
The experience of adoption (1)* A study of intercountry and domestic adoption from the child's point of view

Amanda Hawkins, Celia Beckett, Jenny Castle, Christine Groothues, Edmund Sonuga-Barke, Emma Colvert, Jana Kreppner, Suzanne Stevens and Michael Rutter compared views about adoption for two groups of 11-year-old children (n = 180). The team's analyses compared the views of children according to their pre-adoption background: UK domestic adoptees placed before the age of six months versus intercountry adoptees who had experienced extreme deprivation for up to three-and-a-half years in Romania prior to placement (the Romanian group was further broken down by age at placement). Remarkably few differences were found between these groups, with the exception of two areas. Older-placed adopted children from Romania were significantly more likely to find it difficult to talk about adoption than domestic adoptees, and to feel different from their adoptive families. However, supplementary analyses suggested that these differences were due to increased levels of difficulties within the older-placed Romanian group, rather than whether they were adopted internationally or domestically. The implications of the similarities and differences between these groups for policy and practice are discussed.

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Introduction

Listening to the views of children is an increasingly important focus for research, policy and practice in relation to children's services. The government Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (2003) was followed by a consultation with professionals working within children's services, parents, young people and children. Following the *Every Child Matters* initiative, the Children Act 2004 was passed, which demonstrated the Government's increased recognition of the importance of the rights and views of

children, by aiming to encourage children's services to achieve outcomes highlighted as important by children and young people themselves. As part of this process, the Government appointed the first Children's Commissioner to England to give children (especially the most vulnerable) a voice in government and public life.

The *Every Child Matters* vision for children's services has particular implications for social care, with the Government advising social workers that:

To achieve the outcomes for all children and young people it will be essential that listening to and involving children and young people are at the heart of the way services are delivered. (Department for Education and Skills, 2004, p 2)

The increasing emphasis on child-focused legislation can be seen in the recently implemented Adoption and Children Act 2002. This Act replaces the previous Adoption Act of 1976 and represents the most radical overhaul of adoption policy for almost 30 years. The new Act places adopted children's interests at the centre of policy and practice decisions, ensuring that the child's welfare is the primary consideration for all decisions relating to adoption, and placing a duty on local authorities to provide more support for adoptive families, including a mandatory requirement to provide post-adoption services. By listening to children's views it may be possible for services to be better designed and targeted to meet their needs.

Involving children in adoption research Policy-makers and practitioners recognise that involving service users in policy as well as practice is essential for successful outcomes. Researchers increasingly involve service users in many fields of

* 'The experience of adoption (2)' will be published in the next edition of *Adoption & Fostering* – see References.

study, including law, social work and psychiatry. However, thus far this trend has not extended to adoption research to any great degree. There are many possible reasons for this. The difficulties with involving children in research are well documented (Mauthner, 1997; Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Murray, 2005) and include ethical and methodological concerns such as issues of informed consent, access, confidentiality, unequal power relationships and age-appropriateness of methods and questions. These issues become even more pertinent when discussing such a sensitive area as adoption. However, with the recent changes in the law and the current move in the UK towards increased openness within adoptions, it is crucial to listen to the views of *all* involved in adoption, including adopted children themselves. There is a wealth of data collected on attitudes towards adoption of birth parents, adoptive parents, social workers and adult adoptees, but the field is distinctly lacking in research in how *children* who have been adopted think and feel about their adoptions.

