faced by all those involved in adoption. Written as an account of some fundamental changes taking place, where adoption and social networking have collided, this work examines some of the emerging tensions. Although much of the research is UK-focused, the changes within adoption in relation to social networking are more widely applicable. The inclusion of research material from other countries, including the US, is representative of these changes taking place within the field of adoption.

Through the examination of popular media and adoption as narratives, an indication of social networking's pervasiveness and the unforeseen changes in the provision of care of looked after children begin to emerge. In this new and still uncharted digital territory, all aspects of what it means to be adopted continue to evolve in the context of networked media cultures.

Acknowledgments

This study was carried out at the University of Sussex, Department of Media, Film and Music, from 2009 to 2015.

For over two decades I have worked in the field of digital media technologies as a practitioner and educator in both public and private sectors. My thesis did not start in the field of adoption. Rather, it was whilst going through the adoption process that I began thinking about my pending child's future growing up as a 'born digital' child, in a world where our reliance on technology continues to develop and dominant our daily lives. I was fully aware that popular media coverage about children being found by their biological family using social networking sites could potentially impact on and change the way I would raise my child. As a result, an important aspect of the thesis stems from my desire to inform professionals in the field, such as social workers, on the impact and importance of digital media in the contact between adopted individuals and their biological families.

I acknowledge my appreciation to my supervisors, Dr Margaretta Jolly and Dr Kate O'Riordan for their guidance, constructive input, support, and continued encouragement. I would also like to thank my dear friend Jocelyn Emberton Underwood for inspiring me both personally and professionally, Dr Hannah R. Marston for her support and my tutor Claire Salter for her advice on harnessing neuro diverse skills, sympathetic ear, and guidance on issues such as structure for the non-neuro diverse.

Finally, I would like to thank my beautiful child for the smiles, hugs, and pretend cups of tea when I have needed them and to my child's biological family, for without them, I wouldn't be who I am today.

Table of Contents

Declaration	2
Abstract	3
Acknowledgments	4
Chapter One: Introduction	7
General Information	7
Thesis Structure	9
Research Questions	10
Overview	10
Adoption and Narrative	16
Summary	20
Chapter Two: Adoption in the Digital Age	21
Section Overview	21
Introduction	21
The Invisible Ties That Bind: The Digital Search	24
Social Networking: Promise or Threat to Adoption?	31
Conclusion	37
Chapter Three: Social Networking: Changing Reunification and Representation of Adoption Identity Online	40
Section Overview	40
Introduction	40
Social Networking and its Impact on Adoption Reunification	42
Adoption and Identity in the Digital Age	45
The Possibilities of Digital Media Technologies for the Exploration of Adoption Identity	47
Conclusion	50
Chapter Four: Social Services: Technologies for Communication and the Representation of Social Services in the Popular Media	53
Section Overview	53
Introduction	53
The Popular Media's Representation of the Provision of Care	55
The Use of Technology within Social Services	58
The Risks Associated with Being Online	62
Codes of Conduct	65
Conclusion	67

Chapter Five: Popular Media and Internet Representations of Adoption in the Digital Age	69
Section Overview	69
Introduction	69
The Portrayal of Social Networking for Unmanaged Contact within the Adoption Storyline in the British Soap Opera Coronation Street	72
Tracy Beaker: Changing the Perception of Looked After Children	76
Tracy Beaker in the Digital Age	78
Popular Tabloid Media Stories Featuring Adoption and Race Within Celebrity Culture	81
Conclusion	84
Chapter six: Conclusion	88
Bibliography	94

Chapter One: Introduction

General Information

This chapter puts forward the research questions discussed in this thesis and combines the fields of adoption with digital media technologies and narrative. Discussed within the respective fields, examination of extant research shows the impact that this investigation may have upon the study of adoption, the social work profession, the provision of care, and adoption narratives as an academic field of study. The literature review will include research from these disciplines, providing an insight into the unprecedented changes occurring within the field of adoption due to social networking. Within the scholarly field, which is currently still in infancy, recent publications that address adoption and the impact of social networking highlight concerns about this unprecedented change to reunification between adopted individuals and their biological kin.

Within the social work profession, the lack of immediacy to integrate emerging technologies into the workforce—partly due to concerns regarding confidentiality, security, and the popular media's negative representations of the provision of care—provides fruitful platform for an ongoing discussion. Those working in a profession less focused on technology and fully immersed in the provision of care have unwittingly been ill-prepared and reacted slowly to contact that they do not manage that continues to take place between adopted individuals and their biological family.

Social and digital media technologies continue to have profound influence within the field of adoption. Aware of the Internet's potential to transform adoption, a "flurry of hype and anxiety, a pressure on public and commercial bodies as well as on individuals to be seen to be responding, a fear of not 'keeping up'" (Livingstone, 2002, p. 2) has begun to push adoption service providers to catch up. Evidenced by recent publications concerns about unmanaged contact between adopted individuals and their biological kin are being addressed, and new policies and procedures implemented.

The US continues to lead empirical research into the Internet's transformation of adoption. Unlike the UK that has strict criteria and restrictions about who can adopt, in the US many and often-unregulated private organisations facilitate the adoption needs of prospective adopters, often resulting in cases of adoption fraud, the private

're-homing' of adopted children and adoption abandonment. In addition the US's operation of an open adoption system for some adopted individuals can often lessen the need for unmanaged contact because both the biological and adoptive parents are known and in some circumstances may continue to be involved in the child's life. Learning from both positive and negative aspects of adoption in the US, the UK is well placed to and has the opportunity to protect adopted individuals and their adoptive families. Pertinent to adoption whether in the UK, US or worldwide is ensuring the best possible outcome for both the adopted children and their adoptive family remains the main focus regardless of the changes brought about through digital media technologies.

One important development is a shift in contact arrangements that can take place between adopted individuals and their biological kin due to social networking. Whilst much of the popular media headlines tend to focus on the public's anxieties and consequences of digital media technologies in the transformation of our everyday lives, they are reflective of wider concerns relating to the type of society children are growing up in today. Particularly clear with the digital natives (born since 1980), their daily interactions and activity with digital media technologies continues to influence and shape their lives. Gasser and Palfrey (2008) noted "(i)n our rush to take advantage of the conveniences of digital technologies, we may be giving up more control of the information about ourselves than we can comprehend" (p. 45). Continuing, the authors (2008) noted these young people "will be the first to experience the compounding effect of the creation of identities and digital dossiers over a long period of time" (p. 62).

Likewise parenting "digital natives" (children born into and continue to be raised in the digital world) requires an understanding of digital communication technologies to ensure ability to safeguard children online from inappropriate content and individuals. For adoptive parents, ensuring that contact via the Internet between their children and their biological family does not occur requires a good understanding of digital media technologies and a further understanding of the ease with which these technologies can facilitate this.

Another noticeable difference is in the use of social networking by biological families to announce the pregnancy and birth of their child. Including the sharing of pregnancy scans, baby's first photos, first steps, and the steps that follow friends and family are able to participate through likes and comments about the child's development. Whilst in America some adoptive families partake in the sharing of family

photos through online diaries and other types of online media, in the UK this is scarce. For most adoptive families the sharing of photos online is closely guarded due to concerns that the biological family may find them. The dialectic of promise and threat is further opened up beyond the question of the child and the biological parents, being trailed by anxious adopters and care workers.

Thesis Structure

The body of this thesis is divided into six chapters. Following the introduction, the research presented in Chapter One outlines the research questions, interrelating changes taking place in adoption due to social networking and its influence within adoption narratives.

Chapter Two discusses issues of communication, contact that is not managed, and confidentiality in the digital era within the field of adoption, which has changed considerably due to the ubiquity of social networking.

Chapter Three examines and considers the use of social networking by adopted individuals seeking reunification with biological family members and the exploration of adoption identity through the use of digital media technologies.

Chapter Four summarizes the popular media's representation of social workers, the use of technology within the provision of care, and the changes taking place due to social networking within the social work profession.

Chapter Five highlights the pervasiveness of digital media technologies in the representation of adoption within the popular media. This issue is explored further through the adoption storyline about biological family reunification via the Internet, depicted in the British television soap opera *Coronation Street*. It is also examined through the analysis of the children's British television show *Tracy Beaker* and the

manner in which it has influenced the perception of looked after children, and finally the role of celebrity culture and the perceived understanding of adoption.

Chapter Six summarizes the findings yielded by this research.

Research Questions

1. How are social and digital media technologies transforming adoption?
2. Is social media a threat or can it benefit the life narrative of adopted individuals?
3. What types of adoption stories / narratives are emerging through social / popular media?

Overview

Between April 2011 and March 2012, approximately 28,220 children in England were placed in local authority care, predominantly due to neglect and abuse (NSPCC, 2013). In order to survive and thrive, children need consistent, on-going care provided by a loving and nurturing caregiver in a healthy family environment. The stereotypical family comprising mother, father, and two children living in a detached or semi-detached house is no longer the norm. A new family model with the diversity of parental roles as the central identifier, exemplified by a wide range of possible family forms, has superseded this construct. Within this new family model, the type of families that children grow up in has continued to change. Nowadays, there are many children living with heterosexual parents, single parents, same-sex parents, dual heritage parents, living with relatives and foster parents. Within these family environments, the support and security provided by the responsible adult as parent / carer facilitates the child's development of self-confidence and resilience.

With such diverse family environments that one can grow up within, the concept of the "typical family" continues to change. With so many forever homes to be found for children that wait within the care system, the change of "typical" family makes this more of a possibility (NSPCC, 2013). Within this diverse family environment are many individuals that live together as married, cohabiting, same sex or single choosing

childlessness. These individuals additionally continue, “to challenge traditional social constructions of “family”” (Park, 2005, p. 272). Reflective of the change of “typical family” the Labour government introduced reforms to the Adoption and Children Act in November 2002, including a change allowing all unmarried couples, including those of the same sex, to apply for joint adoption (UK Government, 2002).

Other barriers to adoption include cultural background and race. Deeply embedded within the search for the biological family is the desire to know more about one’s race, gender, and cultural heritage. Willing and Fronek (2014) proposed, “(t)ensions in the formation of parental identities are located in different racial, ethnic, cultural and class-based backgrounds to the children they adopt” (p. 1129). In 2011, the UK government introduced new adoption guidelines including the stipulation, “that as long as prospective adopters show that they are able to care for the child then race should not be a factor” (BBC News, 2011, para. 9). Continuing, the article stated

Current advice states that social workers must give "due consideration to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background", but does not specify whether race should be regarded as outweighing other factors. (para. 12).

Indeed, in 2010, former Children's Minister Tim Loughton in the previous year went a step further and suggested that ensuring a child ends up in a loving home was more important than matching him / her with a family of the same racial background. This statement resulted in much debate proving unpopular with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and many black minority and ethnic (BME) fostering and adoption practitioners. In response to Loughton’s statement BASW (Kirwan, 2010) stated, “many trans-racial adoptions have had a profoundly negative impact on children's development and identity formation” (para. 12).

Reaffirming this notion, interviewed by ABC News in 2010, Gloria Batiste Roberts (Wilmouth, 2010) of the National Association of Social workers argued “(c)hildren deserve the right to be with people who look like them, who can understand what they are going through, understand their culture” (para. 3). For trans-racial adopted individuals, being raised by people that look like them is rarely an option.

An extensive online survey completed by 468 adult-adopted individuals conducted by the Adoption Institute of America in 2009 (Donaldson, 2009) into the development of identity of both interracial Korean and Caucasian home identified eight key findings. Explaining the selection process the report stated “(f)or the purposes of comparison, this paper will concentrate primarily on respondents born in South Korea

adopted by two White parents (N=179), and Caucasian respondents born in the U.S. adopted by two White parents (N=156) - the two groups that constituted over 70 percent of our respondents)" (p. 20). Key recommendations from this study, including "examination of theory and previous research that undergirds it" (p. 7)

1. Expand parental preparation and post-placement support for those adopting across race and culture.
2. Develop empirically based practices and resources to prepare transracially and transculturally adopted youth to cope with racial bias.
3. Promote laws, policies and practices that facilitate access to information for adopted individuals
4. Educate parents, teachers, practitioners, the media and others about the realities of adoption to erase stigmas and stereotypes, minimize adoption-related discrimination, and provide children with more opportunities for positive development.
5. Increase research on the risk and protective factors that shape the adjustment of adoptees, especially those adopted transracially/culturally in the U.S. or abroad (p. 7-8)

The study further concluded that regular contact with other adopted individuals, and positive role models that were identifiable through culture and race, had a positive impact on identity formation. Based on these findings, recommendations were made on adoption policy and practice in the US (Donaldson, 2009).

Within the debate about race and culture it is easy to lose sight of the purpose and benefits of adoption. Offering guidance to those considering adoption Suffolk County Council, UK (n.d) *Make a difference, Adopt* guide stated

Children need parents who can stick by them through good times and bad. They may need extra support to overcome a troubled past, make sense of who they are and grow up feeling safe. This gives a sense of security, which is essential to develop the ability to relate well to other people. Adoptive parents have the ability to offer this safe and nurturing environment (p. 4).

For those choosing to adopt their reasons and motivations differ considerably. Stories of adoptive parents returning their children to the care system and re-homing them via the Internet for example are a reminder that not all adoptive parents are good parents. Indeed, Adamec and Pierce (2007) reminded us, "(a)dooption is a constantly evolving institution that changes to fit the perceived needs of children who need families, whether they are healthy newborns, children in foster care, children from other countries, or children of all ages with special needs" (p. vii). Within this "evolving institution" the perceived needs of the child continues to be altered once unmanaged contact has occurred.

The emergence of social networking platforms has led to the ease with which adopted individuals, biological families, and adoptive families can reconnect and share their personal experiences of adoption with a wider audience through personal websites, blogs, and forums. Illustrative of the new types of adoption communities being created, these sites offer an insight into the changes in the ways members of this social group feel about themselves and each other (Herman, 2012). The ease with which these individuals can post online and self-publish books about their experiences of adoption has contributed to the better understanding of adoption through the narratives of those that have experienced it from various perspectives and have decided to share them in their memoirs. Acknowledging the popular media's ready exploitation of the melodrama inherent in many of these adoption autobiographies about search and reunion, Carp (2000) observed, "(a)s entertainment, adoption search and reunion stories were very emotionally satisfying" (p. 159). Recent popular media coverage of adoption reunification supports this notion.

For adopted individuals and their biological family members, stories that circulate within the popular media about the reunification possibilities via social networking sites yield much more than emotional satisfaction. Offering hope that they may one day be reunited, gain access to information about their origins and a better understanding of themselves, for adopted individuals that choose to utilize social networking for the purpose of reunification, the possibilities are unimaginable. This is, however, juxtaposed with the potential for rejection for a second time, and regression due to the revival of emotions that may have lain dormant. With the biological family, the hope of reunification is sadly accompanied by the possibility of rejection from the adopted individual, which might be difficult to deal with, as the circumstances under which the adoption took place vary and are usually very emotionally charged. Accordingly, social services must consider both the benefits of using communication technologies (in particular social networking) to facilitate the search for families for children waiting to be adopted and the risks (to the biological families, adopted individuals and adopters alike) that arise due to the use of this form of communication for unmanaged contact.

The varied stories in the popular media that feature adoption, includes recent depictions of the use of social networking by adopted individuals, and their biological families for reunification. Often exaggerated and portrayed negatively, reports of reunification have continued to heighten fears about the safety of individuals that have been placed for adoption due to neglect and abuse. These concerns of unmanaged contact relate to children making unmanaged contact with their biological family. Often

at the time unmanaged contact is initiated, the child may be trying to question and seek further answers about their adopted status, often not aware of all the facts that culminated in their placement for adoption.

Conversely, the popular media have been used successfully in the furtherance of adoption and fostering and the recruitment of families through newspapers, television, and magazines. Furthermore, both social workers and adoptive parents have proactively embraced social media's connection capabilities to assist adopted individuals with finding their biological family. Other benefits of using digital media as a communication tool include support groups for adoptive families and contact with sibling groups as per the court recommendation (Fursland, 2011a). As the use of social media within these groups continues to grow, it continues to infiltrate how adopted children are raised. Whether through the popular media or social media, balancing privacy with the desire for reunification raises issues of confidentiality, which remain an ongoing concern.

The advent of social networking has also profoundly transformed the sequence of events and timescale leading to the reunification between the adopted individual and the biological kin. Previously, adoptive families were able to plan their future with minimal consideration of the biological family and child making contact with each other before the age of consent. However, previous safeguards for adopted children are now antiquated and continue to be revised due to the immediacy of contact via social networking sites. For adopted families these safeguards may include not sharing photographs online (for those that choose to share photographs ensuring their social media profiles are visible only to friends and family, and limiting the amount of information about their child), requesting that photos are not taken of their children by other families, and informing the school that photos including their child may not be used for publicity.

Other assurances include ensuring that social media profiles are visible only to friends and family, limiting the amount of shared information regarding one's children. At the same time that adoptive families are security vigilant about reducing the risk of the biological family making contact that is not managed, they continue to use digital media technologies to share and engage in online discussions about their experiences of adoption, offer advice and support from the beginning of the adoption journey through to post adoption and share reading lists for example.

In an interview in the Guardian (online) chief executive of Adoption UK Jonathan Pearce acknowledged that it was "becoming more difficult to guarantee

confidentiality to adoptive parents and their children” (Macdonald, 2010, para. 3). Interviewer MacDonald is mindful of how little information a biological family needs to be able to trace their child placed for adoption via the Internet. In the same article, acknowledging the transformation of contact due to social networking, BAAF's director of policy, research and development Dr John Simmonds stated "(w)e will have to build them into the fabric of our adoption practice and re-emphasise the importance of children knowing why they were placed for adoption and the circumstances of the birth parents" (para. 13).

Whilst many adoption studies have had a tendency to examine the welfare and/or problems of adopted children (Lee, 2003), there is currently paucity of empirical research analyzing the impact that growing up in the digital world may have on adopted children due to its reunification possibilities. Recent publications, however, address some of the changes taking place within adoption due to the impact of digital media technologies. These publications include Fursland's three books *Facing up to Facebook: a survival guide for adoptive families* (2010b), *Foster care and social networking: A guide for social workers and foster carers* (2011a), and *Social networking and you* (2011b), as well as Oakwater's *Bubble Wrapped Children: How social networking is transforming the face of 21st century adoption* (2012a). Oakwater (2012a) reminded us that "(s)ocial networking allows birth parents to search and reconnect at the touch of a button, without reflection, support or considering the impact on the child and adoptive family" (p. 144). The emergence of an increasing number of stories about reunification via social networking and publications of further reports will continue to provide sufficient data to support ongoing research within this area. An indicator of the unprecedented changes taking place within adoption due to social networking, these recent publications highlight the continued need for a progressive response and changes to strategies that can be implemented if contact has occurred via social networking.

Whilst many biological parents may persist in seeking the child they feel was "snatched away" from them by social services, for the adopted individuals, the need to find their biological family is often triggered by curiosity or a stressful incident. Unfortunately, most adopted children and indeed many adopted adults are unprepared for the dynamics of the reunification process. Much more than a meeting, inadequately planned reunification often lacks consideration of an outcome that is anything less than positive. Following much anticipation and excitement about the prospect of being reunited with their biological kin, the adopted individuals might easily be overwhelmed and confused by the conflict between information that they already possess and that

shared during and after reunification. In preparation for direct contact, it is essential to manage expectations carefully; thus, ongoing discussions about the biological family might alleviate some of these uncertainties and make reunification more successful.

Preparations for contact that is not managed are not only an issue faced by adopted individuals, adoptive families, and biological family members. The provision of support provided by post-adoption services is continuing to evolve partially owing to the increase in concerns raised about the anonymous and immediate communication via social networking. In particular, social services and adoptive families face an ongoing challenge of how and when to integrate the potential impact of reunification via social networking into the life story work of the adopted individual. A willingness by the adoptive family to assist in finding the biological family may assist in the future development of a coherent individual and family narrative. More significantly, this willingness to contribute to this process may lessen the possibility of the adopted individual initiating contact in isolation.

Adoption and Narrative

Research on narrative across a wide range of fields has been extensive, prompting renewed interest in its expression and utilization in a wide range of contexts. It also helps elucidate the relationship between narrative and digital media and the significance of narratology within digital media (Bassett, 2008; Ryan, 2004). The emergence of new narratives, where storytelling meets new forms of media, has culminated in a change in the relationship among readers, writers, and media. Whilst temporality, character, and plot remain important in digital narratives, their application across different media has shifted significantly. In an epoch where the use of digital media to self-publish and self-broadcast our personal experiences and views in digital format has become the norm, life narratives have become a preoccupation.