However, there are a few exceptions. For example, two recent studies (Thomas *et al*, 1999; Morgan, 2006) provide valuable qualitative data on how children experience and perceive the adoption process and offer practical advice on how professionals working within children’s services can ease the transition of being adopted. Both of these studies focused solely on the child’s perspective on adoption and used the children’s own words as their primary sources. Thomas and colleagues (1999) interviewed children adopted from local authority care at age five years and over about their views of the adoption process and children’s services, and presented ‘an optimistic picture of . . . adoptive placements’ (Thomas *et al*, 1999, p 130). They concluded that involving children in policy and practice decisions is critical for children’s well-being. Morgan (2006) sent question cards to adopted children to find out how they felt about the process of being adopted and found that children wanted to be more involved in aspects of their adoptions, by being given up-to-date

information and being consulted in decision-making. In addition, the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) has also conducted interviews with children to find out how adoptees in the USA feel about contact arrangements with their birth families (Wrobel *et al*, 2003; Mendenhall *et al*, 2004). They found that directly interviewing children about their feelings added a new insight to the existing research on openness in adoption, unlike previous literature that had ‘been carried out through the perspectives of adults, leaving an understanding of children’s experiences vulnerable to the subjective interpretations of others’ (Mendenhall *et al*, 2004, p 186). While listening to children is critical to inform practice, children’s views should be evaluated within the context of their overall welfare; any decisions need to be considered within the context of any protection issues as well as responding to their wishes.

This article uses data from the English and Romanian Adoptees (ERA) study to develop and expand upon this literature, by examining how two groups of children with very different backgrounds and associated experiences feel about being adopted. The ERA study is a longitudinal adoption study that has been following up two groups of children, one from Romania, the other a group of children placed for adoption within the UK, and the previous stages of the study have been at ages four and six. Here we examine the children’s views at age 11. Like previous studies, this phase of the project involves children in middle childhood and focuses solely on the children’s views of their adoptions; a companion article by Beckett *et al* (in press) explores the differences between children’s and parents’ views.

This study and the analyses of our data differ from previous ones in several important ways. First, previous studies have involved children from across a broad age range, whereas the children in our study were all interviewed when they were the same age (11 years). This element of the research design allows us to eliminate the effect of current age on attitudes to adoption. Second, our design employs a stratified sampling method to

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categorise children into different ages at the time of placement that enables us to see whether the age at which a child joined their family makes any difference to their later views on adoption. Third, rather than focusing on the adoption *process*, as other studies have done, this study asks *how it feels to be an adopted child* some years after the adoptions took place. In particular, this article examines children's views in three main areas: contact and information; the effects of adoption; and the ease or difficulties children have when talking about adoption.

There are many reasons to suppose that the two samples (intra- and inter-country adoptees) might feel differently about their adoptions. First, the two groups were adopted under quite different circumstances: most of the children adopted from Romania were 'rescued' from extremely depriving institutions (see Castle *et al*, 1999 for further details of the conditions within the institutions) and therefore entered Britain malnourished and developmentally delayed, whereas, as far as we know, virtually all the children in the UK group were relinquished at birth (94%) and received good care prior to placement. Second, the adoptions took place at different ages: all of the children adopted within the UK ($n = 52$) were placed at under six months of age (mean age of placement was 2.4 months), whereas children in the Romanian group ($n = 165$) joined their families aged between a few weeks and 43 months. Third, unlike the UK sample, the children from Romania at ages six and 11, who were over six months on arrival have been shown to have elevated levels of problems in multiple areas (Rutter, Kreppner and O'Connor, 2001; Kreppner *et al*, 2007; also see Rutter, Beckett *et al*, 2007 for an overview).

The two samples also share some factors. First, despite their vastly different early experiences, both groups experienced similar post-adoption environments, being placed into generally well-educated, middle-class families in the UK. Second, all the children were interviewed when they were around the age of 11, on the cusp of adolescence. Third, the children in both samples experience largely

'closed' adoptions, that is, there has been little contact between any of the children and their birth families.

Taking all these factors into account, it was very difficult to predict what the children's views would be about their adoptions. Furthermore, as so few studies in this area exist (and those that do are largely of a more qualitative nature) and as the data from the ERA study have never been examined in this context before, this study was considered exploratory.

Aims and objectives

The aims of this article are:

1. to provide reliable, quantitative data about the views that adopted children hold towards adoption, an area little explored by researchers to date;
2. to compare the views on adoption of two different groups of adopted children, domestic and intercountry, to see whether they hold similar or differing opinions about various aspects of their adoptions. To do this, we directly compared the domestic adoptees with international adoptees placed before the age of six months;
3. to compare the attitudes towards adoption of children adopted at different ages – those under six months of age on joining their families and those over six months of age within the Romanian group – to see whether the age at placement makes a difference to views on adoption.

Method

Samples

Two samples were included in the present study: a group of children adopted from Romania and a group adopted within the UK. Both groups were placed into their adoptive families between 1990 and 1992 and all were under three-and-a-half years at the time of placement. The Romanian sample was randomly selected from the 324 children adopted from Romania into families resident in Britain via the Department of Health and Home Office. The children adopted within the UK were recruited to provide a comparison sample;

they were all placed under six months of age and were recruited through a range of local authority and voluntary adoption agencies, approached to find subjects for the study.

The families were originally recruited in 1993 and the data in this study form part of a much larger longitudinal study into the effects of deprivation on outcomes (see Rutter *et al*, 2007, for a review of the study to date). When originally approached, 81 per cent of the parents of the Romanian sample agreed to participate, providing a total sample of 165 children adopted from Romania. As the within-UK group were approached via external agencies and were a volunteer sample, it is not possible to calculate their participation rate, but it is thought that approximately 50 per cent of those approached agreed to take part. The domestic sample totalled 52 adopted children.

The Romanian sample was stratified according to age of entry into the UK, to create sub-groups of children who had spent varying lengths of time in deprivation. The Romanian sample in this study was divided into two groups: those who had spent less and those who had spent more than six months in deprivation. Six months has been found to be a critical age in relation to outcomes, with relatively few further effects for more extended periods of deprivation (Beckett *et al*, 2006; Kreppner *et al*, 2007). The six-month cut-off also allows a direct comparison between the younger Romanian (placed <6 months) and UK adopted groups. When originally recruited into the study, the target was to include equal numbers of boys and girls in each group. However, this was not possible for the children in the group who experienced the longest period of deprivation, as there were more girls than boys in the group who were aged 24 months or older on arrival into the UK.

At age 11, the child adoption interview was conducted with 180 of the 217 children in the total sample, yielding an overall response rate of 83 per cent. Broken down into groups, 47 out of 52 UK adoptees took part (90.4%), 46 out of 58 children adopted from Romania when less than six months of age participated

(79.3%) and 87 out of 107 children adopted from Romania when over six months of age took part (81.3%) in the child adoption interview. The most common reasons for children not participating in the child adoption interview at 11 were that the parents or children refused, as they found the interview too sensitive at that time, or that the child was unable to do the interview due to severe impairment. Some of the children who did take part found certain stages of the interview upsetting. We therefore have some missing data where interviewers decided not to ask particular questions or to stop the interview.

Procedure

Interviewers conducted the adoption interviews with children in their homes. The interviews tended to take around 15 to 20 minutes per child and were videoed and audio tape-recorded. The tapes were then coded for the children's responses by a different researcher and global ratings were made of observed anger, discomfort or avoidance.

Measures and variables

The semi-structured child adoption interview was designed specifically for this study. As a starting point, researchers examined items included in the 'adopted adolescent interview schedule' in the MTARP study (Mendenhall *et al*, 2004). The final questions included in the child adoption interview were:

1. When do you remember first learning about where you came from?
2. What do you know about your life before joining this family?
3. What do you know about your birth family?
4. Do you have brothers and sisters who were not adopted?
5. Do you ever feel different from your family?
6. Do you think being adopted has affected you? Do you think being from Romania has affected you? Do you think having lived in an orphanage has affected you?

7. Is it difficult to talk about these things . . . about being adopted, being from Romania, having lived in an orphanage?