Within adoption narratives, many different life stories emerge and permanently connect, notably those of the biological family, the social services, the adoptive family, and the adopted individual. Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, and Scharp (2012) extended this proposal stating that "(o)ne important kind of narrative is the adoption story, which has multiple tellers and might take on different features, depending on the perspective of the teller" (p. 265). Through careful navigation of these interwoven narratives, the adopted individual is able to claim a new one, and establish an identity

of his/her own construction. As MacIntyre (1991) explained, “we understand our lives in terms of the narratives that we live out” (p. 197). Owing to its capacity to facilitate connections that are not purely chronological, the representation of our lives in narrative form involves determining the significance of life events. Challenged by the immediacy of contact (both managed and unmanaged) in the digital realm, these often-fragile interwoven narratives continue to evolve, partially due to the growing prevalence of social media.

Narrative preoccupation is apparent within online autobiographical memoirs and personal blogs that serve as life review. Transformed by technology and memory, the process of curating and documenting our lives in the digital age as interactive and sharable life narratives continues to inform and define our online identity. While not necessarily an accurate record of the event / incident, our interpretation of these digital stories may facilitate our sense of belonging, understanding, and community. Although much research has been undertaken in the field of digital storytelling as life review across the life course (Center for Digital Storytelling, n.d.; The University of Dublin, 2014), very little has been written about adoption narratives in the digital age.

Already in 1993, when the Internet was still in its infancy, Kohler-Riessman (1993) acknowledged that, although commonly used with reference to storytelling, the term *narrative* has many meanings across different disciplines. Adoption narratives facilitate the exploration of identity formation as an integral part of one’s life story work. Shaped by social and cultural forces, the process of remembering through narrative is one of many ways individuals learn about themselves (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, & Reading, 2009). For adopted individuals, learning about themselves can be further complicated due to the lack of accurate information available about their biological kin. In the context of this research, narrative is applied in relation to storytelling as a contributor to adoption narratives as digital memories for life.

The telling of one’s life story is integral to the shaping and reshaping of life experience across the life course. Telling the adopted individual his / her life story is only the commencement; for these individuals, life story work is an ongoing process across their life course. Often born out of adversity and trauma, the narrative of the adopted individual can be fragmented, requiring the adoptive family to weave the different life stories into a coherent autobiography that can be understood. Furthermore, the formation of a positive identity can only be attained through an understanding of the biological family history and the circumstances that culminated in the individual’s placement into the care system. Through the journey of discovering who they are, the adopted individuals begin to interpret what it means to be adopted

and the external factors influencing their newly claimed identity. With its potential for reunification (managed or unmanaged), the Internet has become one of the many external factors influencing their newly claimed identity.

Bruner (2004) reminded us that the narrating of “(t)he story of one's own life is, of course, a privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same” (p. 693). Stories are, after all, multifaceted and open to interpretation. While each individual can decide which stories to tell, one cannot always determine how these stories will be interpreted. A sensitive rendition of these life narratives is integral to understanding adoption. Often presented as autobiographical testimonies of their life experiences, adoption narratives can read like witness statements. These narratives often reveal how the adopted individual has adapted to fresh challenges and new situations, as well as conquered fear and inner conflicts felt about his / her adoptive and biological families. The publication of online blogs as memoirs by these individuals reveals the changing construct of these narratives.

The importance of a coherent and truthful life narrative as a contributor to the shaping of a positive identity goes some way to ensuring that the adopted individual does not enter into unrealistic fantasies about their biological family (Sokoloff, 1979, p. 188). With assistance from social services, as well as biological and adoptive family, most adopted individuals are able to successfully create a new life narrative of their own. Within the digital era, ensuring that the information that the adopted individual gathers about his / her past is credible and truthful is not without issues.

Social services contribution to the narrative of the adopted individual is an integral part of the life storybook. Although current narratives constructed by social services range from listening to their clients to writing persuasive reports for colleagues, as well as contributing to government policies (Riessman & Quinney, 2005), it is too early to determine how social networking will influence the work they do, the narratives that emerge and its influence within the life story work created for adopted individuals.

For the purpose of this research, the inclusion of the popular media, in particular newspapers, television, and social networking platforms, provides an additional perspective for exploring the subject of adoption and the different adoption narratives that emerge. Today, autobiographical narratives by biological parents, adopted individuals, and adoptive parents are as likely to appear across different platforms, including the Internet, broadcast media, and print format. Popular media's

portrayal of both the positive and negative experiences of adoption has placed adoption firmly in the public consciousness. A contributor to adoption life narratives, digital media technologies continue to inform and influence the publics' perception and understanding of adoption.

Digital technologies facilitate the construction and deconstruction of our digital lives through the creation of tangible interactive narratives. Likewise, the narratives we present vary across the different social media platforms we use, dependent on the targeted audience (Grant, 2011). New languages, codes, and patterns of life continue to emerge within these micro narrative representations of life. Lack of control of our online data and our participation with social media constructs a fragmented, often inaccurate, and deceptive representation of our lives, resulting in growing concern over confidentiality. Combined with issues of technological compatibility, our digital lives are fragile and are thus easily lost, forgotten, and erased.

Regulating our relationship with technology and narrative, the use of social media in everyday life continues to expand, facilitating the documentation of adoption life stories as digital memories for life through shareable digital photographs, videos, blogs, and Facebook posts, for example. However, digital media's presentation of these narrative life stories as digitized personal experiences often contains confidential, political, and culturally sensitive information. For adopted individuals and their adoptive family regulating the content shared online is one preventative measure that may reduce the risk of being found by the biological family. Reitz and Watson (1992) reminded us, "(a)doption is a powerful experience that touches upon universal human themes of abandonment, parenthood, sexuality, identity, and the sense of belonging" (p. 3). These issues in the context of adoption will be explored throughout this thesis.

Digital technology has taken on a significant role in the transformation of our lives, including communication, education, employment, play, storytelling, and reminiscence. Web 2.0 technologies encourage the artistic creation of digital storytelling, as it comprehends the way in which ordinary people use digital technology to document their lives, communicate, and share stories. As a frame of narrative expression, digital stories allow for the creation of digital memories, typically relaying a personal event or experience, which manifests its self in many online guises. As a vehicle for discussion amongst adopted individuals, their families, and adoption communities, the telling and retelling of life stories facilitates the formation of identity and the understanding of past experiences. Via the process of reminiscence through life story work, recognition of their past experiences, whether positive or negative,

encourages the adopted individuals to be accepting of themselves and their experience (Bluck & Levine, 1998).

To date, the literature review highlights the limited academic publications and empirical research within this field. However, recent publications from the Donaldson Adoption Institute do offer critical insights into the transformation of adoption due to the Internet. Likewise British Association of Social Workers social media policy document recognises many of the changes occurring within the field of social work due to Internet use. Underpinned by narrative, and through the inclusion of the popular media outputs (e.g. Tracy Beaker, Coronation Street, newspapers etc..) provides an important insight into adoption and fostering narratives represented on screen, print, and digital media. Although not always accurate these narrative representations within popular media continue to raise questions and continue discussions within the public domains of adoption and fostering. Often celebrity endorsed and perceived as advocates for adoption and fostering, these representations may however facilitate in the finding homes for 'hard to place' children and young people in foster care. With this in mind, the literature review has provided a new narrative focusing on the procedures of adoption and the social work profession in the digital age.

Summary

This chapter has presented and outlined the field of research and the different areas of study that contribute to our understanding of adoption in the digital age. Combining these research streams offers a different perspective to the areas of adoption, digital media technologies, and narrative.

Chapter Two: Adoption in the Digital Age

Section Overview

Issues of communication, contact, and confidentiality are a major concern in the digital era. This chapter provides an overview of the unprecedented changes that are occurring within the process of adoption due to the ubiquity of social networking.

Introduction

A facilitator of communication and reunification, social networking offers the biological family and the adopted individual an opportunity for direct contact, bypassing social services, and the adoptive family. Continuing to be of grave concern for many of those involved in adoption, the use of social networking for searching has transformed the time scale in which reunification between adopted individuals and their biological kin can occur. Often emotionally and psychologically ill-prepared for the reawakening of past trauma, bypassing any intermediary (social workers, adoption agency, adoptive family or other responsible adult), in the pursuit of reunification, these individuals are launched into an emotional environment that may prove disconcerting. For these reasons, social networking as a broad phenomenon has changed contact between adopted individuals and their biological families indefinitely.

Recent popular media publications about contact between adopted individuals and their biological family have continued to highlight the unwitting participation of social networking platforms, in particular Facebook, in the transformation of adoption reunification. Media headlines including “I Found My Birth Mother Through Facebook” (Belkin, 2011), “Elizabeth Boys, Adopted As A Baby, Uses Facebook To Find Birth Family In Just 36 Hours” (Huffington Post, 2013), and “Adopted children face anguish as birth parents stalk them on Facebook” (MacDonald, 2010), highlight some of the complexities of adoption reunification in the digital age. With the potential to be perceived as alarmist, such media headlines demonstrate how social networking sites continue to disrupt agreed contact between adopted individuals and biological family members in an unintentional way. These headlines reveal the main concern of those

involved in adoption—can we protect adopted individuals from unmanaged contact?

Acting as intermediaries, prior to social networking, social workers facilitated indirect letterbox contact between adopted individuals and their biological kin. Prior to the adoption order being granted, the type and level of contact have continued to be defined by what is in the best interests of the child. Indeed, a requirement of the 1989 Children Acts relating to looked after children included the provision “that local authorities promote and support contact between children who are looked after and their families unless it is in not in the best interests of the child’s welfare” (Fostering and Adoption, 2014, p. 1). The severing of face-to-face contact with the biological family is not an option open to all children placed for adoption.

Prior to social networking, for most adopted individuals, official contact with the biological family was relatively infrequent, taking place once or twice yearly, via indirect letterbox contact social worker or adoption agency intermediary, or direct contact as agreed by the court. Using this intermediary process the biological family have the opportunity to respond. The unforeseen use of social networking has resulted in an unexpected outcome regarding adopted children, and has serious implications for all those involved in adoption. Kent (2013) reminded us “(w)hile letterbox contact ensures protection of the adopted family’s identity and location, Facebook offers no such guarantee” (para. 4). Referring to Coronation Street’s adoption storyline featuring unmanaged contact between Faye Windass and her biological father Tim, Kent elaborated, “(a)s social workers know, and as adoptive mother Anna Windass in Coronation Street no doubt will discover, simply banning a young person from using the internet, or monitoring their usage, is akin to putting your finger in a dam[sic]” (para. 10). Sensationalist in her language, Kent nevertheless emphasizes real concerns.

Under some circumstances, the courts may rule that the children should continue to engage in face-to-face contact with their biological parents, siblings, and other family members under supervision. Through intermediaries, the exchange of handwritten or typed letters, presents, and in some circumstances photographs, adopted individuals and their biological family has previously remained in touch. Whilst it cannot be disputed that indirect letterbox contact can be beneficial for adopted individuals in terms of maintaining connections with their biological family and their sense of identity, this can also be problematic, if letters sent are not replied to or the response is inappropriate.

When deciding to bypass these intermediaries and engage in social networking for unmanaged contact, adopted individuals (more specifically children and young

people) are unwittingly exposing themselves once more to the environment that resulted in them being placed in the guardianship system. Remindful of the impact unmanaged contact can have on the adopted child Kent (2013) stated “(s)ome children may welcome contact, but some may be extremely disturbed by their birth families finding them, and may find that it resurrects frightening and upsetting memories” (para. 6). Undermining all the positive work adoptive families and social workers have undertaken, the intervention of social networking has the potential to psychologically and emotionally damage the adopted individual once more.

Letterbox contact mechanisms are underpinned by attachment theory, the need for continuity and contact with identity and limitation of the negative impact of separation, while providing indirect and limited contact between the adoptive individual and biological family. Whilst many authors, including Grigsby (1994), have extensively written about the significance of the relationship between attachment theory and contact, others including Moyers, Farmer, and Lipscombe (2006) and Neil, Cossar, Jones, Lorgelly, and Young (2011), cautioned that any type of contact can be problematic. Letterboxes thus aim to strike a balance between the need for attachment on the one hand and the risk that the biological family can continue to pose to the development of the adopted individual on the other.

Writing in 2010, Dr Joyce Maguire Pavao (2010), “(c)onsultant and (c)oach on child welfare, adoption, systems for business and families” outlined the rapidly changing landscape within the field of adoption due to social networking. Using key examples, Pavao’s online article *Finding Facebook* highlighted some of the opportunities for abuse of trust between adoptive families and biological family members. Citing specific examples, Pavao explained that one particular instance where it had been agreed that, as part of the letterbox contact, the biological family would receive photographs of their now adopted child. However, unbeknown to them, the biological family was posting the photographs online.

Pavao (2010) suggested that such incidents might occur because, on occasion, some adoption intermediaries “have simply filed things and not passed them on to the intended recipient” (p. 3). Continuing, Pavao (2010) proposed:

These types of mistakes lead people to circumvent the agency, feeling that they are withholding, or unfair, or untruthful, or even that they might have policies or procedures to which they adhere that are not in the best interests of the choices the adoptive parents or the adopted person or the birth parents wanted or want to make. (p. 3)

Whilst Pavao is not making excuses for those that choose to circumvent the use of intermediaries that have been put in place to protect children that have been adopted, the article does raise questions about letterbox contact in the digital age. Julia Feast, consultant at the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) reminded us, "(s)ocial networking sites have blown things open -- you can't keep things secret [*sic*]" (Ormsby, 2012, para. 4). With continued efforts by adoption professionals to protect adopted children from unmanaged contact continued improvement to policies about contact and the perceived best interest of the child may help better prepare families for contact.

Exacerbated since the emergence of social networking, issues of confidentiality have resulted in more complex concerns for those involved in adoption. Whilst many adoptive families may experience anxiousness and constraint through their inability to manage contact, these fears may be alleviated through adoption support. Although only time will tell whether the utilization of social networking for adoption reunification has had a positive effect or has posed a threat to those involved, its contribution to the transformation of adoption cannot be ignored or indeed underestimated. As a greater number of instances of contact via the Internet come to light, a better understanding of how technology and connectivity are changing these relationships may emerge.

The Invisible Ties That Bind: The Digital Search

As a framework for direct and indirect relationships that individuals create online, social networking continues to transform our lives. Having rapidly gained momentum, access to the Internet and the emergence of social networking have provided individuals with the capability of capturing, storing, and sharing of increasingly large amounts of personal information about themselves. Within the collation of personal material, the desire to preserve digital personal memory manifests itself through "the proliferation of personal blogs, family history websites and memorial websites on the Internet" (Misztal, 2010, p. 25). Fuelled by the popularity of the BBC's television series, *Who Do You Think You Are?* for example, public interest in genealogy has continued to grow. In response to this renewed interest in researching family history, an array of family heritage websites, including myheritage.com, ancestry.co.uk, and thefamilyheritagecompany.com, have emerged. However, with limited information, the search to discover their family ancestry can be challenging for many adopted individuals.

With outside influence including the popular media, and the often ease with which positive reunification can be achieved as demonstrated through many television programmes, the decision to search for the biological family is to be expected. For adopted children however such influences are of concern, as the decision to search is often undertaken in isolation without discussion or help from the adoptive family. For many adopted adults the decision to search can be triggered after having their own biological child, or the death of one or both adoptive parents. Although many adopted individuals have always searched for their biological family it is the ease with which it can be achieved and the speed that reunification can occur that is of concern.

Velleman (2005) sets out an argument for the importance of adopted individuals knowing “their biological origins” (p. 376). Firstly, Velleman (2005) argued that “(w)hen adoptees go in search of their biological parents and siblings there is a literal sense in which they are searching for themselves” (p. 368). Continuing this line of argument, the author stated, “(n)ot knowing any biological relatives must be like wandering in a world without reflective surfaces, permanently self-blind” (p. 368). In conclusion, he proposed that even though adopted individuals are able to “find meaningful roles for themselves in stories about their adoptive families” until resolution is found through the knowing of “their biological origin,” they continue to live with significant aspects of their lives missing (p. 376). The implication of Velleman’s argument is that, lacking in information about their “biological origin,” many adopted individuals continue to live their lives knowing that a significant part of their identity may “have been constructed out of serious omissions, distortions, secrets, and lies” (Goodall, 2005, p. 492).

There could be numerous reasons behind the adopted individuals’ decision to search for their biological family. These include medical and health-related issues, and ethnicity (especially pertinent to trans-racial adopted individuals). Many have the need to understand why they were placed for adoption and want to find out whether they have siblings that may have been adopted or stayed with their biological family. Genealogy expert and author of *The Everything Guide to Online Genealogy* (2014) Kimberly Powell (n.d.) stated, “(t)he most common reason given, however, is genetic curiosity - a desire to find what a birth parent or child looks like, their talents, and their personality” (para. 2). Acutely “aware of the difficulty of dealing with the *twoness* of being a relinquished and adopted person” (Nydham, 1999, p. 12), adopted individuals make the decision to search for answers to discover who they are. Although many adopted individuals choosing to seek reunification may be adults at the time they begin the search, regardless of age, experiences from their childhood have the potential to trigger “psychological distress during the reunification process” (Wulczyn, 2004, p. 99).

Scholars have continued to discuss the positive and negative benefits of contact between adopted individuals and their biological family. Feast, Maerwood, Seabrook, and Webb (1998) stated “(r)e-establishing contact with the birth family can be a positive and fulfilling experience but it may also bring its own dilemmas” (p. 4). Not alone in this observation, in his paper *Does Reunion Cure Adoption?* Goodwach (2001) proposed “(r)eunion was expected to be a resolution, but in fact, constituted a major life crisis” (p. 73). Referring to findings following the examination of the experiences of “(e)ight birthmothers who had been reunited with their adult –adopted children,” Goodwach (2001, p. 78) concluded that reunification was not the cure for adoption, as any grief that had remained unresolved prior to reunification often remained unresolved. Faced with different dilemmas following reunification with the biological family, these individuals may have to deal with past memories that cause much pain (Feast et al., 1998). Indeed, discussion about adoption reunification has “no meaning without reference to the unresolved trauma of adoption” (Goodwach, 2001, p. 76).

Prior to the change in contact brought about through social networking, typically the initial search enquiry and first face-to-face meeting between adopted individuals and their biological family members may have developed over a long period of time. Having condensed this time scale significantly, social networking has culminated in an unexpected outcome regarding adopted children, with serious implications for those insufficiently prepared for reunification in the digital age. Belkin’s (2011) New York Times article *Found My Mom Through Facebook* serves as a notable evidence of the change and a reminder of the ease with which individuals can be found. Having initially located his biological mother, fourteen-year-old Alexander Dorf reunited with her and is now engaged in supervised direct contact and the exchange of emails. Aware of potential upset and anxiousness contact might cause, Dorf’s biological mother’s message to the family read, “Please let me know if it’s O.K. if we speak Please don’t be upset” (Belkin, 2011, para. 3).

Crossing many confidentiality and privacy boundaries, social networking continues to facilitate communication between individuals separated by adoption. Illustrative of the potential positive outcomes of reunification via the Internet, Dorf’s biological mother’s apologetic comment offers an insight into the complex family patterns that may begin to emerge as the adoptive parents adjust to additional parents and family members within their family unit. Belkin (2011) reminded us “(t)he Internet is changing nearly every chapter of adoption A process that once relied on gatekeepers and official procedures can now be largely circumvented with a computer,

Wi-Fi and some luck” (para. 4). As more reports of unmanaged contact are reported ensuring the privacy of the identity of adopted individuals and their adoptive families remain an ongoing challenge.

Offering an insight into some of these complexities, Boddy’s (2013) report *Understanding Permanence for Looked After Children: A review of research for the Care Inquiry*, stated “(m)eaningful permanence must ensure that children are supported to a sense of belonging and identity that addresses the complex and varied meanings of ‘family’ that they have experienced, whilst in care, and going on into adulthood” (p. 26). Pertinent to the digital age, the inclusion of the adoptive family at this early stage of the search for the biological family may open the door for continued discussion about the decision to search and the possible outcomes that searching and reunification may bring.

Partially due to its connectivity capabilities, social networking continues to gain traction in everyday life. However, given that the popular media coverage of contact that is not managed within adoption often cites Facebook as a key instigator for reunification, the potential for reunification via other social networking media might easily be sidelined. With its connection capabilities and moment-by-moment updates in the form of tweets, Twitter continues to be used for the promotion of adoption, as well as for reunification purposes. Examples of the use of Twitter for reunification can be found in Pepper’s (2014) article in the *Daily Mail* (online) *Teen adopted as a baby is reunited with her birth mother just THREE DAYS after posting a tweet asking strangers to help find her* and Laird’s (2012) online article *Adopted NFL Star's Birth Mom Struggles to Reconnect on Twitter*.