Each item had sub-questions enabling interviewers to probe into the topic further, for example, for item 7 (difficulty talking), the interviewers went on to ask who the children talked to about these issues, when the last time was that they talked and whom they had told about their adoption status.

In addition to the child adoption interview, other measures from the wider study were used to compare the attitudes of the children according to their length of deprivation and the range of difficulties associated with their early deprivation. For some analyses, we compared the children not only across groups (UK; Romanian <6 months; Romanian >= 6 months), but also considered a range of psychological and behavioural difficulties some children had at age six (cognitive impairment, inattention/overactivity, attachment difficulties, emotional, conduct and peer-relationship problems and autistic-type tendencies). These measures were obtained from the assessment of the children and were based on the Rutter scales, clinical diagnosis and parental interviews, all forming part of the wider study. Each child was allocated a score between 0 (no difficulties) and 7 (difficulty in every area listed above, see Kreppner *et al*, 2007, for more details of this combined measure).

Results

Gender

No differences in views were found between girls and boys in response to any

of the questions in the child adoption interview. Accordingly, the gender categories were collapsed for all further analyses.

Contact with birth families

There were no significant differences between any of the groups with regard to their feelings about contact with birth relatives. The majority of children, in all groups, reported that they would, at some point, like to have contact with their birth mothers (65% of UK adoptees; 71% of Romanian <6 months; 71% of Romanian >= 6 months; n = 28, 30 and 53 respectively). However, over a quarter of children in each group said that they would prefer no contact with their birth mothers at any time. When asked about contact with their birth fathers, the children's answers were slightly less positive, with a more even split between those who would and those who would not like contact. Just over half of the UK adoptees asked would like contact with their birth fathers (53%, n = 18), compared with 66% (n = 23) and 56% (n = 32) of the children adopted from Romania (<6 months and >= 6 months respectively).

The children in the Romanian sample were asked about their reasons for wanting contact. These were varied, but popular reasons included: to find out more about other birth relatives, such as siblings (n = 8); just to see them/speak to them/say hello (n = 5); to see what their home is like/what Romania is like (n = 5); to see what they look like (n = 4); and to get to know them/see what they are like (n = 4). Of those children who expressed a wish for contact with their birth family, the majority would like this contact to take place face to face (73–81%, see

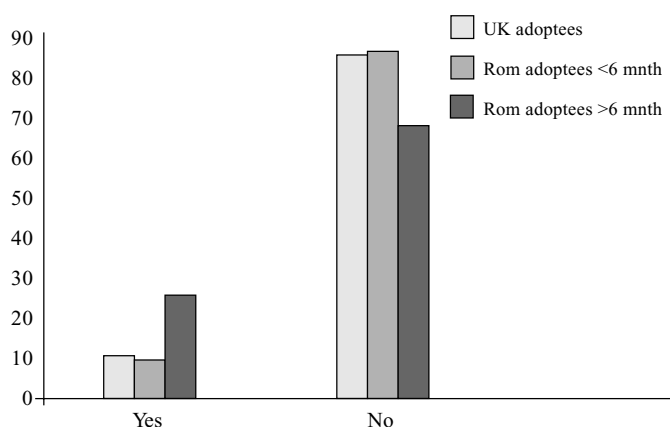
Table 1
Type of contact wanted with birth relatives

	Letter only %	Phone calls %	Face-to-face %
UK adoptees (n = 21)	9.5	9.5	81.0
Romanian adoptees <6 months (n = 29)	10.3	10.3	79.3
Romanian adoptees >6 months (n = 45)	15.6	11.1	73.3

No significant differences between groups

Figure 1

Feeling different from adoptive family*



* A significant difference was found between the ≥ 6 mnth Romanian adoptee group and both of the other two groups. (UK vs Rom ≥ 6 mnth: $\chi^2(1) = 4.25, p < .05$; Rom < 6 mnth vs Rom ≥ 6 mnth: $\chi^2(1) = 4.95, p < .05$). There was no significant difference between the UK and Rom < 6 mnth group.

Table 1). We also asked the children adopted from within the UK ($n = 42$) if they would like more information about their birth families. The majority of them (60%, $n = 25$) said that they would definitely like more information. When asked what exactly they would like to know, the most popular responses were: where their birth family live/were born ($n = 11$); their names/who they are ($n = 5$); about their appearance/what they look like ($n = 5$); and if they have other children/about their siblings ($n = 4$).

The effects of adoption

We asked the children about how they thought their adoptions affected their lives today. Over 80 per cent of children in each group thought that being adopted had not significantly affected them (80% of UK adoptees, 83% of Rom < 6 months, 86% of Rom ≥ 6 months, $n = 37, 38$ and 72 respectively).

When asked about feeling different from their adoptive families, most of the children said that they did not feel different (72–89% across the groups). However, significantly more children in the older-placed Romanian group felt different from the rest of their adoptive

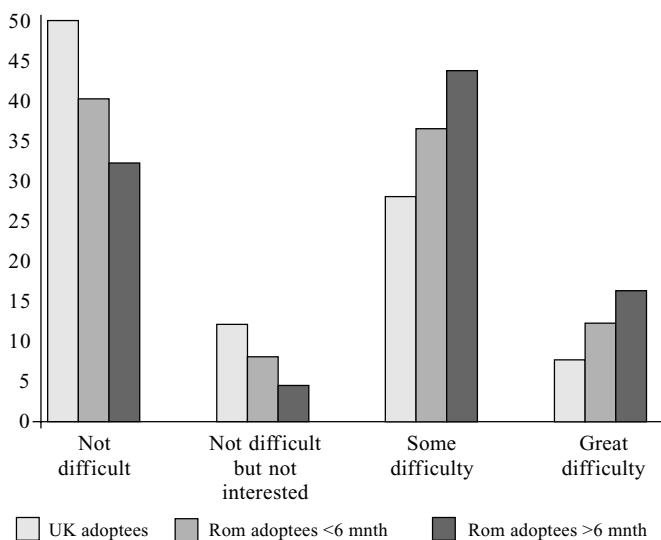
families than did children in both of the other two groups (see Figure 1, χ^2 for trends, linear-by-linear association = 5.80(1), $p < .05$). There was no significant difference between the UK group and the Romanian group who were under six months on arrival.

Talking about issues

Children were asked about how difficult they found it to talk about their adoptions, how often and whom they talked to; researchers also assessed the apparent ease or difficulty the children displayed when talking about adoption. Figure 2 shows the variety in the children's responses. Many children found conversation about adoption easy and in fact welcomed the chance to discuss the issues, whereas others found it difficult to talk about adoption (37% of UK group, 50% of younger-placed Romanian group and 62% of older-placed Romanian group, $n = 17, 23$ and 54 respectively). Significantly more older-placed Romanian children reported having difficulty talking about their adoptions than UK adoptees ($F = 3.12(2), p < .05$). There were no significant differences between the UK adoptees

Figure 2

Difficulty with talking about adoption*



* A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference between the groups ($F(2) = 3.12, p < .05$). Tukey's post-hoc tests confirmed the difference to be between the UK group and the older-placed adopted group ($p < .05$).

and the Romanian <6 month group, or between the two groups adopted from Romania.

To whom do children talk to about adoption and how often?

Although a highly sensitive issue for some, clearly most of the children do talk to someone about adoption, with less than 15 per cent in each group reporting that they discussed it with no one at all. When asked whom they talk to, over half of the children in each group said that they talked to more than one person (51% of UK adoptees, 63% of younger-placed Romanian adoptees, 51% of older-placed Romanian adoptees, n = 24, 29 and 42 respectively). The most popular choice for confidantes were mother (136 children), father (77 children) and friends (51 children). Five children reported that they talked to their teachers about adoption and eight children mentioned someone else as a confidante.