According to Pepper’s article, after her initial tweet to find her biological mother was retweeted more than 50,000 times, Hannah Stouffer was reunited with her. Whilst both Dorf’s and Stouffer’s stories of reunification have had positive outcomes, in contrast, Laird’s article outlining Heidi Russo’s attempt to reconnect with her son Colin Kaepernick, a professional quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers she placed for adoption illustrates the impact attempts at contact may have when only one party wants reunification. Laird (2012) stated, “Russo’s own Twitter account offers a powerful window into her simultaneous alienation and longing for connection” (para. 4). Featuring the same story, Poole’s (2012) coverage highlights how Russo’s public attempts at reunification resulted in attacks by “sports trolls.” Critical of her attempts at reunification, tweets including the following (Laird, 2012), portray a different public perception about adoption reunification in the digital age:

He is not your boy, your son, your family. He has a real mom and you are not her. #badmoms [sic]

Whilst Russo remains hopeful that her son will one day make contact and “somehow fill that empty space in her heart” (Poole, 2012, line. 12), she reveals a feeling that is often shared by many biological parents and adopted individuals.

Although the journey toward reunification may be a joyous experience, it is rarely without emotional distress (Feast et al., 1998). Illustrating some of the issues and the emotional distress reunification can bring forth, Eileen Fursland’s (2012) article details Heidi’s (no surname given) failed attempt to break contact with her biological mother after engaging in unmanaged contact. Following the initial contact and arrangements to meet via Facebook, 15-year-old Heidi’s correspondence with her biological mother was eventually referred to social services by her adoptive parents. Having befriended Heidi’s friends on Facebook, disregarding Heidi’s request of no further contact, her biological mother continued to try to communicate and maintain the online relationship.

Against the backdrop of concerns about adoption reunification in the digital age, these stories reveal the ease with which contact can occur via social networking sites. In particular, it highlights the varied outcomes once contact has been initiated. Situations like those described above are a snapshot of the emerging concerns within the field of adoption due to social networking. Additionally, they reveal the extent to which individuals are engaging in social networking for the purpose of locating family members separated through adoption. Acknowledging the use of social networking for reunification, Trinder, Feast, and Howe (2004) cautioned against rushing in after locating the individual that has been sought. Unaware of the impact that allowing her biological mother to reenter her life would have, Heidi’s story is a clear illustration of the impulsiveness with which many children and teenagers seek out and make contact with biological family members.

Often viewed as life-changing experience, adoption reunification can have both positive and negative implications. Results from Affleck and Stead’s (2001) study *Expectations and experiences of participants in ongoing adoption reunion relationships: A qualitative study* concluded “that the desire for connection and relationship between biological parents and children is so great that many ongoing reunion relationships are being forged out of the maze of their interactions and experiences” (p. 28). Results yielded by a later study funded by the Nuffield Foundation based on the data provided by 500 individuals that were interviewed, *The*

Adoption Triangle Revisited, A study of adoption, search and reunion experiences (Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005) revealed that “(e)ighty-five per cent of adopted people reported that the contact and reunion experience was positive for them” (p.5). These studies of adoption reunification reveal the need to better understand why adopted individuals and their biological family takes huge personal and emotional risks in the attempt to be reunited, managed, or unmanaged by intermediaries.

There are multiple reasons for children being taken from biological families and these are often very negative or highly stigmatized. For these reasons biological families may often construct stories to explain the reason for their child being placed in care (Baxter et al., 2012). Indeed, choosing to place the child in care rather than having the child removed by social services carries less stigma (Baxter et al., 2012). The decision to relinquish a child is a decision no parent wants to make or indeed should have to make (Winkler, Brown, van Keppel & Blanchard, 1988). Where possible social services place the child in temporary foster care with the hope that after intervention and support the child may return to their biological family. The best interest of the child is the focus of such discussions between the family and social services. There are however circumstances where the child has to be removed permanently, and returning home is not an option. These situations are difficult for all involved.

Often traumatic for the life narratives of both the adoptive and biological families, the collapse of time between the adoption proceedings being concluded and unmanaged contact occurring brings additional complications to the new life narratives being constructed (adoptive family changing due to the arrival of the child, the biological family changing due to the loss of the child). This collapse of time due to unmanaged contact can significantly affect the experiences of adoption, often disturbing, and rupturing life narratives or inhibit the capacity to understand their life story.

The immediacy of being found and the consequences of reunification via social networking demonstrate the need for ongoing discussions. Radical changes to policy and procedure of looked after children that reflect contact and reunion in the digital age cannot be ruled out. Recently, Haralambie (2013) stated,

Searchers must be sensitive to the fact that in searching for a birth relative, others may necessarily be impacted, especially when information is posted on that person’s social media site, where it may be visible to a wide range of family, friends, business associates, and even casual acquaintances. (p. 206)

Not wanting to dissuade those wanting to search for their biological family, Hilpern (2012) stated that “majority of adoption reunions do last, the most recent research showing that 78% are still in touch eight years later (and only around 7% experience outright rejection)” (para. 6). Continuing, the author noted that many of these studies concluded, that whilst the majority of these reunifications were beneficial, “it’s also important not to have rose-coloured spectacles” (para. 6). In response to these growing concerns about social networking and its transformation of adoption, BAAF continue to engage in discussion with the UK government “to put in place a system where agencies and adoptive parents can get in touch and share their experiences, learning from each other” (Ormsby, 2012, para. 12). The continuing challenges for social work professionals remains how best to respond to these changes. Proactive response to these changes that are occurring continues to be of benefit to all those involved in adoption (and fostering).

With so much focus on the positives and negatives of adoption reunification, the decision made by many adopted individuals not to search for their biological family is receiving less coverage and is sparsely written about. Lifton (1994) proposed, “THERE ARE ADOPTEES WHO SAY THEY WILL NEVER search, but would not object to being found by their birth mother – it would mean she cared enough to look for them [*sic*]” (p. 46). Published in *The Telegraph* (online), Rose Garland’s (2014) article *Why I have never felt the need to find my birth mother* explained that, with the exception of a “few niggling questions” about her origins in her early 30s, she had no desire to find her biological mother. Having survived cancer, and having had to deal with her adoptive mother dying, Garland believed the “niggles” she experienced were purely borne out of curiosity, rather than activated by significant life-changing events. Respecting many adopted individuals’ commitment to searching for their biological family and echoing Lifton’s proposal, concluding, Garland (2014) stated, “(i)f my birth mother came and found me, or we somehow came across each other, that would be fascinating. But I’ve decided to leave it in the lap of the gods [*sic*]” (para. 9).

For those individuals seeking reunification with those separated through adoption, an array of websites, including Mission2reunite’s Facebook group *Adoptee and Birth Mother Searching* created in 2009, have embraced the reuniting potential that social networking offers. Set up to facilitate the reunion between biological families and adopted individuals, the website encourages members to leave messages for each other in the hope that one day they might be contacted. Creating open profiles linked to their personal Facebook pages, many of these members display photos of themselves that span their life course. The following extracts are an illustration of the

types of messages left. Seeking her biological mother, Michelle Simon posted the very first message on July 27, 2009 (Mission2reunite, 2009)

I have been looking for my birth mother, Mary Ellen Reed for several years now. I was born on Aug 28, 1973 in Norristown PA. If anyone has information that could lead to a reunion, I would be very thankful! (2009)

On December 24, 2009, biological mother Lisa Jordan posted a message to her daughter placed for adoption in 1978 (Mission2reunite, 2009)

Birthmother ISO Birthdaughter DOB Nov 1978 SLC UT area -private adoption- Nolan Olsen was the lawyer. I was 16 in 1978, I have been searching for years and years and will keep searching untill I find You or You find me ,, ,,lets get to know each other, I am not trying to replace your adoptive mother just to be part of your Life!! [sic] (2009)

Although one cannot determine whether significant life events may have triggered the search for reunification, the desire, and hope of reunification is evident.

The concurrent themes within this site and other websites facilitating adoption reunification are the messages of hope for reunion between the families, and reassurance to the adoptive families that their intention is not to replace or exclude them. Through these websites, we begin to see how social networking continues to transform adoption on many levels. Illustrative of the new types of adoption and biological family online communities being created, these sites are an indicator of changes in the way adopted individuals and biological families feel about themselves and each other (Herman, 2012). Popularized within the American adoption community, as continued stories of positive reunifications continue to circulate the use of Facebook and other social networking platforms by individuals from other countries will become more visible.

Social Networking: Promise or Threat to Adoption?

Social workers, adoptive families, and many biological family members have always been concerned with the impact that contact with the biological family may have on the development of adopted individuals (Elsbeth Neil, 2009). Pertinent in the digital age with reports of unmanaged contact social networking remains a treat to those connected by adoption. Illustrating this point through the story of Poppy Adams' adoption breakdown, Hilpern's article *How social networking sites threaten the security of adopted children* (2015) highlights the risk to adopted individuals and concerns of adoptive parents and social workers. Having located Poppy's biological mother online,

Poppy's adoptive mother Sue found pictures she sent annually to Poppy's biological mother via letterbox contact displayed on Facebook. Following this revelation, she was advised by Poppy's social worker to monitor Poppy's biological mother's online presence.

For the biological family members that do not wish to be found by the child they placed for adoption, potential contact via social networking remains a threat to their privacy. For many adopted individuals their biological families negative or no response to unsolicited contact may lead to presumptions being made about the circumstances of the adoption. For some biological parents unsolicited contact may force them to have to reveal that they placed a child for adoption without the knowledge of their family. With so much focus on the safeguarding of adopted individuals due to fears of unmanaged contact fears of the biological family being contacted directly is easily overlooked.

For social workers and allied professionals social networking remains a threat due to fears of cyber bullying in response public anger when mistakes are made that culminate in the death of a child in particular or biological family resentment of their child being removed. Acknowledging these changes to contact taking place within the field of social work due to social media, British Association of Social Workers (BASW) 2012 Social Media Policy (2012) document stated that, whilst encouraging the positive usage of social media, they "recognise(s) the opportunities and challenges social media presents for social workers in their practice and the possible risks both for social workers and service users" (p. 4).

As social networking continues to threaten and unite these individuals, left unchecked a myriad of unforeseen consequences may emerge that could potentially undermine contact that is currently in place. Collaboration between academics, adoption professional, adopted individuals, adoptive and biological families, and the sharing of good practice and findings may go some way to alleviating some of these tensions. Although the focus of many of these publications may be in determining the immediate nature and extent of unmanaged contact, the impact long term cannot be forecast.

In 2013, The Donaldson Adoption Institute (Whitesel & Howard, 2013) reported on an extensive study into the impact of the Internet on adoption involving "over 2,000 adoptive parents, adopted individuals, birth/first parents and adoption professionals" (pp. 6-7). Key findings from *Untangling the Web II: A Research-Based Roadmap to Reform* included

- Despite the acknowledged risks, the Internet is an important and regular part of how respondents live their lives in relation to adoption
- The Internet and social media facilitate ongoing contact between members of adoptive and birth/first families, enabling regular and quick exchanges of information. An unexpected finding was that many of those involved appreciated the “contact with distance” that the Internet provides
- A significant majority of professionals do not receive training about the Internet’s use in adoption or on how to prepare clients to safely and effectively use this technology. In particular, few were trained to prepare adoptive parents for the likelihood of contact that the Internet enables, even in ostensibly closed adoptions.
- Despite concerns about the potential for unwanted contact, few respondents reported that the Internet or social media had led to unwelcome intrusions. Generally, parties were cautious and respectful about imposing themselves on others (pp. 5 -7).

The largest study to date into adoption and its transformation due to the Internet, although the research pertained to the US, the findings and recommendations offer a useful insight to all those involved in adoption worldwide. Revealing the opportunities and challenges within this rapidly shifting culture within the field of adoption due to social networking, the report addresses some of the many needs and concerns related to adoption in the digital age.

Key recommendations following the study included working with adoption professionals, allied professionals, and the larger Internet companies

to create best-practice standards relating to adoption on the Internet; delineate illegal, problematic and unethical behaviors; establish regimens for monitoring adoption-related marketing and other activity; and create regulations and laws, including punishments, with the aim of providing protections for children, adults and their families. (Whitesel & Howard, 2013, p. 7).

In the long term, collaboration with these institutes will ensure that all those involved in adoption are better prepared and adopted individuals better protected both on and offline. For individuals already affected, more immediate action is necessary.

Within the UK professional bodies and academics remain at the forefront of publications offering advice to social workers, allied professionals and adopted families. Hosted by Adoption UK in Milton Keynes the July 2012 conference *Growing Up with Social Networking. The implications and challenges for adoptive families* (Adoption Today, 2012) addressed some of the emerging tensions about contact and the potential benefits of social networking. One of the many conclusions to emerge from the conference was that more long-term support from post-adoption services is required. Writing in *Adoption Today*, Oakwater (2012b) highlighted the differences between opportunities and risks, including positive as well as negative long-term

implications of social networking. Continuing Oakwater (2012b) proposed “(w)e have a fantastic opportunity to transform adoption and heal maltreated children but only if adopters, professionals and decision makers have the courage to recognize the legacy of trauma” (p. 21).

Notable academic research includes Greenhow, Hackett, Jones, Meins, and Bell (2014) *Chatting Online With My Other Mother: Post-Adoption Contact in the Facebook Era* (Durham University) and Neil, Beek, and Ward (2013) *Contact After Adoption: A Follow Up In Late Adolescence* (University of East Anglia). Citing her recent research, in an interview in the Guardian (online) Professor Julie Selwyn, Head of the Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies at the University of Bristol, confirmed that (Hilpern, 2015) “many young people reported that they hadn’t felt prepared for adoption and as they had grown older and asked more questions, nobody seemed to have the answers” (para. 13). Continuing Selwyn (Hilpern, 2015) stated “(y)oung people need to get information about the reality of why they were removed” (para. 13).

The continued challenge for those connected by adoption is balancing the opportunities against the risks. In contrast to much of publicized concerns about the potential deterrent to adoption that social networking brings forth, Thomas Taneff, who runs an adoption attorney firm in Columbus, Ohio, US, has spoken positively about its usage within the adoption process. Offering more than an opportunity to locate relatives with very little information, in ways that might not otherwise have been possible, Taneff has argued that Facebook has been instrumental in cutting through much of the red tape surrounding adoption (Boyle, 2013). Actively engaged with social networking within the adoption process, over a period of three years, Taneff claims to have assisted 75 couples or individuals to adopt. Although data to support this phenomenon may be sparse and as yet cannot be substantiated, Taneff’s reliance on social networking would suggest that its use within the field of adoption is on the increase (Boyle, 2013).

Starkly contrasted against the positive use of social networking for the promotion of adoption is interviews with adoptive families about the devastation and intrusion that reunification via social networking has caused their family. Writing in the Guardian (online), Hilpern (2015) reminded us “(s)ocial media is the latest threat to adoption, with adoption agencies reporting a marked growth in cases of an adopted child – typically a disaffected teenager – finding their birth family in just a few clicks” (para. 5). Further examples of the potential risk to adoption from social networking are

evidenced in interview extracts from Oakwater's *Bubble Wrapped Children. How social networking is transforming the face of 21st century adoption* (2012). An anonymous adoptive mother stated (Oakwater, 2012), "(r)eally feel Facebook is very culpable here, and may have completely changed the face of adoption for the future. I for one would not, I think, consider it now, knowing what I know" (p. 149). Another anonymous adoptive mother, who adopted her daughter at the age of four, stated (Oakwater, 2012), "At 20 she reconnected with her birth mother in Facebook. Two years on, her name, not mine, features on Ali's Facebook front page as 'mother.' All her friends can see this very public change of status" (p. 151).

While these stories are important in informing our understanding of social networking's transformation of adoption, more worryingly, these extracts reveal the change of heart that some adoptive families may continue to have about their decision to adopt. Visible in both printed publications and online, these concerns, and feelings of those that have already adopted, have the potential to deter prospective adopters. Although useful in highlighting concerns about unmanaged contact, these observations featured within the popular media offer little in the way of suggestions for possible resolution. Potentially taking the form of evidence-based policy, the importance of building social media safety considerations into both policy and guidance documentation as well as adoption preparation groups continues to be paramount. Regardless of the revised safeguards that may be put in place if the adopted individual makes the decision to search for their biological family the information they have been given about their history is sufficient to start the search process.

The impact of the Internet on adoption can additionally be evidenced in three different adoption-related stories from the US. The first story pertains to adoption related to fraud, while the second entails the use of classified ads to find children to adopt and the subsequent rehoming of some of these adopted children via the Internet. In a scam claiming to have a baby requiring adoption, and conning unsuspecting would-be adoptive parents, Davanna Dotson from Muskogee, Oklahoma, US was sentenced to four years in prison for adoption fraud. Uncovered when one of the couples searched her phone number via Google, the search result led "to a Facebook page about avoiding adoption scams, where someone else told a very similar story and posted the same phone number" (Fullbright, 2011, para. 12). Although uncommon, Dotson's story reveals the lengths many individuals are prepared to go to become parents and the opportunities the Internet offers individuals hoping to make money illicitly.

Although uncommon, some would-be adopters have placed classified ads on Craigslist to find children to adopt (see “Baby Wanted: Desperate Couples Advertise for Children on Craigslist” (Ninan, 2012) for example). Only allowable in a few US states, prospective parents place advertisements hoping to attract biological mothers. Once contact has been made via the advertisement, support from both adoption agencies and a solicitor is still a legal requirement to legalize the adoption (Ninan, 2012). Raising ethical concerns about adoption in the digital age, the Donaldson Adoption Institute (Howard, 2012), amongst its key findings about the Internet’s transformation of adoption, stated “(a) growing “commodification” of adoption and a shift away from the perspective that its primary purpose is to find families for children” (p. 4).

Following extensive investigation, Twohey (2013) reported on the sinister use of the Internet for the rehoming of internationally adopted individuals. Published in Reuters (online), the article *The Child Exchange: Inside America's underground market for adopted children* (Twohey, 2013) stated

Reuters analyzed 5,029 posts from a five-year period on one Internet message board, a Yahoo group. On average, a child was advertised for re-homing there once a week. Most of the children ranged in age from 6 to 14 and had been adopted from abroad – from countries such as Russia and China, Ethiopia and Ukraine. The youngest was 10 months old. (para. 21)

In a practice called “private re-homing” (Twohey, 2013, para. 17) — although many Internet companies, including Facebook and Yahoo, removed these pages following notification of the usage of the Internet for this purpose — such use within other sites continues. Having been placed for adoption due to the harm or risk of harm, many of these adopted individuals have continued to suffer harm at the hands of their adoptive families and subsequent family they have been privately rehomed to. Revealing a different and more sinister threat to adoption, these stories reveal a wider problem and the different risks that the Internet presents to adopted individuals.

Pointing to the cultural difference surrounding adoption within the US, these stories highlight the many differences between adoption policies, practices, and procedures in the UK and the US. Writing in the Telegraph (online) Jardine (2007) article *Why adoption is so easy in America* reminded us that unlike the UK “there has never been a shortage of babies to adopt in America” (para. 8). Highlighting other differences author noted that in America in particular “the adoption industry is largely privatised and run by firms that promise to bring together pregnant women and adoptive families, deal with all the legal niceties and ensure there are no hitches along

the way [sic]" (para. 4). Although these specific tensions are not in the remit for further discussion within this thesis, these examples are whilst a reminder of the diverse and broad range of issues of adoption in the digital age these examples highlight some of the motivations for and the impact of reunification.

Conclusion

There are indeed many critical issues surrounding Internet contact between adopted individuals and biological family members, namely tensions that appear following the crossing and eroding of approved and agreed boundaries within the adoption order. For social workers and social service providers, tension over social networking's ability to share and disclose private and confidential information that may put adopted individuals at significant risk from harm continues to be of major concern. As I have already highlighted, those by the Donaldson Adoption Institute offer possible long-term resolutions that may appease some of the tensions and anxieties about contact. Looking to the future, the *Untangling the Web II: A research based roadmap for reform* (Whitesel & Howard, 2013) report proposed "(f)uture work in the area of the Internet and social media in adoption will allow for tracking changes in practice and informing policy so that advocacy for better, more- ethical practice can be pursued" (p. 77). As we continue to discover more about the impact of social networking on adoption, identity, and contact, the way in which social workers address these emerging concerns is imperative. The problem is not that social workers have fallen behind in their knowledge and use of digital media technologies; rather, it is that they were, and to some degree still are, unprepared for the impact it continues to have regarding contact.