We wanted to establish how often adoption is talked about by the children. Again, there was considerable variation

within all the groups (see Table 2). Around a quarter of children in each group reported that they had spoken about adoption ‘quite recently’ (21% for UK adoptees and Romanian <6 months; 27% for Romanian ≥ 6 months). However, 26 to 35 per cent of children in each group reported that they had not spoken about adoption for a ‘long time’. There were no significant differences between any of the groups.

We asked the children whom they had told about their adoption status. We wanted to find out how many people outside their families *they* personally (not their parents) had decided to tell about being adopted. Again, there were no differences between the groups and most children (88%) reported that they had either told their close friends, or their wider circle about the fact they were adopted (Table 3).

Using researcher observations, we examined the apparent ease or difficulty children displayed when talking about adoption to the interviewer. Table 4 shows that, although the majority of children did not show any overt anger or distress, most of the children in all groups appeared to find the subject matter uncomfortable or tended to avoid discussion of the issues.

Group differences in more depth: the relationship between adoption-related attitudes and other difficulties

For the majority of the questions we asked, there were no significant differences between the groups (UK adoptees; adoptees from Romania placed <6 months; adoptees from Romania placed 6 months or older). However, for the two areas where there were group differences (how difficult the children found it to talk about adoption and whether they felt different from the rest of their adoptive families), we carried out analyses to investigate further. Using univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs), we controlled the effects of whether or not the children had psychological or behavioural problems (cognitive impairment, inattention/overactivity, attachment difficulties, emotional, conduct and peer-relationship problems and quasi-autistic tendencies) to see whether the difference

Table 2
Frequency of talking about adoption issues

	Quite recently	Some time ago	Long time ago	Can't remember	Talks to no one at all
	%	%	%	%	%
UK adoptees (n = 42)	21.4	14.3	28.6	21.4	14.3
Romanian adoptees <6 months (n = 39)	20.5	15.4	25.6	30.8	7.7
Romanian adoptees >6 months (n = 74)	27.0	2.7	35.1	17.6	14.2

No significant differences between groups

Table 3
Who the adoptees have told about their adoption status

	Family only	Family and close friends	Wider circle	'Everybody'
	%	%	%	%
UK adoptees (n = 47)	4.3	53.2	38.3	4.3
Romanian adoptees <6 months (n = 46)	4.3	43.5	45.7	6.5
Romanian adoptees >6 months (n = 83)	13.3	36.1	48.2	2.4

No significant differences between groups

Table 4

Observations of reaction to adoption interview

	No evidence %	Some evidence %	Clear evidence %
<i>Evidence of observed anger</i>			
UK adoptees (n = 47)	85.1	10.6	4.3
Romanian adoptees <6 months (n = 46)	89.1	10.9	0.0
Romanian adoptees >6 months (n = 87)	89.7	6.9	3.4
<i>Evidence of observed distress/anxiety</i>			
UK adoptees (n = 43)	76.7	16.3	7.0
Romanian adoptees <6 months (n = 45)	86.7	13.3	0.0
Romanian adoptees >6 months (n = 84)	85.7	11.9	2.4
<i>Evidence of observed discomfort/avoidance</i>			
UK adoptees (n = 43)	20.9	48.8	30.2
Romanian adoptees <6 months (n = 45)	20.0	57.8	22.2
Romanian adoptees >6 months (n = 84)	20.2	38.1	41.7

No significant differences between groups

between the groups remained when their specific difficulties were taken into account. For both areas in which we found group differences in attitudes towards adoption, these differences were no longer significant when we controlled for their specific difficulties. The differences in how difficult the children found it to talk about adoption ($F = 1.40(2)$, n.s.), and whether or not they feel different to their adoptive families ($F = 1.81(2)$, n.s.), appear to be as a result of their specific difficulties rather than whether they were adopted internationally or domestically or whether they were placed sooner or later.

Discussion

This study examined the interview data of 180 adopted children, aged 11 years of age, to find out how it feels to be an adopted child in today's society. The general aim was to contribute to the very limited existing data on children's perceptions of their own adoptions and to compare the views of children from different types of adoptions. We

interviewed children from two samples: those adopted within the UK (n = 47) and those adopted from Romania (n = 133) to see whether different types of adoption (in this case, intra- and intercountry adoptions) lead to variations in attitudes regarding adoption. We also used the Romanian sub-groups to examine the influence of duration of deprivation and examined the effect of other specific psychological and behavioural difficulties upon attitudes regarding adoption.

Main findings

First, we found that attitudes towards adoption did not vary according to the type of adoption. There were no group differences in attitudes towards adoption between domestic adoptees and internationally adopted children, when the Romanian group was examined as a whole, and even when the Romanian group was split into two ages of placement, there were no differences between the UK group and the younger-placed Romanian group. This is reassuring given the professional concerns that surrounded these adoptions from Romania when they began in the early 1990s (Beckett *et al*, 1999). The assumption of many agencies and professionals at the time was that there would be considerable difficulties in both the adjustment of these children and their integration into their adoptive families, due to their cultural differences and extremely deprived start in life. International adoption represents the main form of adoption in the USA and mainland Europe, with more than 40,000 children being adopted annually involving more than 100 sending or receiving countries. Therefore, it is important to investigate the long-term effects of this kind of adoption and how they compare to the outcomes of domestic adoptions. It is clear that, although these adoptions (and their outcomes) are distinct in many ways, adopted children's opinions do not appear to be determined by whether they were adopted domestically or internationally.

We did find differences between the groups in two areas (feeling different from adoptive families and difficulty talking about issues); in both cases the

differences were found between the older-placed Romanian adoptees and one or both of the other two groups. These differences were found to be associated with the child's specific difficulties, which are more prevalent in the children who were older upon adoption (see Rutter *et al*, 2007).

Second, it is striking how much variation there was in each group in response to many of our questions. This high level of variation was evident in the views regarding contact with birth relatives. Although over half of the children in the groups said that they would like contact with birth fathers, more than 40 per cent were equally certain that they would not, and although over two-thirds of our sample expressed a desire for contact with their birth mothers, almost one-third felt just as strongly that they would not want it. There was also considerable variation in response to the questions we asked about how often the children communicated about adoption issues and to whom they talk (if at all). This heterogeneity in the children's answers highlights adoption as a personal experience, unique to every adopted person.

Third, most children in our study appeared to feel secure in their adoptions and in their adoptive families. The general picture gained from interviewing the children was encouraging: most reported that being adopted was not something that distinguished them as 'different' from family or friends, or significantly affected their lives today. This finding is in line with other studies in this area: Thomas *et al* (1999) reported adoption to be on the whole a positive experience and Morgan (2006) found that the overwhelming majority of children in their sample felt no different at home due to being adopted.

Fourth, although most children rated their adoptions quite positively, it was still a rather sensitive topic for discussion. Almost half of the children in our project reported some, or great, difficulty when talking about adoption issues. Interviewers found that the majority appeared to demonstrate some discomfort or avoidance when talking about their

adoptions, showing that this is still a sensitive area for a lot of children. Children may find adoption a difficult issue to talk about depending on their post-adoption environment and how communicatively 'open' adoptive parents are. Alternatively, this finding may be due to individual differences, or may simply be a consequence of discussing highly personal and sensitive issues with an interviewer. Regardless, the apparent difficulty that the children had in talking about adoption is an important issue to consider, especially as recent research suggests that openness in communication within adoptive families may be a greater predictor of children's adjustment than whether or not adoptions are structurally open, in terms of contact with birth relatives (Brodzinsky, 2006). It is not clear what the implications of the difficulty in talking about adoption will be for the adjustment of these children. This article concentrates on the children's views on openness; a companion paper (Beckett *et al*, in press) explores how the parents view openness and how their views compare with those of the children.