Highlighting the critical issues surrounding adoption and contact, recent publications in both print and digital media format reveal the extent to which communication via the Internet continues to transform adoption. In particular, the impact that tracing relatives can have on the adopted individual, biological family, and the adoptive family is often underestimated. Boddy (2013) stated "(t)he growth of social media such as Facebook also means that contact with birth families may not be avoidable. Family members may continue to be present in the virtual world for children, even if no contact is authorised" (p. 25). Having speeded up the process of reunification between these individuals, social networking allows very little time for

adjusting to the life-changing event that continues to unfold following unmanaged contact.

Offering opportunities and risks, promise and threat, social networking continues to transform many aspects of adoption. Writing in 2014, Greenhow, Hackett, Jones, Meins, and Bell (2014) stated “(p)ractice literature has been produced in the UK as an effort to respond to the use of technology in adoptive family life, whilst policy guidance is still lacking” (p. 2). For social workers, finding the best way to disseminate information about the opportunities and risks online remains a challenge. Utilizing the very tools that continue to disrupt adoption, social workers may begin to readdress the balance between opportunities and risks, promise and threat.

Although the pace and manner in which social networking is affecting the field of adoption is such that evidence based and academic research has not yet caught up, through post-adoption support, adoptive individuals and their families may be better prepared for contact that may occur via the Internet. In acknowledgement of this, Boddy (2013) stated “there is a gap in our knowledge of the role of social media in children and young people’s relationships within the looked after system, and the concomitant implications for understanding permanence and work with families” (p. 25). Disproportionate and often far removed from reality; public understanding of adoption is fueled by recent stories about contact. Indeed, given that media coverage tends to focus on loss, search, and reunification, although this is not the case, adoption might be perceived as a negative experience that can only be made positive through reunification. For many adopted individuals, however, “(t)heir ‘need to know’ and to find the ‘missing pieces of the jigsaw’” (Rees, 2009, p. 87) remains the driving force behind the decision to search. For these individuals, the risk of harm is secondary to reunification with their biological family.

The provision of easily accessible lifelong post-adoption support will continue to be required, and preparation for contact built into the life story work. Furthermore, the telling of a more accurate life story to the adopted individuals may additionally prepare them for unmanaged contact should it occur. Importantly, a willingness by the adoptive family to help find the biological family may assist in the future development of a coherent family narrative and thus reduce the risk of harm to the adopted individual. Sokoloff (1979) reminded us that, whatever the circumstances that brought these individuals together, “(a)n adoptee and his adoptive parents are indeed aware that they are in a situation unlike most families” (p. 184).

Whilst many of the stories about adoption reunification via social networking have emerged from the US, as accounts from the rest of the world continue to emerge, the true impact of social networking remains to be seen. As the extent of the powerful experience of adoption continues to be publicized online, fuelled by the growing ubiquity of social media, the impact of these changes will become more prevalent within scholarly communication. Regardless of the potential negative repercussions reunification may bring forth, for both adopted individuals and biological family members, social networking continues to serve as a viable tool in searching for information leading to reunification following adoption. The following chapters will argue that the impact of social networking on adoption has found significant traction within social services, scholarly literature, and the popular media coverage.

Chapter Three: Social Networking: Changing Reunification and Representation of Adoption Identity Online

Section Overview

This chapter is subdivided into two sections. The first discusses the uses of social networking by adopted individuals to search for their biological relatives, while the subsequent one explores some of the ways adopted individuals use digital media technologies to explore the theme of identity.

Introduction

Reunion is a powerful word that frames contact entirely positively and features regularly within both the popular media and literature about adoption (Horspool, 2014). Within the assumption that contact is entirely positive, the inability of adopted individuals to experience both positive and negative effects of reunification at the same time might easily be ignored. Likewise, it might well be assumed that the willingness of these individuals to engage in contact is an acceptance that they may encounter and are prepared to deal with a negative outcome. Reunification via an intermediary, i.e., social worker, adoptive family, and friends, provides the adopted individuals with a protective frame within which to pursue communication with their biological kin. Through the employment of an intermediary, the potential for a negative outcome may be addressed and positives sought, which may help the adopted individual to reconcile with the experience of reunification.

Offering a reason for the public interest in adoption Homans (2007) argued “(a)dooption, like “queer,” names a social practice and a social condition that provides fresh insights into what it means to be human” (p. 59). Proposing reasons for the escalation in demand for reunification stories, McColm (1993) suggested that the popular media has become prolific in the number of stories of reunification it has brought to public attention. Reaffirming this notion and citing the reunion between the former Labour government minister Claire Short and her son Toby Graham in 1996,

Eldridge (2009) observed that, since adoption reunification became possible, it has been accompanied by public interest and copious media coverage worldwide.

With so much written about the relationship between mother and baby across many disciplines, even within the field of adoption, the role of the biological father is typically overlooked. Citing the international adoption of predominately girls from China, Homans (2007) argued “(a)doption involves sons as well as daughters, fathers as well as mothers, yet activism and scholarship in the field of adoption have historically been dominated by women, and the recent history of adoption from China has accentuated this slant” (p. 60). Concurring, Passmore and Feeney (2009) stated “(a)lthough birth mothers and birth fathers contribute equally to the conception of their relinquished child, most research has focused on reunions between adoptees and their birth mothers” (p. 101). The significance of the mother and the marginalization of the father is evident in Verrier’s (2011) statement, “(f)rom the moment the baby is separated from the first mom and gives up hope of connecting with her again, she begins to cope with that loss” (para. 3). Verrier is not alone in her focus on the significance of the role of the mother. A series of interviews conducted by March (1995) into the motivations of adopted individuals searching concluded “(c)ontact with the birth mother became the goal of the adoptees' search because the birth mother had severed those ties through her act of relinquishment” (p. 657).

The act of searching for the biological family may indeed lead to the supposition that the invisible bond between mother and baby remains even after separation through adoption, lessening the significance of the bond between the adopted children and their adoptive families. Writing in 2004 Trinder et al. (2004) argued that for many “(t)he word ‘reunion’ itself will be unacceptable to some people who might feel uncomfortable with the implicit suggestion that there is an existing relationship that can be renewed” (p. 1). According to the Independent Adoption Center (n.d.) “(w)hether the bonds are instant or grow over time, the ties between adopting parents and adopted children are as strong as any between biological child and biological parent” (para. 6). The strength of this bond is tested in instances where the adopted individual has returned to the biological family following reunification online and has subsequently severed contact with the adopted family. In these cases, the bond with the adoptive family is not as strong as that with the biological kin.

Commonly viewed and discussed from the perspective of loss, many adoption reunification attempts remain focused on finding answers about one’s biological heritage. Indeed, Volkman (2005) argued “(s)earching to repair the wounded self and

broken narrative seems almost compulsory” (p. 97). Elaborating on this premise, Homans (2007) stated

Adoptees are peculiarly burdened, in popular adoption culture, with this obligation to find, know, and grasp material origins. They are compelled to narrate their lives in terms of one particular quest plot. I would like to see this plot loosen its grip on adoptees, adoptive parents, and adoption professionals and scholars. (p. 59)

One cannot dispute the significance of the loss; however, through adoption, a positive resolution can be found in a problematic situation that can be of benefit to everyone involved in the adoption triad. With much concern about contact and those involved in adoption focused on their own loss (adopted individual coming to terms with the loss of their biological family, adoptive families may worry that their child may return to the biological family, the biological family grieving for the loss of their child), the numerous benefits and the reasons for adoption can easily be forgotten.

Pertinent in the digital age where contact has occurred without an appropriate intermediary, Feast reminded us that, although adoption reunifications are often perceived as idealistic, it is the development of the relationship in the long term that can prove to be complex (Hilpern, 2012). Within this idealistic perception of reunification, one must remain mindful that the circumstances that have led to adoption might be upsetting and indeed some attempts at reunification may not have a happy ending (Trinder et al., 2004). Often viewed as a “rite of passage,” the experience of reunion may assist the adopted individual in making sense of their past, coming to terms with the reasons behind the adoption, and what it entails to be raised by a different family (Trinder et al., 2004, p. 121). The use of digital media technologies by adopted individuals to document and share their experiences of adoption continues to offer insight into these dynamics.

Social Networking and its Impact on Adoption Reunification

The examples cited in the previous chapter highlight some of the immediate concerns about contact in the digital age. Within these examples, underlying themes that bind many of these stories can be noted, in particular that of the awakening of suppressed and dormant emotions. Differentiating “between search and reunion” The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2011) stated

It is often assumed that birth family searches automatically involve a reunion. In fact, ambivalence about a possible reunion has sometimes deterred people from searching. Many professionals believe that it is a basic human right to search and learn about oneself. The reunion however, is not a right, but a privilege. All people have a right to their own boundaries and to decline if they do not want to have a relationship or even a reunion. (p. 3)

Crossing the eroding boundaries stipulated by law through the adoption order, these individuals' lives often collide, and possible irresolvable tensions arise. Within these potentially irresolvable tensions, a sense of fortitude is required. Within this fortitude, based upon the understanding that social networking will remain a potential threat to adoption, creation of a different type of resilience is necessary.

Embedded within the search for reunification between adopted individuals and the biological family is the unearthing of such unforeseen pain and suffering that may prove difficult for all concerned (Treacher & Katz, 2000). The motivation for seeking reunification and the emotional resurgence it may cause has been discussed for several decades. Following a study into the outcome of reunification between eleven adopted individuals and their biological mothers, Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor stated (1974)

There are many reasons why an adoptee feels a need to search for more information on his birth parents to seek out a reunion; in many cases, the true purpose remains unconscious. It would appear that very few adoptees are provided with enough information to be incorporated into their developing ego and sense of identity. Feelings of genealogical bewilderment cannot be discounted as occurring only in maladjusted or emotionally disturbed individuals. (p. 195)

Regardless of the motivations and the success rate of any attempt at reunification, "it is still a time of emotional stress and adjustment as the past and present come face to face" (Feast et al., 1998, p. 7). For many individuals, opportunities outweigh the risks. Even though the search for reunification may be emotionally and psychologically challenging for many adopted individuals, feelings of euphoria as "they challenge the story(s) that caregivers have told them about their lives and their adoption process" may prove overwhelming (Global Overseas Adoptees' Link, n.d., p. 12).

Writer and contributor to the recently published book *Adoption Reunion in the Social Media Age* (Dennis, 2014), Becky Drinnen's account of her search for her biological family using social networking is illustrative of the ease with which reunification can be achieved. She also speaks of the emotional journey undertaken to achieve this. Reflecting positively on the use of social networking to search for and find reunification with her biological family, Drinnen (2014) stated "(m)y Facebook

profile became the key to opening the floodgates of my adoption search” (p. 164). Continuing, the author noted, “(t)he gift of the Internet to those who search for biological family is ease of access. The Internet has made it possible for more people to have access to the information they need to search” (p. 168).

Other noteworthy examples of the use of social networking for reunification can be found in Dave Crispin’s story. Having gained prominence through the use of social networking sites to find his biological mother, Dave Crispin’s Facebook page “attracted a lot of attention. Not just for people offering clues to where he can find his biological mother, but dozens of other adoptees who are also looking for clues about their biological families” (Carmody, 2013, para. 9). Carmody (2013) reported that, although an unnamed Facebook spokeswoman was unable to give specific numbers of the amount of individuals using social networking sites for the purpose of searching for biological family members, she was able to confirm that it was an upward trend. In the same article commenting of the use of the Internet for the purpose of reunification amongst adopted individuals, Donnie Davis, president of the American Adoption Congress, stated “social media has become so commonplace that using it may actually be less damaging than she initially feared” (Carmody, 2013, para. 21).

Having attained a positive resolution, these popular media stories featuring Drinnen, Boys, and Crispin are illustrative of the benefits of social networking for reunification by adult adopted individuals. However one of the key differences between seeking reunification via social networking as an adopted adult, and not an adopted child is the level of emotional resilience. For adopted adults, having had significantly more time to come to terms with / accept their adoption they may be more prepared for potential rejection. For adopted minors, engaging in contact that is not managed their often-unconscious motivations may be triggered partially due to their biological transitional stage to adolescence. While focusing on the ease with which unmanaged contact with the biological family can be achieved, none of these stories comments on the emotional or psychological undertaking the search for reunification can entail. Boys’ story in particular demonstrates the worrying speed with which reunification can occur. Whilst the popular media coverage of adopted individuals utilizing social networking for reunification as human-interest stories remain of interest to the public, one can easily ignore the right to privacy of the individual that has been found.

Although the individual that has been found might well be elated by the reunification, he / she may not have been prepared for it emotionally or for being thrust in the media spotlight. Horspool (2014) observed that, if adopted individuals and their

biological families are to fully reconcile, the popular media needs to focus less on the negative aspects of reunification “for it is by far the most overwhelming majority experience. It might not be joyful and uplifting like reunion stories, but it is the truth and a truth that needs to be told” (para. 7).

In contrast to Drinnen, Boys, and Crispin, stories like Heidi’s and comments by adoptive parents featured in Oakwater’s book highlight the negative impact of social networking on adoption and the concerns of unmanaged contact and reunification in the digital age. In an interview in the Guardian (online) with Eileen Fursland (2010a), North Yorkshire county council adoption social worker Joan Hunt stated, “(c)hildren tracing their birth families has been the most prevalent – we have had dozens of cases in North Yorkshire” (para. 3). Hunt’s observation is in contrast Donnie Davis’s statement that ‘social media might be less damaging than she initially feared’. Elaborating further, Hunt explained, “(w)e have had cases of the adopted child running away from the adopted family to the birth family. Age 14 to 15 seems to be the most vulnerable time” (para. 4).

In her article *Facebook: direct contact with no safeguards* Oakwater (2010) stated

In the adoption world contact is a huge issue. . . . There are conflicting views on its strengths and weakness, short and long term benefits, safety and privacy issues However we need to realise that Facebook and the internet have destroyed and safeguard because birth families can, and will, search online for their original families [*sic*]. (p. 15)

One of the many challenges for social workers remains how best to reassure prospective and current adoptive parents that such occurrences are in the minority. Additional challenges include ensuring that the stories popularized within the popular media reporting do not deter prospective adoptive parents from coming forward.

Adoption and Identity in the Digital Age

It is widely accepted that social media has become a facilitator of storytelling as life narratives, providing a new level of transparency through the sharing of our lives. In this respect, Grant (2011) noted, “our digital life histories reveal a complex, partial and often misleading picture that we are not able to fully control” (para. 5). Within the use of social media for narrative practices of engagement, much value can be placed on personal storytelling and a voice that was previously unheard (Mackay & Heck, 2014).

The theme of identity, and the search for “Who Am I?” is at the core of various adoption narrative inquiries. Often triggered by adolescence, many adopted individuals make the decision to confront their adopted status and in doing so may attempt to redefine their identity. Psychologist Erik Erikson (1968) proposed that the “Identity vs. Identity Diffusion” stage is one of the fundamental stages of adolescents’ psycho-social development, a period where they have no concern about their lack of commitment and their ways of thinking. Continuing, Erikson (1977) stated that “(t)he process of identity formation depends on the interplay of what young persons at the end of childhood have come to mean to themselves and what they now appear to mean to those who become significant to them” (p. 106). For adopted individuals, whilst transitioning through the “Identity vs. Identity Diffusion” stage, the questioning of the significance of their biological family and the role of their adoptive family in their upbringing may be a factor that triggers the decision to search.

As adolescents, breaking from the boundaries of childhood and parental restraint allows for freedom to engage with and have more control of many aspects of their lives including access to digital media technologies. In an article about the safeguarding of adopted children from Facebook, Maddox (2012) reminded us “(t)he difficulty with unscreened internet contact is that there is no other adult checking the communication” (para. 6). Within this freedom, lack of understanding of accountability, responsibly and consequences of their actions may leave adopted minors particularly vulnerable to unmanaged contact as evidenced in Heidi’s (no surname) story.

The problematizing of identity within adoption continues to frame much of the discourse and research available. Verrier (2011), for example, argued that adopted individuals are susceptible to identity-related issues because the act of adoption “is something that makes adopted feel a kind of alienation all their lives, beginning with their adoptive family” (para. 1). Responsible for adopted individuals’ well-being, the role of the adopted family in assisting in the development of positive self-esteem and sense of identity can be a lifelong process. Brodzinsky and Schechter (1993) stated that the format with which the adoptive family chooses to discuss adoption with the adopted individual can have some bearing on how the individual progresses “toward identity resolution” during their teenage years (p. 163). Furthermore, the adoptive parents’ attitudes about adoption can have some bearing on the adopted individuals’ perception of identity at this age (p. 164).

As early as 1995, Turkle (1995) observed the Internet’s capacity for people to play with and explore their identity. Continuing, Turkle (2011) stated that

“(c)onnectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity and, particularly in adolescence, the sense of free space” (p. 152). Particularly for adopted children, this sense of free space (that is unmediated and boundary free) would make them more likely, through lack of understanding of their past experiences, to be vulnerable online. Livingstone (2008) reminded us that “(t)he complex relation between opportunity and risk is not distinctive to the internet but is, rather, a feature of adolescence [*sic*]” (p. 397). Continuing, Livingstone proposed, “(c)reating identity and social relations online is not only time-intensive and, on occasion, risky, but it can also be difficult to manage” (p. 404). Social worker Joan Hunt’s experience of adopted teenagers running away from their adoptive family after reconnecting with their biological family online is a clear indicator of the emotional resurgence, the opportunity of reunification via the Internet, and the risk these individuals place themselves once more.

The Possibilities of Digital Media Technologies for the Exploration of Adoption Identity

As a vehicle for the exploration and (re)creation of the notion of identity through play, as digital media technologies become more accessible it can provide a safe platform for art as therapy. Widely recognized that creating art can be a liberating and therapeutic experience, providing a formal outlet for one’s innermost thoughts, working with art therapists, many adopted individuals have previously engaged in creative art as a form of non-verbal communication to talk about their past experiences. Malchiodi (2000) explained that the use of digital media in the field of art therapy has been positive:

For art therapy, the strides made in computer technology and digital imagery may be even more important as they have opened up opportunities to incorporate digital media such as photography and videotape as well as computer painting and photo programs in therapy, electronic arts that can offer clients new ways to express themselves creatively. (p. 13)

Despite the fact that this process is often emotionally charged and distressing, within a safe therapeutic environment, many adopted individuals are able to move forward in life because of a more manageable understanding of their past. Offering uncensored freedom of self-expression, through the use of digital media technologies many individuals are able to continue to build upon their prior experiences of art therapy. For many individuals however, a fragile sense of self may leave many them susceptible to

unmanaged contact that may lead to an unhappy outcome.

Used creatively, digital media technologies have been pivotal in the facilitation of self-expressive outlets, while also providing an opportunity for both connection and relationship building by adopted individuals. The Art Strings project and the Media Trust Community Voices project are evidence of this positive engagement of digital media technologies for therapeutic exploration of adoption identity. Combining traditional art material and digital technology, the Art Strings 2001 project assisted adopted individuals in the narration of their experiences of adoption. Coordinated by artist and adopted individual Darren Bradshaw, many of the works produced focused on identity, and the visuals produced included handprints and mother totems (Prasad, 2001). Media Trust Community Voices used digital media technologies to produce video diaries, animation, and art to capture how adopted individuals felt about their biological family. Through shared experiences, the project facilitated in confidence-building and the development of different skills (Media Trust, 2010). As careful managed and supervised projects the exploration of adoption identity is undertaken within a safe and secure environment. Assuming the role of the empathetic narrator the responsible adult ensures that the lived experience as an adopted individual although often complicated and confused is explored within and concluded in a positive outcome.

Other interesting examples of digital media technologies used for the exploration of adopted individuals' identity can be found in works of artists such as Jess Emmett, Joanna Fisher, Grace Johnson, and Kelsie Kiley. Having initially resisted the notion that she had been affected by adoption, Hong Kong born artist Jess Emmett's (2000) work has continued to explore her identity, race, heritage, and diaspora as a trans-racial adopted individual living in the UK through video, photography, and performance. Likewise, American artist and professional photographer Joanna Fisher (2011) used photomontages in documenting her experience through her adopted status and the reunion with her biological family. Coming to prominence through the use of the Internet for the exploration identity, Dan Matthews (2013) of Wong Fu Productions and the Far East Movement conveyed the chronology of his return to South Korea from the US after finding his biological family. Utilizing KickStarter to raise funds to sponsor his journey to reunification, Matthews employed Twitter, Facebook, tumbler, and YouTube to update his followers and sponsors on the progress.

The exploration of adoption identity via digital media technologies is limited.

While the adopted individuals may find some resolution of aspects of their identity through the exploration of their adopted "status", and reunification, it does not always however complete this journey to discover who they are. In an interview in the Guardian (online) an adopted individual (Hilpern, 2012) stated "(t)o have had real relationships with real people and to have critical information about my history is even greater. There are rarely situations in life that are wholly positive or negative. Adoption reunions are no different" (para. 21). Writing in 2004, Freeman (2004) argued that "narrative, rather than being imposed on life from without, is woven into the very fabric of experience" (p. 305). However, with so much emphasis on adoption narrative focusing on loss and the triumph of reunification as a possibility of bringing closure and healing, the lived experience as an adopted individual as a positive one might easily be overlooked.