The issue of contact with birth relatives has generated great interest in recent years, with an ever-increasing trend towards structural openness in modern adoptions. Researchers have debated the effects that open adoptions and contact with birth relatives can have on adoptees (see Mendenhall *et al*, 2004, for a review), yet few studies have included directly the views of children themselves when discussing the benefits or disadvantages of increased openness. Most of the participants in our study have fairly 'closed' adoptions in that very few children have had any contact with birth relatives. Although the majority of parents adopting from Romania did meet the birth parents at the time of placement (Beckett *et al*, 1999), this contact has rarely been maintained. The group of children adopted from within the UK in this study is one of the last waves of adoptees to be placed before adoptions became more open. Therefore, it is important to recognise that, although contact is not a possibility for these children at the moment, they still clearly

expressed views on whether or not they would like it. Most children reported that they would like some form of contact with their birth mothers (69%) and birth fathers (58%).

Future directions

This article serves as an introduction to the data that the ERA study has collected specifically on adoption issues. Overall, our data have shown that within our sample there is great variation in attitudes towards adoption, but few differences at a group level. This demonstrates that adoption is a highly individual experience, but that individual variation in attitudes does not seem to be determined by the type of adoption, at least as measured in this study (intra- or inter-country). This finding begs the question: is it the post-adoption environment that is most important in determining views on adoption, or is it a result of the child's personality, or an interaction between these factors? Subsequent articles will examine the post-adoption environment in more detail, beginning with the companion paper already mentioned, that looks at our data in relation to communicative openness within our adoptive families, the factors that predict styles of communication about adoption and the relationship between communicative styles and outcome (Beckett *et al*, in press).

Limitations

As with any research study, this project is not without its limitations. As other researchers have found (Thomas *et al*, 1999), some of the interviews were very difficult to conduct, not only due to the sensitivity of the issues involved, but also owing to the age of our participants and the impairments of some of the children. Because of the nature of our samples, there are also limitations on the extent to which our results can be generalised to broader populations of adopted children. Our samples are fairly specific in terms of the kind of problems some of the children display and the types of adoptions (domestic closed and international closed), so caution should be exercised when applying our results to a broader spectrum of adopted children. Both

groups were relinquished soon after birth by their birth relatives and so differ in their profile from children adopted from the looked after population.

Policy implications

This type of research has important policy and practice implications for all those coming into contact with adopted children, as it highlights the heterogeneity in how children feel about being an adopted person and so emphasises the importance of considering each case on its individual merits. Decisions regarding children placed for adoption are made in accordance with the child's needs, and in order to assess those needs the views of the child can play an important role. There are wider implications for how the individual needs of children can be met with current adoption policy. For example, within the UK, adoption practice has changed to enable greater openness between adoptees and birth relatives, but these developments have not always extended to the placement of very young children, where there is often an assumption that contact does not need to be maintained. Likewise in intercountry adoption, continuing contact is not always possible and this may be determined by differing cultural expectations as well as practical obstacles. However, this research suggests, as have previous studies (Thomas *et al*, 1999; Morgan, 2006), that children *are* interested in adoption issues and the possibility of contact, and many would like more information and to be involved in decisions concerning aspects of their adoptions. The study also showed that talking about adoption can be harder for children who have greater psychological and behavioural difficulties and that these children may need additional help to be able to voice their views.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the limited existing research examining how children feel about their own adoptions and how it feels to live as an adopted child, and highlights the need for more research to be done in this area, involving the direct views and attitudes of adopted children. We found that participants, even as young as 11 years old, held

definite opinions about adoption, and that these attitudes did not appear to be related to the type of adoption experienced. The lessons from this research could usefully inform policy and practice so that the views of children can be considered in future decision-making.

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