Produced by non-adopted individuals, other interesting examples, including the following two, document the lives of adopted individuals and their adoptive families using digital media technologies. Exploring the theme of family, and their experiences at the beginning, middle, and end of the trans-racial adoption, the American multimedia producer Elena Rue's (n.d.) work was inspired by her family's decision to adopt her trans-racial brother six years before she was born. Similarly, critically acclaimed at the Los Angeles New Wave International Film Festival, Grace Johnston and Kelsie Kiley's (Stephens, 2012) documentary represented the lives of the Twietmeyer family, an Illinois couple that made the decision to adopt children with HIV/Aids. Documenting their daily lives, the film provided a personal account of adoption, and the stigma attached to life as a child living with the disease. Produced more like fly-on-the-wall documentaries, these productions provide a narrative insight into the influence adoption and adoption identity can have on the family.

Through the engagement with digital media technologies, these artists have been able to share multiple interpretations and the complexity of their experiences of adoption with a wider audience with uncensored immediacy. Not based on public's impression and scholarly analysis of adoption, but made by real people that have been adopted, these individuals willingly participate in portraying the reality of their adoption experience. As more adopted individuals participate in self-publishing their experiences, a more realistic understanding of what it means to be adopted will prevail. Whether instigated or triggered by curiosity, through this media discourse some common experiences of being adopted in the digital age is revealed.

Conclusion

Despite the risks the Internet brings to all those connected by adoption, social media will continue to evolve and its impact more readily seen. For these individuals, uncertainty about the Internet's transformation of contact between adopted individuals and their biological kin remains. Regardless of the perception that the Internet is a double-edged sword, due to the dialectical relationship between promise and threat, its role as a platform for the dissemination of information about adoption has been largely positive. One cannot however ignore social networking's capacity for shared communication, interaction, and explorations of adoption identity that continues to challenge popular assumptions about what it means to be adopted. Used prudently and cautiously, the Internet will continue to provide adopted individuals with a platform to share their experiences of adoption.

Maddox (2012) noted that the contemporary understanding of "contact" required re-evaluation in the digital age, and allowing the potential communication via the Internet to be reconsidered. Within this reconsideration following America's lead, exploring the potential for more open adoptions within the UK, may lessen the threat that continues to occur within adoption due to unmanaged contact. Likewise dominated by research produced by the Donaldson Adoption Institute America continues to lead the way in researching the changes within adoption and contact due to social media. Importantly however regardless of the tighter controls in place regarding adoption, neither America, the UK or worldwide foresaw these changes and continue to respond after unmanaged contact has occurred.

The uses of digital media technologies for the exploration of adoption identity, adoption narrative and within this new generation of art-based therapy are a reminder of the positive engagement that can occur. Often mediated by therapists and other professionals, including television producers and documentary makers, adoption continues to inform and entertain the public's interest. Intertwined within these outlets, the public's ability to engage and comment via social media continues to inform our understanding of adoption. Much more than a tool for conversation and sharing of information, through these technologies, the complexities and nuances often associated with adopted individuals' identity formation can be visualized and shared. Through positive dissemination of information that has been produced by adopted individuals, the public's often-preconceived misconceptions of adoption may begin to

change.

Von Korff and Grotevant (2011) reminded us that “(a)doptive identity is not directly observable, but is manifested in the adoption narratives or stories that individuals construct, write, and/or tell about themselves” (p. 394). Indeed, these stories that adopted individuals tell as life narratives, the popular media’s circulation of reunification stories, and discussions about the promise and threat of social networking will continue to change our understanding of adoption.

The availability of information on the Internet continues to promote the ease with which it is possible to find information, highlighting viability of connecting with those separated through adoption. Often a “launch into uncharted waters” (McColm, 1993, p. 153), reunification via the Internet can be simultaneously exciting, unwanted, and overwhelming. Trinder et al. (2004) extended this notion, noting that “(a)ll reunions involve taking a leap into the unknown, with no guarantee that the person you will meet will be someone that you will like, get on with, or share similar lifestyles” (p. 27). Offering a useful insight into the process of reunification via the Internet, Drinnen’s (DeMeyer, 2014) reflection on her own experience is reflective of the concerns of the promise and the threat social networking brings forth to adopted individuals:

Facebook opened doors to me and helped me learn that my brother and I both know some of the same people! So, here's what I believe: What others post on social media sites and make publicly available is fair game. Feel free to explore what is publicly available. I also think social media is a great way to keep in contact once ongoing contact has been agreed upon. However, in most cases, I don't think social media is a good way to make initial contact with a parent or child. Social media is a wonderful tool, but it needs to be used carefully. (para. 3)

Often undertaken with little thought of its consequences, reunification can be difficult for many individuals, as they fail to set expectations or have unrealistic views of the outcome. In addition to reawakening feelings and emotions that may have lain dormant or have never been fully explored, impromptu reunification offers the opportunity to be psychologically damaging to all involved. For many adopted individuals, the realization that the answers they seek will never be attained or those provided are inadequate can additionally prove to be psychologically damaging.

The impact of our continued engagement with technology within our daily lives continues to have both positive and negative influences across many aspects of our

existence. Whether positive or negative, Cairncross (2001) reminded us that “what matters most about a new technology is not how it works, but how people use it, and the changes it brings about in human lives” (p. ix). Still, for adopted individuals and their biological families, the engagement with social networking has brought about some profound changes to their lives through searching and reunification online.

Chapter Four: Social Services: Technologies for Communication and the Representation of Social Services in the Popular Media

Section Overview

This chapter summarizes the popular media's representation of social workers, the integration of technology within the provision of care, and the changes taking place within the profession due to social networking.

Introduction

Whilst literature addressing the impact of social media and technology on the provision of social services and the education of prospective social workers is still in its infancy, the use of the Internet to promote the services provided by social services continues to grow worldwide. Technology, in particular social networking platforms, continues to radically change the landscape of adoption and the types of prospective adopters expressing interest (Fursland, 2010b). In the UK, government websites, adoption and fostering charities, local authorities, private and voluntary adoption websites, adoption support websites, personal blogs, newspaper adverts, mobile apps, YouTube channels, are all now as, if not more, important than the traditional printed magazines for information sought by prospective adopters. The Internet is also primarily used for integrating real stories, advertising adoption, and fostering. Owing to their strong online presence, government and celebrity endorsed adoption and fostering continue to feature within the popular media in a positive manner.

In the digital era, the narratives created by and used within social services constantly shift due to the immediacy of communication and contact. Placing the potential of reunification with the biological family at the forefront of current post-adoption supports, the narratives created between social workers and their clients to address these concerns are continually evolving. Recently published books (Fursland, 2010b; Oakwater, 2012; Rogers & Watling, 2012a; Dennis, 2014; Westwood, 2014) and reports (Adoption Institute of America and British Association of Social Work)

outline the impact of social networking and the consequent changes for all those involved in social work. Particularly for the adopted individual, where contact is often triggered by curiosity or a stressful incident, strategies aimed at minimizing and dealing with the emotional issues that arise are paramount due to the fragility of the life narratives that have been documented by social workers and interpreted by the adoptive family. Within these narratives, social workers remain responsible for the preparation of impending contact or dealing with the aftermath of contact that they do not manage.

For biological parents that never give up seeking their child, often feeling that he / she has been snatched away by social workers, the narrative between these parties can be fraught. At the same time, while encouraging the clients to explore their feelings through storytelling, social workers are acutely aware that client information requires careful documentation, as it has informed the decision to place the child within the care system. The use of digital communication technologies facilitates and allows for accurate documentation of these procedures leading to the removal of a child from the biological family home. Compounded by continued fear of being targeted “by online trolls who have an axe to grind with the profession – of whom there are a fair few” (Hardy, 2014, para. 3), the reluctance of some social workers to engage with technology is justifiable. Blogs such as *Name & Shame Social Workers* (2008) are a reminder that “when working with clients, social workers must maintain clear boundaries to assure professional integrity and responsibility” (Handon, n.d., para. 1).

Through social networking, negative comments about the provision of care, and the naming and shaming of social workers, poor representations of social services are easily circulated and become very public. Any positive embracement of the integration of technology into the workplace also has to deal with the growing number of social workers engaging in social media technologies to vent their frustration at both their employer and their clients. In his article *Pause Before Posting – Using Social Media Responsibly*, Robb (2011) stated “(a)s the digital age unfolds concerned ethicists fear they are witnessing the emergence of a new breed of social worker—the renegade blogger—whose stealthy, unethical disclosures and intemperate rantings suggest a new normal [sic]” (p. 8). Indeed, whilst the vast majority of social workers continue to operate within the HCPC (Health & Care Professions Council) guidelines, Schraer (2015) reminded us that “(s)ocial workers left in the dark as to how to manage complex and unique challenges around social media [sic]” (line. 1). Schraer’s article *Less than 2% councils provide social media guidance for social workers*, published in 2015 in *CommunityCare* (online) is evidence of this, stating:

Most policies are focused on not bringing the council into disrepute, leaving social workers at a loss when it comes to navigating the very particular, and almost daily, problems of adopted children having unsupervised contact online, case confidentiality or protecting yourself against being contacted by hostile service users. (para. 4)

Even though the use of social networking in this manner by social worker professionals and their clients remains in the minority, it still has the potential to further damage the reputation of the profession.

The Popular Media's Representation of the Provision of Care

Since 1990, the influence of negative media representations of social work as a profession has been the focus of discussion amongst social workers (Aldridge, 1990). Even though the majority of the public still has little contact with social services, decades later, "the failure of social work to influence both press and public" (p. 618) in a positive manner is still of grave concern. Following the death of Maria Colwell in 1973, the UK media have maintained an interest in the provision of looked after children and those known to them. Having sustained severe internal injuries and brain damage, Colwell died at the Royal Sussex Hospital, Brighton on January 6, 1973. The enquiry that followed identified poor communication among agencies, inadequate training of social workers, and changes in society's attitude as the key factors that contributed to this tragedy (Parton, 2004). The enquiry led to major reforms in legislation in child protection.

Following inquiries into the deaths of Jasmine Beckford, Kimberley Carlile, and Tyra Henry and the handling of alleged sexual abuse in Cleveland, UK, where "large numbers of children over a short period of time were removed from parents under suspicions of child sexual abuse" (Braye & Preston-Shoot, 2006, p. 19), and other inquiries since, Franklin and Parton (2013) argued that "negative and occasional hostile media reporting of social workers became more evident" (p. 1). Continuing, the authors proposed that

Aggrieved by media reporting of their profession and believe that journalists lack sufficient knowledge and experience of the social services to report matters adequately and sensitively, whilst some journalists have urged social workers to adopt a more proactive public relations strategy. (Franklin & Parton, 2013)

Published by Department for Education in 2011, the *Munro Review of Child Protection* highlighted the need for social workers to engage in direct discussions with the media.

Professor Eileen Munro, from The London School of Economics and Political Science (2011) stated, “a number of senior journalists commented on the lack of a clear, strong voice for social work in the national debate” (p. 122). Continuing, the author proposed that, with such negative representations social services, its employees should “take the opportunity to work proactively with local and regional media to present a more positive, balanced view of social work and its importance to society” (p. 122). The report further highlighted the need for those working in the media to report the information they receive responsibly and accurately, while at the same time questioning whether the information “is in the best interests of vulnerable children as well as the public interest” (p. 123).

Social workers have continued to debate the impact of constant criticism, the misrepresentation of their profession, and the distorted representation of child protection services (Franklin, 1998). Hopkins (2007) acknowledged media capacity to vilify social services, stating, “(t)he history of care has always been signposted by tragedy and scandal. Indeed, we all know that the only time you can guarantee coverage of social care in the media is when things go horribly wrong” (para. 1). Partially due to repeated failures of social services to protect vulnerable children from significant harm, negative media commentary has continued to demoralize and demonize social workers whilst damaging the public understanding of the provision of care they provide (Franklin, 1998). The emergence of social networking and availability of the popular media across a diverse range of media platforms facilitates the outreach with which circulation of negative publicity permeates.

In his paper *From Maria Colwell to Victoria Climbié: Reflections on Public Inquiries into Child Abuse a Generation Apart*, Parton (2004) drew comparisons and contrasted the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 to the case of Victoria Climbié in 2000. Highlighting identity, parental responsibility, and cultural differences, Parton (2004) argued, “these important issues reflect many of the significant social and cultural changes that have been evident in this country over the last 30 years” (p. 84). These changes include the definition of family and parental responsibility. There were no concerns about Maria’s identity and parental responsibility. Maria was white, her mother known, her first language was English, and her social workers were of the same cultural background. In contrast it transpired after Victoria’s death that she was living with her great aunt and her questions about immigration status and entry into the UK from Ivory Coast where her parents resided.

Following each enquiry into the failings of social services to protect a child from

significant harm, leading to death, statements about lessons learned have become the norm. Indeed, Hopkins's (2007) article in *Community Care: Inspiring excellence in social care* acknowledges this, "(e)ach avoidable child death or uncovered systematic institutional abuse has changed our thinking, jolted our accountability, and improved our practice. And yet we continue to make the same simple mistakes" (para. 1). Overshadowed by the death of Peter Connelly in 2007, much of the recent popular media representation of children in care or under supervision has continued to produce choleric coverage, discussion, and public response (Allen & Fernandez, 2008; Butler & Morris, 2013; Disley, 2009; Jones, 2013). Thematically, such representation continues to be coterminous, lacking in leadership, not fit for purpose, and failing the very people it was set up to protect—vulnerable children.

Heyes (2014) cited three reasons why "negative media coverage impacts on the profession and subsequently the vulnerable children and families we are trying to protect and support" (para. 3). Firstly, continued negative coverage results in experienced staff leaving the profession. Secondly, social services are perceived and presumed to be incompetent. Holding such views "creates a barrier of distrust and fuels hostility towards social workers" (para. 4). Finally, for those choosing to stay in the profession, "working in a culture of criticism and blame creates anxiety" (para. 5). Within this culture of naming and shaming, it is sadly the vulnerable children and adults that suffer the most due to inconsistencies in their care resulting from caseloads being transferred to colleagues when social workers leave the profession or are signed off on long-term sick leave due to the stress of heavy workloads they are increasingly expected to handle.

Often influenced by the popular media coverage, the reform of the UK Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government 2013 *The Children and Families Bill*, in relation to adoption and the way looked after children are cared for has the potential to sway public opinion of social services and shape both local and national policies. A key aim of the reform included ensuring

that services consistently place children and young people at the centre of decision making and support, enabling them to make the best possible start in life and challenging any dogma, delay or professional interests which might hold them back (Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, p. 4).

Indeed, with its "considerable power and the ability to exert considerable influence on policy" (Brotherton, 2010, p. 2), recent government reforms of adoption have not only changed the policy and procedures of looked after children, but have also brought

adoption in the media spotlight once again. Refocusing on helping the social workers place children with adoptive parents more quickly, the revised statutory guidance has been designed to engage adopters in the process at an earlier stage, in order to best serve the needs of adopted children and their new families.

The Use of Technology within Social Services

Whilst highlighting concerns about data protection, information sharing, and the privacy of the individual client, much of the early literature published within the field of social services in the UK focused on the Internet as an information system (Alaszewski, 1985). As early as the 1990s, research into the influence of technology on the provision of social services was a subject of discussion among social workers (Sapey, 1997). For example, Sapey (1997) argued that “social workers are in a good position to understand and influence the use of computers within welfare agencies” (p. 803). Continuing, Sapey conveyed that, unless social services were proactive in the adoption of technology, “they may further fail to control the way in which computers affect the nature of social work itself in the future” (p. 803).

Examples of positive use of the Internet and digital media technologies are evidenced in the promotion of adoption and fostering services across many countries. Since the late 1980s, adoption has featured on the Internet, with its first photo listing of children published in 1994 in the US (Gerstenzang & Freundlich, 2003). In contrast, concerns about the Internet’s negative influence on this process were raised as far back as 1995. At the time, the Los Angeles Times journalist Colker (1995) highlighted the potential drawbacks of the Internet within the field of adoption. Colker stated, “Adoptions Are Now Just a Click Away: Internet: Feelings are mixed, however, as some observers fear the downside: Lack of controls can lead to abuses” (line. 1). Evident within the findings of a study conducted by the Adoption Institute (US) in 2012, the Internet’s transformation on adoption practices and policies is seen as both positive and negative (Howard, 2012).

Despite much negative popular media coverage on the provision of care, for many decades, social services have continued to successfully implement the popular media in the positive promotion of adoption and fostering. Successful media campaigns have included National Adoption Week launched in 1997, as well as adoption parties that were popularized in the 1970s and were later rebranded and re-

launched in 2013 as adoption activity days. Alongside these campaigns, the recruitment of prospective adopters and foster carers has featured regularly in national, local, and free newspapers. Other methods of recruiting adopters have included the placement of leaflets in “leisure centres and GP surgeries; staffed stands at exhibitions, community events or in shopping centres; radio interviews; radio adverts; posters on the backs of buses and bus shelters; conventional press interviews and adverts” (Clifton & Neil, 2013, p. 14).

The 2013 report by the Centre for Research on Children and Families at the University of East Anglia, UK on behalf of BAAF into *Success factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officers* confirmed the importance of continued engagement in marketing and advertising strategies for recruitment across a diverse media platform to attract more potential adopters (Clifton & Neil, 2013). Acknowledging the “prominence that internet marketing has now assumed in adoption recruitment [sic]” (p. 15), the report found that one of the many success factors was the use of social media. Indeed, use of social media has successfully provided adoption agencies “a window into the agency for enquirers thinking of making a first approach and has the potential to ‘accompany’ and inform enquirers and adopters in assessment” (Clifton & Neil, 2013, p. 21). With much of the initial search and enquiry about adoption being made online, it is paramount that social workers are able to engage in, use, and respond to these modes of communication effectively. Recognizing the benefits that digital technology has to offer in the delivery of social care across all sectors highlights the need for an appropriately skilled workforce. Alongside the everyday use of computers within their working profession, it is vital that social workers “maintain technical competency with new technologies” (Thompson, n.d., para. 3). The maintenance of technical competency will ensure that, while assisting adoptive families and adopted individuals whose lives may be affected by unmanaged contact, they are aware of the need “to maintain privacy regulations and ethical standards when using computer technology in practice” (Thompson, n.d., para. 2).

The use of technology for the recruitment and promotion of adoption has produced positive results. BAAF’s 2012 announcement of an ongoing project with social media experts Net Natives is an example of a successful initiative that uses technology to enhance the provision of care within social services. Founder of Net Natives Steve Evans (2012) explained that BAAF were interested in their “recruiting-through-social-media brains” (para. 1). Devised as a recruitment tool for local authorities to increase their online presence, BAAF’s chief executive David Holmes

(2012) stated, “(b)y extending their reach to the online community, we hope that agencies can increase their pool of adopters and foster carers and ultimately find more families for children who need them” (para. 4). Utilizing a range of online media, including a new Facebook page and apps, the launch of the “Pledge Application Built” Facebook page is among many positive steps in addressing some of the need of their clients in the digital age.

Other examples of the successful use of technology to enhance the provision of service are evident within Patchwork, launched in 2011. Nominated as a runner-up in *The Guardian Public Service Awards 2013* Digital category, Patchwork was developed to support families, as well as help social workers to protect vulnerable children and work more effectively with their clients (Patchwork, 2010) by connecting “professionals and the information they hold on their clients” (Campbell, 2011, para. 5). FutureGov’s director Dominic Campbell (2011) explained, “we hope that Patchwork can act as an example of how digital technology can be used to create public services fit for the 21st century” (para. 8). Founded in 2003, the awards were intended for public servants to “recognise innovation and measurable impact as well as brilliant ideas and techniques that, if replicated, could help to mitigate the impact of the government’s austerity agenda.” (Benjamin, 2013, para. 3).

Other success stories include the PCF (Professional Capabilities Framework) smart phone app. Developed as a tool to facilitate social workers in the recording of their professional capabilities “the app provides clear and easy access to the descriptors for each capability for these two career levels. It also contains good examples and case studies illustrating the ideal type of evidence required to meet each capability” (The College of Social Work, 2014, para. 8), PCF was launched in 2014. Positive of its intentions, Andrew Errington (The College of Social Work, 2014) professional head of social work at an NHS trust and a member of the app user-testing group, stated

Having been involved in the testing stage of the app development, I can confirm that this is a fantastic product. It’s easy to navigate, provides really useful examples against the capability statements, and will be of huge benefit to frontline staff – helping them to translate the PCF into everyday practice. My advice would be to get downloading the PCF app now (para. 7).

Twitter was utilized by The College of Social Work to recruit its rigorous user testers. Adjustments were subsequently made to the app in accordance with the feedback received (The College of Social Work, 2014).

Other attempts at integrating technology into the provision of social care have yielded mixed results. Launched in 2003, following the inquiry chaired by Lord Laming into the death of Victoria Climbié, ContactPoint was “set up to improve outcomes for children” (Nicholls, 2010, para. 1). Providing a quick lookup tool to identify local authorities working with children within the online database, ContactPoint contained basic information about every child in England from birth to their 18th birthday. Riddled “by delays, technical problems and fears over security after an official review concluded that it could never be completely secure” (Hough & Beckford, 2010, para. 7), ContactPoint was closed by the coalition government in 2010. In support of the decision made for closure, Isabella Sankey, director of policy at Liberty (2010) stated, “(w)hile the motives behind ContactPoint were never disputed, an unwieldy database of this kind would have put vulnerable children at greater, not less, risk” (para. 9). Rather than functioning seamlessly within their daily work, the application was reliant upon the staff to remember to update the system on a regular basis and “to check whether any changes have occurred in the records of children and young people with whom they are working” (Hoyle, 2010, para. 34).

The previous examples would suggest that social services are continuing to embrace a diverse range of technology for both public and private communication with mixed outcomes. Hardy (2014) reminded us, “(h)istorically services have been cautious with digital tools, but things are changing” (line. 1). Conveying this notion, Charani, Castro-Sánchez, Moore, and Holmes (2014) observed

(h)ealthcare and academic institutions should support the use of technology and not stifle technological progress, but the drive for development of apps needs to be supported by robust governance frameworks, and evaluation of the clinical outcomes and potential unintended consequences. (p. 3)

Sensible as this is, the need for governance points up the political contexts that also shape social services, and their vulnerability to cuts when the state sees fit. Financial constraints can often be the reason behind lack of motivation of local authorities to delve into social media (Hardy, 2014).

The involvement of social work professionals in the design of any new system is fundamental if the profession is to develop effective systems that its workforce is prepared to use whole-heartedly. When used in line with its full-intended specification, these systems can bring significant benefits to both the professionals and their clients. As with the introduction of any new technology, an element of resistance from a minority of professionals is to be expected. Yet, through positive integration into their

working practice, social networking may facilitate changing the types of stories that reach the popular media. Prone to bad press, because of the lack of immediacy due to the complex ongoing casework involved for each individual child, “good stories rarely fit the requirements of news” (Wilby, 2008, para. 8). The utilization of technology and its inter-relation with life must be viewed as an opportunity rather than a challenge, as it may allow “good stories” to reach the public.

The Risks Associated with Being Online

Under constant scrutiny and criticism, reoccurring popular media headlines would suggest that there remains an irresolvable tension between social services and the media. According to the 2011 poll conducted on Social Work Care Day into the representation of social work in the media and its effects on their job, 71% of the respondents agreed that more needed to be done to raise the profile of the profession and the work it undertakes (McCann, 2011). Adamant that the media will only continue to vilify the social services, particularly in relation to cases of neglect, 29% of the respondents felt that the profession needed to remain out of the media spotlight (McCann, 2011). Yet, compounded by a court ruling in 2013 by Sir James Munby to allow social workers to be identified in the media and on the Internet once care proceedings have concluded, social workers are once again in the media spotlight, potentially deterring those in the profession from speaking out. Munby’s ruling followed Staffordshire County Council’s attempts to block “the publication of names, images and video footage of social workers involved in the case of Child J, who was subject to an emergency protection order after being born in April this year” (Donovan, 2013, para. 2). Video footage of the child’s removal from the family home was secretly filmed by the child’s father and was later uploaded onto the Internet.

A different challenge emerges in that, often armed with vast personal experience of using social networking for both personal and professional use, many social work students now enter the profession with a digital presence. Thus, their personal life has the potential to collide with their professional one. With popular media headlines highlighting cases of individuals that have lost their jobs because of comments made about their profession and employers, images posted on Facebook of nights out that ended in drunken pranks for example, understanding the impact of what they choose to post online about their private lives and the potential impact it might have on their chosen profession is a fundamental aspect for consideration in the digital

age. Rogers and Watling (2012b) observed “(s)ocial work students often arrive at university in possession of a range of digital technologies and behaviours without ever having to consider them within the boundaries of professional practice” (para. 8).

As a part of their transition to professionals in their respective fields, it is vital that social work students, like all students, learn to be “engaging experts in synchronous or asynchronous online conversations about content” (Richardson, 2008, para. 16). Within this framework of professional development, building networks and sharing good working practice appropriately, often at a global level, is the new reality of most professions (Richardson, 2008). Continuing, the author noted “(t)hese new realities demand that we prepare students to be educated, sophisticated owners of online spaces” (para. 14). The need for digital literacy training that facilitates students in the engagement of critical reflection and sharing of values across different social networking sites is paramount (Adhikari, 2011). It is only when students are able to “articulate their skills and aspirations online, they can initiate conversation with a new audience who might engage with them in unexpected ways” (para. 5). Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, and Fullmer (2013) proposed that clear recommendations for the use of social media are necessary to safeguard students. This is reiterated in many current educational guidelines.

Partially due “to the risks of being online as a professional” (Hardy, 2014, para. 2), the reluctance of social work professionals to embrace the use of the latest technology, in particular social networking platforms, is to be expected. Likewise negative publicity within the popular media social workers failings can significantly impact the viability of many adoption charities and agencies. Often reliant on public donations to cover any shortfall, British Association for Adoption and Fostering’s (BAAF) recent descent into administration following financial difficulty is yet another indicator of these difficulties. Coupled with government austerity, lack of funding, rising demand for care and the withdrawal of many key preventive services the provision and future of social care remains in a state of flux.

Within this proactive approach, the setting up of blogs and regularly tweeting about the realities of their job is becoming more prevalent. Examples of such undertakings can be found in *The Masked AMHP*, *Fighting Monsters – The life and thoughts of a British Social Worker*, and *Secret Social Worker*. In 2011, the avid anonymous blogger, *Fighting Monsters*, outlined the positive impact of new media technology on the social work profession. The blogger proposed that not only did technology assist them in becoming better practitioners, it offered an “opportunity to

promote a greater understanding of the social work role” (The Social Worker, 2011, para. 1). Acknowledging the significance of online communication in giving “social workers and service users a common platform to discuss problems and find solutions,” the blogger highlighted the need for such visibility of those on the front line, rather than the representations of academics, consultants, and managers (para. 3).

Whilst these attempts at positive representation of social workers are “honorable,” the shroud of anonymity under which these online postings are brought to light are representative of the fear of potential breaches of confidentiality, media crucifixion, and disciplinary hearings that might follow. Misconstrued as a social worker’s declaration that her career high was a case that culminated in three children being placed in care (BBC, 2013), this statement led to media crucifixion and a disciplinary hearing. This case is illustrative of such fears. In May 2013, the BBC (online) reported that an unnamed female social worker was under investigation by her employer Essex County Council for comments she had made about a case on Facebook. The social workers comments cannot be verified as the full transcript of her statements and were quickly removed. Indeed, her comments might easily have been taken out of context. The social worker might have been expressing her joy that the children were safe from harm. In an era where forgetting is almost impossible, time is a poor consolation for the damage such media coverage can cause the individual and the profession.

BDO Local Government UK 2012 report *From Housing and Litter to Facebook and Twitter* (2012) noted that “the key strengths and benefits of social media are also its biggest weakness” (p. 22). As a facilitator of the faceless voice of discontent through social media, public displays of dissatisfaction will always outnumber displays of gratitude. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon.com (BDO Local Government, 2012) observed, “(i)f you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell 6 friends. If you make customers unhappy on the Internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends” (p. 22). Whilst many individuals may be prepared to speak on record about concerns and failings of the industry they work in, others have been prepared to openly criticize their industry only when shielded by anonymity. Those choosing to speak off the record often provide journalists enough information to be the unnamed source providing the necessary facts to run with a storyline that can be verified by someone else.

A study conducted by Northern Illinois University concluded that social networking sites could impede a person’s job performance and academic success. Kluemper, Mossholder, and Rosen (2012) the authors of the study stated that, even

though it has become practice for prospective employers to Google their applicants, “employers should use caution when using websites such as Facebook to make hiring-related decisions” (p. 1165). In 2012, Judd and Johnson (2012) stated “(a)s students begin to construct their professional images, interactions within a social network site can compromise control over their own personally relevant information, and ability to construct an accurate moral identity” (p. 7). With its potential to hinder career progression, the use of social networking for initial screening of applicants can raise “concerns about the social worker’s ability to maintain a balance between personal and professional life” (Judd & Johnston, 2012, p. 9).

Codes of Conduct

Amid concerns of misconduct from the misuse of technology, in particular from the use of social networking, social workers, education providers, and students continue to face ethical, professional, and personal challenges. As a regulator across a range of social service and health sectors set up to protect the public, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) has the responsibility for investigations into claims of misconduct. Utilizing social networking resources as an extension of their communication tools for the promotion of their services, HCPC stated that it is rare for social networking related cases to come to their attention (Health & Care Professions Council, n.d.). Despite these concerns of potential misuse by health care professionals, action would only be sanctioned “if it raised concerns about their fitness to practice” (Health & Care Professions Council, n.d., p. 1).

Within British universities, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) subject benchmark statements formalizes the use of ICT and numerical skills for social work. According to QAA (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008), social work students graduating with honors “should be able to use ICT methods and techniques to support their learning and their practice” (p. 14). For social work education providers, social work students, and those already working in the profession, regular updates on changes taking place due to this unprecedented phenomenon is only the starting point in keeping abreast with new technologies that influence adoption and the provision of social care across the sector.

Other evidence of the influence of social networking within social work education is evident in the launch of the University of Birmingham (2013) app offering

practical, and ethical guidance “designed to help students to learn about the role of social media in life-like ethical social work dilemmas” (para. 1). Devised to “stimulate discussion and debate, and present scenarios via channels that many students use in their personal lives” (para. 3) and encourage informed decisions, the app covers a range of themes related to social media dilemmas in a game format. Sheffield Hallam University’s *Practice Learning Partnership: Guidance on the use of Social Media* document is another example that demonstrates changes within the sector. Providing guidance on best practice for engaging in online communication in both personal and professional lives due to its ethical implications, the document “addresses the use of social networking sites by social work students” (Sheffield Hallam University, 2012, p. 1). The document additionally highlights the code of conduct and ethics, as stipulated by the Health, and Care Professions Council (HCPC) with regard to the use of social networking sites (Sheffield Hallam University, 2012, p. 1).

The ethical implications of social networking in the education of prospective social workers are evident within these codes of conduct guidelines, including the provision of information about the consequences of misuse of social media on the reputation and future career of students, as well as the public’s trust in social services. Clearly, one might derive numerous benefits through the engagement with social media, such clear policies for both staff and students, encouraging responsible use and accountability to uphold the reputation of the profession at all times, which ensures that inappropriate behaviour leading to disciplinary action does not occur. Indeed, “what constitutes professionalism in the era of Web 2.0” (Judd & Johnston, 2012, p. 10) is a question for all professionals, not just social workers.

Writing in 2012, Judd and Johnston (2012) acknowledged the need for further research to assess the effectiveness of current policies that address the online behaviors of students. Continuing, the authors highlighted the need “to determine the effects of policies and curricular programs on students’ online behavior and professional development” (p. 10). Often unaware of the terms and conditions for the use of social networking sites, many individuals create and distribute content often containing personal information, without the understanding of ownership rights and potential redistribution rights the site may have. Given that content produced for private consumption can be made public, “initiative, caution and thoughtfulness as you engage in social networking” (The George Washington University Law School, n.d., p. 1) are the key to protecting one’s professional reputation online.

Conclusion

No longer “surrounded by mystery and stigma, which the media and general public knew little about” (Beckett & Oni, 2005, p. 1), recent media coverage about the impact of social networking on adoption continues to be interwoven with stories of social services’ incompetence. Within this continually evolving environment, where the social networking and adoption have collided, transformations have taken place purely based on the capabilities offered by modern technology (Howard, 2012). The planning of practice and legislation for the foreseeable future will need to take into account the use of such technologies (BASW, 2012). Summed up by a social worker manager who wished to remain anonymous, “we are trying to predict the future with the information available to us and our experience” (Pemberton, n.d, para. 12). Within this new uncharted territory, ensuring safe and secure homes for vulnerable children remains at the heart of social services.

In her article *Data Driven, People Focused - Technology Takes on Social Work*, whilst acknowledging technology’s transformation of the collection and sharing of information, Reardon (2010) suggested that “social workers who refuse to acknowledge this trend risk falling out of step with the profession” (p. 6). In the same article, Schoech, MSSW, PhD, professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Arlington noted, “I think the idea that social workers are behind the times when it comes to technology is totally bogus” (p. 6). Continuing, Schoech argued that social workers were willing to adopt technology that was useful, provided they “get the information out of it that they need to use” (p. 6).

Dale Fitch, PhD, MSW, Assistant Professor at the University of Missouri School of Social Work (Reardon, 2010), proposed that, as younger more technological minded individuals enter the social work profession, the existing tension between social work and technology would decrease. Fitch continued, claiming that “many schools of social work still lag behind when it comes to teaching students about the positive ways technology can improve the delivery of human services” (p. 6).

Nevertheless, the profession may be hindering the integration of technology in light of concerns over confidentiality requirements whether at government level, council level, or initiated by social workers. Coupled with concerns that the use of an integrated system where all client information is stored on one central system may create a “nanny state” that could potentially breach aspects of civil liberties, progress will require lengthy discussions among social services, allied professionals, and the

government. Whatever the concerns about the use of technology, one cannot ignore the fact that future of social services is one in which the use of electronic and mobile systems is indispensable (Charani et al., 2014).

With its focus on the provision of care, the changing demands and integration of technology continue to offer new challenges for the social work profession. For the digital natives pursuing careers within social work, the use of, and some of these concerns about, technologies are largely second nature. Underpinning the digital revolution that is taking the provision of care by storm are the “unique and unprecedented ethical challenges” (Reamer, 2001, para. 4) that technology brings to this profession.

As technology continues to transform our lives, “(s)ocial media is now an unavoidable part of most of our lives – particularly if you have any dealings with children and teenagers – and it’s one that presents unique challenges for social workers” (Schraer, 2015, para. 2). Preparation for this “new social reality” (Singh-Cooner, 2013, p. 4) is a concern, particularly where the boundaries between public and private information start to blur. With more social work services going online, these issues will remain at the forefront of discussions for the foreseeable future. Whilst some aspects of the profession may show signs of struggles to adapt ethically as much as technically, entertainment and popular media representations of the profession continue to focus on their failings rather than successes.

Chapter Five: Popular Media and Internet Representations of Adoption in the Digital Age

Section Overview

This chapter highlights the pervasiveness of digital media in representations of adoption within the popular media. This phenomenon will be analyzed first through the portrayal of adoption stories in online newspapers, before approaching it through the adoption storyline about biological family contact via the Internet depicted in the British television soap opera *Coronation Street*. Thirdly, it will be explored through the analysis of the children's British television show *Tracy Beaker* and how it has influenced the perception of looked after children. Finally, the role of celebrity culture in shaping some of the public perceptions of adoption will be examined.

Introduction

Much of the recent popular media coverage about adoption has continued to focus on the failings of social services, unmanaged contact, and the reunification between adopted individuals and their biological families. These stories of contact highlight the dialectical relationship between promise and threat underpinning the contact that is not managed by social services, foster carers, and adoptive families via the Internet (Belkin, 2011; Huffington Post, 2013; MacDonald, 2010; McCormack, 2013). As a primary source of information for the general public, print media, in particular tabloid newspapers as well as television and films, have contributed to discussions and debates about adoption as human-interest stories.

Whether depicting the plight of the adopted individual, a failed attempt at reunification between the adopted individual and their biological family, the adoptive families' concerns about contact that they do not manage, or that not managed by social services, or adoption successes, these human-interest stories are populated by a cast of families, children, and authority figures within varied fields (social workers, educationalists, medical practitioners, politicians). Within this cast of individuals, the different narratives are interwoven into the life narrative of the adopted individual.

According to Baxter et al. (2012), “(o)ne important kind of narrative is the adoption story, which has multiple tellers and might take on different features, depending on the perspective of the teller” (p. 265). Through careful navigation of these interwoven narratives, the adopted individual is able to claim a new narrative, and establish an identity of his / her own construction.

The discourse that permeates these Internet and social media stories relating to adoption could be perceived both as a threat and as an opportunity. When perceived as a threat, these stories may deter prospective adopters from pursuing the goal of having a child due to concerns about contact and stories about adopted individuals abandoning their adoptive families and returning to their biological family. Likewise these stories may make assumptions of the good intentions of adoptive parents. The report by Twohey into the rehoming of adopted children is however a reminder that not all adoptive parents are motivated by the best interest of the child. Freelance writer, blogger and adoptive parent Kirsten Howerton (2012a) reminded us “(a)doptive parenting is not a noble pursuit” (para. 6). Continuing the blogger stated

(a)doptive parents are regular, imperfect people. Adoptees have the same rights as biological children to be resentful, annoyed, or ungrateful towards their parents, without being reminded that they've been "saved" by their parents” (para. 6).

Thankfully, stories of the abuse of adopted individuals by their adoptive families remain in the minority. The opportunities of Internet within the field of adoption, however, are limitless and can be used positively as evidenced in the use of the Internet and social media for the publicizing and raising awareness of adoption and the children waiting for forever families. In this respect, the benefits clearly greatly outweigh the threats. As more stories of unmanaged contact come to light, particularly dependent upon the outcome of the contact and reunification that may occur, the balance between threat and opportunity may shift.

For the purpose of this research, the inclusion of the popular media — including tabloids, television, and social networking — provides a wider perspective for exploring adoption and adoption narratives in the digital age. Stories of social services’ failings and adoption reunification via social networking are contrasted against those of celebrities that adopt with seeming ease. Often depicted as saviors of children that need rescuing, celebrities continue to feature both positively and negatively in media headlines. With the exception of Madonna, and the controversy regarding her adoption of two children from Malawi (Tentahani, 2009) and the father that secretly filmed his son being removed by social workers (Donovan, 2013) it is still very rare to hear

biological families so openly and publicly challenge the placement of their child for adoption. Although the father's contesting of the removal was publicized due to its circulation via the Internet the identity of the child and biological family were protected.

There could be many reasons behind the biological family's decision not to contest the removal and adoption of a child publically. This may be due in part because, over many years, the biological families' attitudes towards the removal of their children gradually changed as they became "less angry and preoccupied about their loss and could appreciate what good carers could offer their children" (Schofield, 2010, p. 86). The fear of being judged and the stigma that remains for parents who are not in a position to care for their children are an additional deterrent. As the use of social networking within adoption continues to grow, the biological kin has found a visible voice through social networking, a platform through which they can speak out and challenge the circumstances of the removal of their child. Through this vehicle of communication, the biological kin are able to reach out and make contact that is not managed.

Recent widespread media coverage about adoption continues to fuel inaccurate portrayals of the vast majority of adoptive families. Kline, Chatterjee, and Karel (2009) argued that "(t)he media has received some of the blame for perpetuating the ideology of adoption as a deviant family form" (p. 57). Attention-grabbing headlines, such as "Couple's Adoption Scam Story Lesson for Others" (Israel, 2011) and "Woman Who Sent Adopted Son Back to Russia Alone Must Pay Child Support" (Waldron, 2012), pertain to this idea. Such headlines often distract from the additional complications that can often occur within adoption, particularly in overseas adoption cases. Russia, for example, made the decision to delay some of the adoptions by prospective parents from the US pending a new agreement that would allow maintaining more control over international adoption cases. This change was put in place after an adoptive mother made a controversial decision to return the son she had adopted (Waldron, 2012).

Positive or negative, one cannot ignore how the popular media and the Internet continue to transform our understanding of adoption through such discussions and coverage. Adoption continues to be positive for many families choosing to extend their family and for the individuals they adopt into their family. If one looks beyond such headlines, the popular media can continue to be used positively to influence the public understanding of adoption. Although many of these stories featured pertain to the US specifically, they reveal an additional difficult and complex side to adoption relating to adoption breakdown.

The Portrayal of Social Networking for Unmanaged Contact within the Adoption Storyline in the British Soap Opera *Coronation Street*

The television soap operas (referred to as soaps) are an integral part of British culture. The life on screen depicted within “the soap opera has emerged as a format within which controversial or socially sensitive issues are played out” (Robson, 1996, para. 3). Since the birth of new media, the public’s ability to engage in discussions about the varied storylines has filtered into other types of media, including the Internet, magazines, and newspapers (Robson, 1996). Often a “catalyst for positive conversation” (Henderson, 2007, p. 12), subjects that might once have been taboo have become the norm for online discussions. Such views reflect a change in the attitudes of the viewing audience and have positioned television soap operas centre stage “within current debates about the blurring of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news” (p. 11).

Created as a part of British culture, since its first episode in 1960 (ITV, formerly Granada TV), *Coronation Street* has continued to produce storylines that portray themes that are true to life and has thus remained relevant to society. Set in the North (Manchester area), at a time when other dialects were less common on television, *Coronation Street* has remained popular due to its often larger than life characters, clichés, and the depiction of everyday life. Writing in the Guardian (online), David Liddiment (2005), former executive producer of *Coronation Street*, reported that its editors were often placed under “persistent pressure from government and voluntary organisations to harness the powerful relationship the programme has with its audience in the service of public policy objectives and other good works” (para. 7). Likewise, the researcher and lecturer Lesley Henderson (2007) argued that “the British soap opera has from time to time been developed in order to modify public behaviour (particularly in relation to health issues)” (p. 11).

As early as 1966, *Coronation Street* featured an adoption storyline. Prior to her appearance on *Coronation Street* fictional character Bet Lynch, at the age of sixteen, relinquished her son Martin for adoption at six weeks old because she wasn’t ready to be a single parent. Martin’s biological father Joe Mason wanted no contact after being told about the pregnancy. In 1974, Martin made a one-off appearance at The Rovers pub where Lynch worked as a barmaid. Appalled by Bet’s appearance, Martin left

without speaking to her. Later in 1975 Lynch discovered that Martin had joined the army and had died in a car accident whilst serving in Ulster (Henderson, 2007, p. 12).

Since 2010, Coronation Street has featured three prominent adoption storylines; its most contemporary highlights the concerns of adoption and unmanaged contact via social networking. In January 2011, the fictional characters Eddie and Anna Windass fostered and eventually adopted Faye aged nine. Shortly after her placement, overhearing part of a conversation between Eddie and Anna, Faye learned of the death of her biological mother following a drug overdose. During the conversation, Eddie complained that telling Faye of her mother's death was not their responsibility. Krusiewicz and Wood (2001) argued that "the stories that adoptive parents create about how and why their children entered adoptive families can be extraordinarily important in mending, further rupturing, or otherwise modifying the children's sense of place, history, identity, and value" (p. 786).

This display of Eddie's insensitivity, even though he apologized profusely, coupled with Faye's continued disruptive behavior, including stealing and lying, forced Eddie to concede that he only went along with the process to make Anna happy. Compelled to choose between her marriage and Faye, Anna accepted Eddie's decision to depart to Germany. Shortly after, the return of Anna's son from the army further potentially jeopardized the placement due to the change in living arrangements that had been agreed prior to Faye's placement. Yet, Faye's overhearing the conversation about her mother's death, Eddie's departure, and the return of Anna's son did not jeopardize the adoption. In November 2011, with the adoption process concluded, Faye officially became a member of the Windass family.

Faye's fictional adoption storyline develops and features unmanaged contact with her biological father Tim Metcalfe via the Internet, which yet again threatens to jeopardize the adoption. In acknowledgement of Coronation Street's most recent adoption storyline on February 12th, 2013, and the popular media coverage, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) (2013) posted the following link on both their Facebook and Twitter page, "(i)nteresting piece in Guardian on Coronation Street's storyline about contact by birth families through social media" (BAAF, 2013). Following reunification with Tim and unmanaged discussions online, the pair arranged to meet in person. Faye failed to inform her adoptive mother Anna and her new partner Owen Armstrong, owner of the local builders' yard, of the unmanaged contact online or indeed the planned meeting. Anna and Owen uncovered Faye's clandestine meeting

with Tim after looking at her laptop. Tim's relationship with his daughter continued to develop despite Anna's unhappiness and threats by Owen to keep away.

In the episode that aired on Friday January 25th, 2013 Anna made contact with Faye's social worker Joanne Riggs for advice about Tim's parental rights and raised her concerns about contact both on and offline. Having initially tried to ban Faye from seeing Tim and continually suspicious of his motivations, Faye's social worker deemed Tim to be of no risk following her assessment of the situation, much to Anna and Owen's disappointment. Riggs' decision is based upon Tim's non-involvement in the adoption order. Indeed although this part of the storyline is less credible and the circumstances about his lack of involvement in Faye's life prior to reunification online implied but not explored, it is this plot device that has allowed his reunification with less of a threat. Initially, the reunion between Faye and Tim threatened the relationship Faye and Anna had built. In the episode aired on Monday April 15th, the strain on the Windass family due to Tim's presence was made apparent when Faye announced her intentions to live with her father. More recent storyline developments have seen Faye move in with her father temporarily but later return to Anna and Owen.

Very timely in its production, Coronation Street's adoption storyline involving the Windass family reflects some of the current changes taking place within adoption owing to social networking. Indeed Coronation Street's first adoption storyline featuring Bet Lynch again reflected society's attitudes towards unwed mothers in the 1960's. In the 1950's, and 1960's the stigma of illegitimacy ensured that many mothers who were otherwise capable of raising their child had little choice other than to place them for adoption. Once visibly pregnant, the expectant mothers were often dispatched to mother and baby homes where they would eventually sign their baby over to social services or adoption agencies. It was then expected that these mothers would return to their families, and resume life as if nothing had happened.

Although both storylines feature reunification, the circumstances and outcomes differ significantly. In both storylines although it is the adopted individuals that initiate contact, in Faye's adoption storyline her age and the use of social networking for searching that are an important factor and a reminder of the transformation in the time scale in which reunification can occur. Faye's entire timeline from contacting her biological father Tim via the Internet highlights her lack of desire for support from her adoptive family in the searching process rather than her adoptive family's unwillingness to help her search. Following reunification with her biological father Faye's moving between the home of her adoptive family and her biological father implied an inability to

figure out how and understand the choices she had made once he entered her life due to unmanaged contact. Lynch's storyline is a reminder that adopted individuals were already initiating searches and making contact that was not always managed prior to the use of the Internet for this purpose.

The British Association of Social Workers, as well as BAAF and Adoption UK, have raised concerns about social networking's use for unmanaged contact due to its potential to revive past traumatic memories or place children back within an environment where they might be at risk of harm (Kent, 2013). Illustrative of these concerns, Anna and Owen's reaction to finding out that Faye had made contact with her biological family is representative of the fears and anxieties of many adoptive families whose children have found reunification online. Likewise, Faye's decision to contact her biological father without prior discussion with her adoptive family demonstrates the need for continued open dialogue about contact in the digital age. However, unlike many true stories of reunification between adopted individuals and their biological family, Faye's reunification with her biological father transpires to be positive experience for everyone.

Reflecting the concerns expressed by social workers, adopted families, and many adopted individuals, the popular media coverage about the *Coronation Street* adoption storyline demonstrates the emotional effect such storylines can have on the viewers. In an open online discussion within *digitalspy.co.uk* (2013), the suggestion by one of its members that Anna should return Faye to social services whilst she waits for her father to be assessed is a reminder of the ease with which the general public can engage in online discussions to express personal views and opinions. Such dialogue reaffirms the relationship and connections that can be established between the media and its audience. Modleski (1979), however, reminded us, "it is crucial to recognize that soap opera allays *real* anxieties, satisfies *real* needs and desires, even while it may distort them [*sic*]" (p. 38). An indicator of the writers' and editorial team's understanding of adoption in the digital age, the potential storylines and interaction between these fictional characters are clearly still in infancy.

A survey conducted by the Broadcast Standards Commission (BSC) in 2002 to establish *Audiences' attitudes to the British soap opera* (Hargrave & Gatfield, 2002) concluded, "stories should be dealt with appropriately, although there was no absolute marker as to whether storylines should always end positively" (p. 41). Lack of understanding and misinterpretations of facts presented in dramatized format have the potential to invoke public outrage and can have serious repercussions from both the public and the profession that has been dramatized inaccurately. Television soap

operas have the capacity for “conveying information, stimulating thought and discussion, and in forming and developing ideational behaviour [sic]” (Basten, 2009, p. 15).

The engagement by the public in online discussions about soap opera storylines, including *Coronation Street*'s adoption storyline, points out the often-blurring boundaries that exist between the real world and the world portrayed on television. Modleski (1979) acknowledged the importance of recognizing that soaps tend to portray families in constant turmoil, rather than the ideal family, in order to keep the interest of their viewers. As the *Coronation Street* adoption storyline continues to highlight and remind us of genuine issues, the move to a more open adoption where the biological family has some involvement in the raising of the child may need to be considered. Although not always accurate, the inclusion of and the continued interest in storylines that feature adoption (soaps that have recently featured adoption storylines include *Emmerdale*, *Neighbours*, and *Home and Away*) may additionally result in more traffic flow through adoption websites from people that had never considered adoption or fostering. Regardless of its possible inaccuracies, the Windass family adoption storyline has raised the political and media profile of adoption and as such continues to have a pivotal role in raising the awareness of looked after children.

Tracy Beaker: Changing the Perception of Looked After Children

Adapted for television, interactive website, merchandise, and a musical, first published in book format in 1991, the popularity of the series of British children's book *The Story of Tracy Beaker* has continued to increase. Written by Jacqueline Wilson, OBE, and illustrated by Nick Sharratt, Tracy Beaker has “redefined common perceptions of cared for children” (Frampton, 2005, para. 4) through its portrayal the life of a ten-year-old that, following neglect by her mother, now resides in a children's residential care home nicknamed by its residents “The Dumping Ground.” After two failed attempts to foster her, Tracy continues to document her life in first-person in autobiographical format. So fashionable was the portrayal of Tracy as a loveable yet often infuriating individual, the *Tracy Beaker* series of books is often recommended as an essential read for adopters and as a part of life story work for children (Baynes, 2011).

Written in an era before concerns about unmanaged contact between looked after children and their biological families via social networking, the use of technology

for communication and entertainment featured within many of the storylines, as did the use of print media for the recruitment of foster carers and adopters. Formerly a popular use of media, reliance on print media for the recruitment of foster carers was demonstrated in the episode aired in July 2002, in which Tracy was chosen to be “Child of the Week,” which featured in a local newspaper advertisement. Other evidence of the use of technology for communication is found in the 2005 film, *Tracy Beaker – The Movie Of Me* (Agnew, 2005), in which Tracy runs away to be reunited with her biological mother. In the movie, Tracy is seen using her mobile phone for communication with her friends in the care home, foster mother Cam, and biological mother Carly. The use of technology in everyday life is again demonstrated in the episode *Moving On* (Davies, 2010) (spin-off series *Tracy Beaker Returns*), aired in March 2012. In this episode, Tracy is set to move to London to work as a junior reporter following an article she wrote about the home in which she resides. Tracy is portrayed photographing the children, as well as typing and emailing her article to the editor.

Tracy’s failed attempts at reunification with her biological mother and the intervention of social workers point out that looked after children, adopted individuals, and biological family members have always attempted to make direct contact. Leeds Children’s Social Work Services (2012) offered the following advice for children in care of the dangers of contact in the digital age:

Foster carers, residential staff and social workers must be clear with children and young people in care about the possibility of being contacted by 'unsafe' people through social networking sites or in any other way. The social worker must discuss this potential situation with the young person when looking at any contact arrangements that have been made as part of the care plan. (p. X)

Within these storylines that portray a young girl with a vivid imagination, living in care without fear of breaking its rules, the interweaving of the life narratives of Tracy, her social worker, biological mother, and other allied professionals further reveal some of the complexities of identity of the children that have been placed in care. Importantly like the Coronation Street storyline featuring Bet Lynch, Beaker’s storyline is another reminder that contact that is not managed was occurring prior to the Internet for reunification between adopted individuals and their biological kin.

Tracy Beaker in the Digital Age

Despite the fact that Tracy Beaker may have only entered the digital age through websites and apps, Wilson has cited television and the Internet as key contributors of ideas and issues that children are being exposed to far too early (Rajan & McSmith, 2008). In an interview in *The Independent* (online) Wilson (Rajan & McSmith, 2008) stated

(with) television and the internet playing a bigger and bigger role in their lives, children are being introduced to ideas and issues which used to be kept away from them. Rather than having fun for the sake of it, and going out to play, they're receiving the adult world in a largely unfiltered form [*sic*] (para. 4).

Recognizing the change of interest in today's children, in an interview Wilson cited social media as a reason for no longer writing for those in their mid-teens. Wilson (Donnelly, 2013b) stated, "(t)hings like social media are a big part of their lives but it changes so quickly it would be hard for me to keep up. Teenagers are getting up to all sorts that an old lady like me doesn't know about" (para. 30). In another interview, Wilson (Donnelly, 2013a) raised her concerns about children's reliance on technology, stating, "(n)ow technology is so overbearing. I wouldn't worry about what they are accessing, you can control that; but more this total reliance" (para. 24). Although Wilson raises concerns about children's reliance on technology, the Tracy Beaker series adapted for the Internet continues to offer a safe haven for children seeking advice about friendship, romance etc.,

With its capacity to reach a wide audience the Tracy Beaker story both online and on television continues to facilitate in changing the perception of looked after children. Lefevre (2010) Senior Lecturer in Social Work, reminded us of the benefits of such representation of looked after children and their social workers. Lefevre highlighted the use of fictional characters by social workers to communicate either directly or in story format with their clients. Lefevre (2010), additionally cited the stories of *Tracy Beaker* as an example of literature that might help in the facilitation of discussion about complex and difficult subject matters. Saunders and Selwyn's (2008) study into the *Supporting of Informal Kinship Care* revealed that some looked after children and younger adults expressed relief because "their social worker was nicer than expected, particularly if their expectations were based on Elaine the Pain in the *Tracy Beaker* stories!" (p. 36). Such explicit representation of social workers engaging

with looked after children within this dramatization may go some way toward changing the perception of the social work profession and the children in their care.

Realism / lack of realism of the portrayal of children's residential care home within the *Tracy Beaker* series has been the subject of much online debate, including Mumsnet, Forumnation, CommunityCare, and Adoption UK. Often critical of the image portrayed by the fictional character Tracy Beaker, on occasion many parents have cited Tracy Beaker as responsible for their child's unacceptable behaviour. A commenter on mumsnet.com (2011), UK social network for parent's forum stated, "I am aware that Tracey Beaker is considered a good thing as a looked after child represented in the mainstream children's media - but that's by adults!" (2011). Another commenter (mumsnet forum, 2011) on the same forum posted "I think the problem is that Tracey Beaker is the only portrayal of children in care (aimed at children); so it is always going to be too fun/too bleak" (2011). Unhappy with the attitude of their child, a commenter within Adoption UK (Anonymous, 2010) declared, "Tracey Beaker has a lot to answer for" (2010). These comments demonstrate the blurring of lines between television and the real world and impact such portrayals can have in the shaping our understanding of adoption (and fostering). The potential effect that such portrayals on television may have is that is those viewers who see the type of representation of looked after children could come to see it as real.

In an interview in *The Guardian* (online) in 2005 with Phil Frampton chair of the Manchester Parents of Black Children since 1994, Jacqueline Wilson revealed that many of children she has met have stated, "Tracy Beaker's so lucky. I'd like to live in a children's home" (para. 1). In a letter to Frampton (Benjamin, 2004a) a 10-year-old Tracy Beaker fan living in care wrote "Care is rubbish and I hate it. On Tracy Beaker it makes it look fun, but when you're in a proper home it is horrible" (para. 6). In contrast a letter to Frampton (Benjamin, 2004a) from Jorden a 14-year old living in care wrote, "Tracy Beaker has made us realise that care may not be as bad as we had first thought and maybe our minds had exaggerated it" (para. 6).

A 2012 report by the YoungMinds (Levene, 2012) charity examining the mental health stigma amongst looked after young people found that looked after children that watch of the show have mixed views on the portrayal of residential care through the eyes of *Tracy Beaker*

Participants repeatedly stated that the only representation of children in care that others know is the TV character Tracy Beaker and that they are tired of telling peers that they are 'not like Tracy Beaker'.

The benefits however of such portrayals are can be found in Jenny Dover (2004) educational psychotherapist, and lecturer's observation, "(a) fostered child found the story of Tracy Beaker very helpful in that she could explore ideas about a neglectful mother at one remove" (p. 45).

Critical of the typical and traditional family life as desirable and preferable of children, Alston (2008) argued that fictional characters like *Tracy Beaker* should reside in the real world and not be encouraged "in her foster-home, to fantasise about a home with roses around the door, home-baked bread and a loving parent" (p. 135). Within its representation within the popular media alternative family patterns may emerge that continue to transform what is often considered the family norm. Offering an alternative theme that run through families, representations of children that reside in care continue to be under-represented and represented inaccurately within the popular media.

Not always delusional, family fantasy / romance is a significant part of child development, and facilitates children's journey and finding of comfort in a real family environment (Krout-Tabin, 1998). In the digital age, fantasies about the biological family and the immediacy of communication via the Internet place individuals at a significant risk if contact is made with the biological family are unmanaged. Harold P. Blum (1983), Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, argued, "(i)n the typical family romance of natural children the biological parents are denigrated while the wished-for ('adoptive') parents are idealized. In contrast, the adoptive child denigrates both the adoptive parents and the (unknown) biological parents" (p. 144).

The reasons cited by Wilson not to continue to with the *Tracy Beaker* series are an indicator of the divide between digital natives (those born and have grown up using digital technology) and digital immigrants (those born before or not exposed to digital technology at an early age). Wilson cited her lack of understanding of the digital age rather than the continued relevance of *Tracy Beaker* in the representation of looked after children. Wilson's lack of understanding of trends, terminology, and the Internets capabilities has lead to her inaccurate assumptions about it. Continuing to see its relevance of *Tracy Beaker* Lefebvre, Dover, Childline, and social workers continue to cite *Tracy Beaker* as relevant to adoption and fostering

Likewise the relevance of *Tracy Beaker* in the representation of children in residential care across the digital media platforms as a facilitator for discussion about issues and concerns related to looked after children remains high in this digital age. With its continued expanse into ringtones and apps the *Tracy Beaker* phenomenon remains relevant and is likely to continue into the future.

Popular Tabloid Media Stories Featuring Adoption and Race Within Celebrity Culture

With its ongoing fascination with adoption (and fostering), the media continues to permeate stories across multiple platforms and its coverage and content varies according to the intended audience. For the wider general public, media articles that embrace both celebrity culture and human-interest stories continue to offer a superficial understanding of adoption. Owing to the considerable interest in celebrity culture, celebrity adopters, and their adopted children, this superficial understanding of adoption is permeated. For the political endorsers and patrons of charities, celebrity culture in the media “offers connections to a world of public and political issues” (Couldry & Markham, 2007, p. 404). With the popular media’s outreach, one can understand the inclination of some members of the public to utilize celebrity news coverage to gain an insight into what it means to be adopted or to adopt a child. Interwoven within some of these adoption stories about celebrity adopters are personal narratives about their struggles to conceive, raising their child as a single parent, and raising the child in the media spotlight.

Prevalent within the contemporary popular media are stories about celebrities and inter-racial adoption. While celebrities have been adopting for decades, the media coverage was not as extensive. In the 1950s, Hollywood actress Bette Davis adopted two of her three children. In the 1960s, the American singer and actor Sammy Davis Jr. adopted two of his four children. Similarly, beginning in the 1970s, the actress Mia Farrow adopted ten children. With the exception of Mia Farrow, until recently, celebrity adoption remained mostly private, with the public only aware of the adoption when for example the celebrity attended award ceremonies with their family. Much of the celebrity adoption prevailing in current media headlines focuses on the propensity of white celebrities adopting trans-racially.

Much of the media surrounding this “propensity” questions the motivations of some of these adopters. Recent celebrity adopters that made media headlines include Madonna, Angelina Jolie, Sandra Bullock, and Charlize Theron. Having adopted trans-racially, the motivations of these adopters often evoke skepticism amongst members of the public, as evident in the YouTube spoof remake of *The Tomb Raider* starring Angelia Jolie as *The Womb Raider*. In the spoof, Jolie is depicted travelling the world stealing “priceless treasures otherwise known as babies” (First Church of Christ, 2006). In her article, *Why Are So Many Celebrities Adopting Black Babies?* Howerton (2012) observed, “(t)his conversation has become a predictable subject every time a celebrity adopts a child of color [sic]” (para. 1). Howerton continued, stating, “It usually takes a cynical tone, as if black children are a fashionable accessory” (para. 1).

Citing Madonna to highlight concerns about the adoption of trans-racial children by celebrities, CNN reporter Simon Hooper (2006) proposed that celebrity adopter Madonna might be perceived by the public “as jumping onto the latest celebrity bandwagon” (para. 4). Proposing, “some celebrities have unwittingly encouraged international adoption,” (Malkin, 2008, para. 12) Child Psychologist, Professor Kevin Browne stated, “(c)losely linked to the Madonna-effect, we found that parents in poor countries are now giving up their children in the belief that they will have a 'better life in the west' with a more wealthy family” (para. 11). Cautious of the motivation of such adopters, Hooper (2006) suggested that, when these children from developing countries are thrust into the media spotlight, they inadvertently become poster images of child poverty. His caution is supported by Hannah Pool, an Eritrean adopted individual, who referred to celebrity adoption as a “vanity project” (para. 11). Amongst non-white communities in the US, this is an ongoing public discussion and concern.

Offering suggestions for the noticeable increase in celebrity adoption of trans-racial children, Howerton (2012) suggested reasons for the trend, including less waiting time, availability of younger children, exposure to different and often impoverished living conditions through travel, or just wanting to provide a child with a good start in life. Although black celebrities adopt, they do not make the media headlines as often as their white counterparts do. Howerton (2012) argued that the bigger question of why so many black children are in the care system should instead be the focus of the popular media discussion, rather than being overshadowed by the color of the adopters’ and adoptees’ skin.

The noticeable increase in celebrities adopting trans-racially has raised concerns in the UK as well. Chief executive of the British Association for Adoption and

Fostering (BAAF) David Holmes (Womack, 2006) has raised concerns about what is often referred to as the "Madonna effect" (para. 5). Concerns about estrangement from race and cultural heritage and its integral role within the formation of positive identity for adopted individuals continue to dominate much discussion about celebrities choosing to adopt. Outspoken in his views about trans-racial adoption, Ron Claiborne (Wilmouth, 2010), World News, ABC correspondent promoted "the view that black children may be harmed psychologically from being adopted and raised by white parents" (para. 1). Highlighting the Black filmmaker Phil Bertelsen, Claiborne argued that, like other Black adopted individuals, Bertelsen has been estranged and isolated from his race and culture (Wilmouth, 2010). Continuing the argument that inter-racial adoption can be detrimental to adoption identity, Rita Taddonio (Wilmouth, 2010), director of the Spence-Chapin adoption resource centre was reported to have argued "(i)f you look around your table and your guests are all of the same color, then you shouldn't be adopting a child of a different color [*sic*]" (para. 3).

In his article *Raising Culturally Responsive Black Children in White Adoptive Homes: Uncovering the importance of Code-Switching in the Battlefield of Racial Identity Development*, Professor, writer, political and cultural commentator Darron T. Smith (2013) argued that black-adopted individuals that are exposed to white people for long periods of time "become adroit at understanding and speaking in largely white middle class ways" (para. 6). The author (2013) explained, "(t)hese 'socially white' brown and black people might have all the racial markings of blackness, but they know very little about the black experience, rendering them to some extent as 'culturally incomplete'" (para. 6). Smith (2013) reminded us that, as early as in 1972, "the National Association of Black Social Workers (NASBW) articulated concern over white parents raising black children" (para. 2). Continuing, the author argued that the loving and raising of a child of a different race to their own does not go far enough in counterbalancing "any societal stigma a child of color might potentially face while living and existing in whiteness [*sic*]" (para. 9). Criticism has also been directed at the film *The Blind Side* (Hancock, 2009) starring Sandra Bullock for its portrayal of a white family taking in a black teenager, claiming that it portrayed the white parents as the answer to the social problems of troubled black children (Wilmouth, 2010).

Positive perceptions of being adopted trans-racially is evident in the account of celebrity chef and author Marcus Samuelsson of his childhood experience as a black child of Ethiopian descent adopted and raised by a white family in Sweden. Samuelsson recalled that, whilst his family never referred to him or his sister as adopted, his parents were constantly questioned about their motivations for choosing

to adopt black children. Pro inter-racial adoption, Samuelsson (2012) hopes the future brings a wider community of “blended families” (para. 8).

Receiving less coverage, in 2007, the *Seattle Times* reporter Segall (2007) wrote of the slow but noticeable increase in the number of black and inter-racial families adopting white children in the US. According to Segall, 26% of white families adopted non-white children as opposed to 8% of black families adopting white children. Continuing, Segall reported that some non-white children had expressed a preference to be adopted by black families because they had developed friendships and had good experiences when they were fostered. This unnoticed trend is a direct result of “blended families live in somewhat integrated neighborhoods, which helps them to fit in” (para. 26). The role of the popular media in the objectification of race and gender stereotypes can be problematic, especially for adopted individuals that have low self-esteem and have been affected by trauma. The general public can, however, gain a better understanding of adopted individuals through accurate representation in the media (Running, 1996).

Different reasons have been proposed for the motivation behind celebrity adopters’ decision to adopt trans-racially. New York magazine reporter Steven Gaines’s (2009) article *Hungry Heart, The global celebrity adoption didn’t start with Madonna* depicted the song and staged performer Josephine Baker’s reinvention of “herself as a universal mother who rescued orphans from around the world” (para. 1). According to Gaines (2009), unlike today’s celebrities, “Baker really went shopping for kids as if she were at Costco” (para. 2). Continuing, the author reminded us that the majority of American celebrities adopt native-born children. The question remains as to whether it is better to allow people that want to adopt children the freedom to do so regardless of ethnicity, or deny children from disadvantaged backgrounds a new start in life. Within such discussions, one might easily lose sight of the improved quality of life adopters can offer a child. Although mocked in Cohen’s mockumentary comedy film *Bruno* (Charles, 2009) for their “accessorizing” by adopting a black child, many celebrity adopters continue to provide security, stability, serenity, self-reliance, their own identities, and self-determination and are inspirational to others.

Conclusion

Evidently, despite the fact that no one could have foreseen the impact that social

networking would have on adoption, the popular media coverage of adoption is diverse, each dependent on the angle the writer chooses and its target audience. The interpretation of the news being presented between different news outlets represents both a difference in readership and the “personality” of the publication and the recurrence of adoption-related stories further demonstrates what its readers are reacting to. With all media coverage, whether adoption-focused or not, the danger of providing disparate and sometimes contradictory reports on news that requires accuracy is known to be damaging. Although only a snapshot of framing devices has been demonstrated by these media representations, it nonetheless reveals some of the issues facing adoption in the digital age.

In 2008, Waggenpack (2008) argued that “(i)t is the ‘face’ that popular media (both news and entertainment) puts on adoption issues that creates an imbalanced public perspective [*sic*]” (p. 62). Acknowledging the diverse media outlets available that depicted and explain the complexities of adoption, Adamec and Pierce (2007) stated “many people obtain information about adoption from media outlets available on the INTERNET [*sic*]” (p. 185). Continuing on this issue, Harvel (2006) argued that accusations of the poor representation of adoption extend beyond the media to “television shows, movies, and even books” (p. 32). The author (2006) argued that “(i)t is imperative to examine media portrayals of adoption as a main ingredient in crafting a more positive – and more importantly, more accurate – portrayal of adoption” (p. 34). Regardless of the fact that one cannot easily dispute the positive benefits that popular mediation *can* offer, stories with happy endings are often of little interest to the wider public.

Within the dramatization of adoption within the TV soap opera *Coronation Street*’s reunification due to the Internet storyline, the potential of adoption breakdown is played out. The continued conflicts between the Windass family due to Faye’s biological father Tim result in Faye periodically moving in with her father and returning to her adoptive mother. On the surface, although Faye may have appeared emotionally resilient and unaffected by Tim entering her life, the temporary move reveals some of the personal and emotional turmoil reunification brings forth. In more recent episodes, when Faye makes the decision not to disclose her teenage pregnancy to her adoptive mother Anna or her biological father Tim until she is in labour, the story reveals the changes in relationship that have occurred among these individuals. Although one might question the accuracy of such dramatization, its outreach potential in facilitating discussion about adoption in the digital age is unquestionable.

Likewise, through the “social” reality *Tracy Beaker* series, Wilson has attempted to address some of the contemporary social issues that affect children in care. In an online interview in *Community Care: For everyone in social care*, acting youth offending team manager in North Yorkshire Steve Walker raised concerns about the public perception of residential homes for children. Sharing these concerns policy manager for a housing charity David Woods (Short, 2005) cited the role of television, soap operas in particular, as the main culprit that “perpetuate[s] myths about life in a children's home and result in the public patronising children in care by pitying them” (para. 4). In contrast, outlining the premise for the television adaptation, Jane Dauncey (Short, 2005), producer of *Tracy Beaker* stated, “(w)e aimed to de-stigmatise being in care to show that children find themselves in it because their carers cannot cope with their circumstances, and not because the kids themselves are disruptive” (para. 10). According to Short (2005), the *Tracy Beaker* series had the potential to assist in the raising of the profile of and changing the perception of looked after children to “kind of cool to be a looked after child” (para. 11).

An important difference between children that have been adopted and those that are looked after is that the immediate concerns of contact do not raise the same level of anxiety when children are in temporary foster care or residential care homes. Many of these children may continue to have direct contact with their families during the period of separation and assessment of their family situation. Often “placed inappropriately in residential care because of the lack of foster carers and alternative community provision(s)” (Kendrick, 1998, para. 8), these children have the legal right to remain in contact with their biological families.

Whilst many individuals may debate the morality of celebrity adopters, they do however continue to contribute to the public’s understanding of adoption. The dramatization of adoption on television and snapshots of celebrity adoption stories as a staple of tabloid and popular media, on and offline, continue to inform the general public. Even though many of these representations of adoption have been constructed as celebrity gossip juxtaposed with human-interest stories, they continue to offer an insight into what it means to be adopted.

As issues of unmanaged contact continue to emerge across the popular media, the use of politicians and celebrity culture, as well as the popular media in general to attract prospective adopters and present a different face to adoption is paramount. Through the use of the popular media and social media, used positively stories of

successful and happy adoption will continue to permeate. It is this relationship between these forms of media, and social networking, needs to be further explored.

Chapter six: Conclusion

Chapter Six summarizes the findings from this research.

Offering opportunities for unauthorized and unmanaged connections, the use of social networking for searching has transformed the time scale in which reunification between adopted individuals and their biological family can occur. The timing of telling a child that they are adopted is critical due to the intervention of social networking in contact between adopted individuals and their biological kin. Ensuring that the adoptive family explains the circumstances of the adoption with accuracy and sensitivity, rather than learning of their adoption via the Internet through contact being made by the biological family is key. In many cases, unmanaged contact occurred at a vulnerable time in the child's transition to teenager years. During this transition period identified by Erikson (1968) as "Identity vs. Identity Diffusion", lack of preparation for unmanaged contact with the biological family is intertwined with lack of concern of the risks contact may bring.

Previously reliant upon intermediaries and official procedures for contact, the collapse of time between the adoption proceedings being concluded and reunification occurring has been shortened significantly. Continuing to be of grave concern for many involved in adoption, how best to protect adopted individuals from unmanaged contact remains a challenge for all those involved and connected by adoption. For adopted individuals, the changes to contact brought through social networking, whilst offering opportunities for reunification with their biological kin, are juxtaposed with potentially increased threat to their safety. The question remains - Can we protect adopted individuals from unmanaged contact?

Although recent publications, including those by BAAF, BASW, Donaldson Adoption Institute, and scholars, have attempted to address some of the emerging concerns about adoption and contact in the digital age, systems to protect adopted individuals and their adoptive families are still in their infancy. Recent popular media coverage and recent publications about unmanaged contact continue to be of concern to those involved in adoption. Regardless of how and when these policies are implemented, the continued use of social networking sites to express adoptive parents' concerns and on occasion change of heart about having adopted owing to contact will continue. Reassuring these families and prospective adopters that these concerns can

be addressed satisfactorily is paramount. Due to social media the commodification” of adoption and a shift away from the perspective that its primary purpose is to find families for children continues to emerge.

A dialectal relationship between promise and threat remains. Stories of happy ever after reunification stories and celebrity adoption that permeate within the popular media are contrasted against stories of adoption fraud, the rehoming of adopted children, and the breakdown of adoptive families due to social networking. Highlighted in the popular media, the adoption triad comprising of the biological family, adopted individuals, and the adoptive family continues to be profoundly altered. This is evident within the type of articles that permeate both print and online media, as well as “the dramatic license taken by movies, prime time, and soap operas in portraying the adoption process” (Waggenpack, 2008, p. 58). Waggenpack further stated, “(u)nfortunately, most people hear about adoption only through popular media (news and entertainment), which skews coverage towards the dramatic, sensational or exploitative” (p. 59).

In this respect, Nelson (1986) argued, “the cognoscenti of the media, the regular readers, listeners, and viewers, sense the pattern of the media’s (and government’s) attention to particular issues” (p. 53). Yet, unlike the general public, people that are interested in adoption — whether in a professional capacity within social services, as academic researchers, or as prospective and approved adopters — are more inclined to source accurate information from professional materials available on and offline (Waggenpack, 2008). For those involved in adoption as professionals or in a personal capacity (adoptive individuals and their family), continued dialogue about adoption and assumptions made in the popular media will allow this superficial understanding to change. For adoption professionals, a positive relationship with the popular media is required to change this superficial understanding. Within this remit of the popular media, “(s)ubcultures are brought into being through narration and narrative: told by the participants themselves, as well as by those who document them, monitor them, ‘label’ them, outlaw them, and so on” (Gelder, 2007, p. 66).

And just as we can find positives in the use of popular and mass media, used positively, social networking continues to be effective in the promotion and recruiting for adoption (and fostering), the dissemination of information about adoption, and providing an uncensored voice for adopted individuals, adoptive families, and biological families. Indeed optimists of digital media technologies within the field of social work will continue to see the benefits of further integration. Acknowledging the changes

within the field of adoption Adam Pertman (2012), President, National Center on Adoption and Permanency and Myriad Strategic Partners stated

The list of positive, negative and complicated changes occurring in the world of adoption as a result of the Internet goes on and on, with many already in place and others still evolving. The common denominator among them is that they are not best practices derived from lessons learned from research and experience; rather, overwhelmingly, they are a mostly unregulated, unmonitored tangle of transformations that are happening simply because new technology enables them to happen (para. 15).

Despite these concerns, uncertainty, and caution about its use, many positives continue to emerge.

Writing in 2012, Siegel (2012) suggested that the efforts by adoptive parents to intervene in adopted individuals' access to their biological family might "be potentially futile given the electronic communication" (p. 22). Following the realization that "the toothpaste cannot be pushed back into the tube" (p. 22), adoptive families turn to social workers for advice. Many of them, much like the adoptive families, are inadequately prepared and unsure how to manage the changing landscape of contact in the digital age (Siegel, 2012). Yet, within this evolving landscape many social workers and service care providers continue to make positive and effective use of social networking and other digital communication technologies within their professional workplace. Similarly, a few that write anonymously online assist in permeating a better understanding of the good work they do. With continued negative popular media coverage about the failings of social workers, the use of these technologies used with caution may finally allow a greater number of positive stories to reach the public.

Whilst recent post-adoption support may have factored in concerns about contact that they do not manage, for families where this has already occurred, it is of slight comfort. But again, we can find some positive developments, for as a consequence of these concerns, open adoptions as part of ongoing contact with the biological family may require further consideration (Adoption Today, 2012b). Oakwater (2012b) extended this proposal, "(i)f the advent of social networking breaks down some of the barriers and fixed mindsets in adoption, then it has done us a favor" (p. 21). It is however too early to know the true impact of the social networking on adoption, the number of adoptions that break down as a result of direct contact, or the number of adopted individuals initiating contact with their biological family, and vice versa. With the increase in the engagement with social networking sites by adopted individuals and their biological family for reunification, strategies and policies implemented by social services require flexibility and adaptability.

Despite the risk that social networking brings to those involved in adoption, the use of the Internet continues to be an important and integral part of these individuals' lives. The Donaldson Adoption Institute (2013) reported that "(d)espite the acknowledged risks, the Internet is an important and regular part of how respondents live their lives in relation to adoption" (p. 6). For adoptive parents of young children / teenagers, finding a balance between the use of the Internet and protecting their children from contact that they do not manage remains a double-edged sword. As the prevalence of the Internet continues to grow, its use "has made it possible for adopted children and birth relatives to search and contact one another online on sites such as Facebook without professional support" (Greenhow et al., 2014, p. 2). Howard (2012) stated

In essence, Internet- related issues are not entirely different in character from those that have always been present in adoption, but important aspects of them have changed. Search by adoptees is more likely to occur at younger ages, it is more likely that searching birthparents can find minors, and both of those things can more easily occur without professional guidance or parental knowledge. Perhaps the biggest difference is that contact can take place much more quickly – without the opportunity for self-reflection, conversation with friends or family, counseling or processing [sic] (p. 40)

Within this changing landscape, the balance between integration and use of social networking and other communication technologies used by social workers, adoptive individuals, adoptive families, and the biological family has the potential to yield both positive and negative conclusions.

With so much focus on the promise and threat of social networking, the true purpose of adoption is easily overlooked. It is important to remember that adoption is not all about reunification and the quest to discover *Who am I?* Neither is adoption a quick fix for families that are not in a position to conceive or want their own biological child. Discussion about adoption should focus less on grief, loss, healing, and trauma and instead pay closer attention to the progressive enrichment it brings to people's lives. It is important to recall that adoption is about bringing different people together as families. Indeed, different personal circumstances bring these individuals together as a new often-unconventional family unit. Transue-Woolston (2010) reminded us, "(a)doption is an institution; we should be able to discuss it without portraying unhealthy and condemning views of entire groups of people" (para. 1). Adoption is a set of relationships as well, and for new adoptive families, digital media and mediation can be used to strengthen and affirm those relationships as well, whether or not they include the biological family.

It is important to remember that irrespective of concerns of unmanaged contact for many adopted individuals being adopted remains a positive experience. Reflecting on her life growing up knowing she had been adopted at the age of one, Madeleine Melcher (2015) reminded us

when you hear that someone was adopted, or notice because they look different from the rest of their family, know that so many of the stereotypes about adoption are not true. That we did not just step out of a made-for-TV movie. We are individuals and don't all feel the same way. We are REAL people with REAL families, and there is so much more to us than having been adopted [sic] (para. 14).

For many individuals whether adopted or not, social media continues to feature within their personal lives, offering new ways to connect and share personal information and experiences with friends and loved ones, update events within their life through statuses, pictures and videos. Caught up in the excitement of digital media technologies for communication, for adopted individuals remembering to engage with these medias with caution remains pertinent. Indeed, what it mean to be an adoptive child in 21st-century is continually evolving partially due to digital media technologies.

Recommendations for Future Work

The following section discusses the limitations of the study, and proposes a series of recommendations for future work, which can be drawn from this research.

The research undertaken for this thesis has highlighted a number of themes on which further exploration would be beneficial. The key limitation of this study was the exclusion of empirical research due to type of educational programme undertaken; thus been an MPhil rather than PhD programme. Conversely, this thesis has offered an alternative perspective to the changes in regard to contact within the field of adoption. Further work is however required with the undertaking of empirical research to determine the level of transformation within adoption practices and procedures due to the phenomenon of the Internet. Therefore, expanding the scope of this thesis within the field of academic study and contributing to further empirical research an additional two key questions have been identified:

1. Do concerns about unmanaged contact between adopted individuals and their biological families via social networking platforms have the potential to deter prospective adopters?
2. What happens after the reunions are made via social networking?

However until more reports of contact that is not managed (children), adoptions that have broken down due to reunification with the biological family, or prospective adopters deterred from coming forward due to fears of this are reported this won't be known. Future work would involve recruiting participants from different perspectives of the adoption process: adopted individuals, adopters, biological family and social work practitioners and would be undertaken in the form of study groups, questionnaires and surveys. Further research and findings will engage critically with the field of adoption examining the interface between digital media technologies, education, cultural studies, health and social care, and anthropological perspective.

From the literature review process two key potential audiences were identified, the social work profession, and adoptive families. Having identified the potential audiences, what might be of interest to them determined the rationale for the selection of literature for the thesis. The author is planning to continue this area of research through a variety of outlets including: publications (i.e. journals, books, policy and guidance documents), conference organisations, attendance, and presentation.

To provide an insight into how the respective author is intending to publish in these domains a breakdown is provided across perspective users. For adoptive families, through new proposals for inclusion within current adoption policy and guidance some of the emerging concerns about contact that is not managed may be alleviated. For social work practitioners working more research is need into the transformation of adoption and their profession as a whole due to the Internet and the necessary changes required to protect both themselves and their clients. The creation of a website about social work and adoption in the digital age will address some of these issues whilst facilitating in the promotion of the sharing of good practice and positive stories.

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