EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION REUNIONS: CONSIDERATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract

This article, drawn from a larger study of the reunion experiences of intercountry adoptees focuses on the role of social media and technology in adoption reunion. This is the first Irish study to explore reunion experiences in intercountry adoption. The qualitative data was gathered through in-depth interviews with eleven Irish people who are adopted from outside of Ireland. The findings demonstrate that social media and other technologies are now a central feature of reunion in intercountry adoption and have contributed to a completely changed landscape of reunion. Social media and technology appear to have normalised and casualised contact with birth family; requires a level of digital literacy; and can add extra complexity to managing contact and boundaries. Participants report that while social media has facilitated their contact with birth family, it cannot and does not replace the need for 'real life', in person contact. However, it helped to prepare participants for the initial in-person contact and acts as a substitute for in-person contact between meetings. The implications of these findings for social work practice are considered.

Keywords

Intercountry Adoption; Search and Reunion; Post-adoption contact; International Adoption; Social Media; Communication Technology

Introduction

Social media and technology now play a central role in negotiating relationships and in connecting with people (Caughlin and Sharabi, 2013). Adopted teenagers and young adults have grown up with social media and technology in a way that was unimaginable at the time of their adoption (Fursland, 2013; Fursland, 2010). This article details initial findings of research exploring the role and impact of new technologies and social media on reunion experiences of intercountry adoptees in Ireland. This is drawn from a larger Irish doctoral study of reunion experiences in intercountry adoption (ICA). Between 1991 and 2018, 5510 ICAs have been registered in Ireland (AAI, 2019; AAI, 2013; Adoption Board, 2003). This study demonstrates a trend in using social media

and other online platforms for both initiating and maintaining birth family contact, which has contributed to a completely changed landscape of reunion in ICA.

The impact and role of social media and technology on the experience of adoption reunion for intercountry adoptees has not been explored in adoption research to date. Black et al. (2016) and Greenhow et al's (2015) research on social media and adoption focuses on how parents manage and support their adopted children in relation to social media, boundaries and contact. Both studies highlighted the need for practitioners to have knowledge and understanding of the impact of social media and technology on post adoption relationships in order to support adoptive families. Fursland (2013), Pavao (2010) and Siegel (2012) draw attention to the issues and provide guidelines for adoptive families in managing social media. Haralambie (2013) explores the potential ramifications for the use of social media in post adoption search and reunion. The discourse in literature regarding social media and technology and adoption is frequently one of risk, however, the findings of this study also indicate the opportunities that social media and technology bring to post-adoption contact and reunion. O'Brien (2013) explored the impact of social media on adoption leading her to conclude that that the need for research in this area was 'compelling'. A recent review of adoption policy in Ireland suggested that adoption services are 'out of step' with the reality of social media. This review also highlighted the lack of state support for post adoption contact in ICA (DYCA, 2019). It is hoped that the current study will contribute to literature and social work practice by exploring how social media and technology shapes the reunion experiences in ICA.

Methodology

The study which this article is drawn from uses an interpretivist approach to focus on the reunion experiences of Intercountry Adoptees. Qualitative data was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample[2] of eleven Irish intercountry adoptees aged between nineteen and thirty years and adopted from a variety of birth countries (see table 1). Due to the complexities of contact in ICA and the aforementioned changes in the way people communicate a broad definition of reunion that includes one-off meetings and contact facilitated by social media and technology is used in this study. Interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed and uploaded to Nvivo for thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Ethical approval was granted by the Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork.

2   One participant was recruited via non-purposive sampling to a university email list

Profile of Research Participants					
Participants	Gender	Country adopted from	Contact with sibling(s)	Contact with birth mother	Contact with birth father
Participant 1	F	Belarus	No	Yes	No
Participant 2	F	Columbia	Yes	Yes	No
Participant 3	M	Romania	Yes	No	Yes
Participant 4	M	Romania	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participant 5	F	Romania	Yes	Yes	No
Participant 6	M	Romania	Yes	No	Yes
Participant 7	M	Romania	Yes	No	No
Participant 8	F	Russia	Yes	No	No
Participant 9	M	Russia	Yes	No	No
Participant 10	F	Russia	Yes	Yes	No
Participant 11	F	Vietnam	Yes	Yes	Yes

Age and pseudonyms assigned to participants in the findings section are not included here for anonymity purposes.

Role of Social Media and Technology in Reunion in Intercountry Adoption

The findings reported here focus on the overarching theme of participants' experiences of using social media and technology in reunion and contact with birth family members. The six subthemes, which were identified using thematic analysis, are discussed here.

Role of Social Media and Technology in Search and Contact

Nine participants used social media and technology to facilitate their contact with birth family members. Two participants did not use social media or technology to communicate with their birth family, opting for traditional methods of letters, phone and in person contact. Of those participants that are using

social media and technology to maintain contact with their birth family, nine are in contact with siblings and six are in contact with birthparents. The platforms participants used for searching and contact are social media platforms (Facebook and Vkontacte[3]) and video and messaging platforms (Skype, FaceTime, Facebook messenger and WhatsApp). The accounts of participants in this study corroborates earlier literature which suggests that searching and contact with birth family is now more likely to occur using technologically mediated communications than traditional methods of communication (Greenhow et al., 2015; Black et al., 2016; O'Brien, 2013; Fursland, 2013; Haralambie, 2013).

So we Skyped for the first night and oh sure Jesus my mam and my second oldest sister and my auntie, the three of them, they were waiting for me to answer the Skype call and I

_____
3   A Russian social media platform

said, Jesus I was so nervous. (Abby)

Abby's experience of 'meeting' multiple members of her birth family for the first time via skype, suggests that reunion in intercountry adoption is very different from previous practice in domestic adoption where a first meeting has usually been between a birth parent and adoptee. Both parties would prepare and communicate initially through a social worker or other third party and safeguards regarding confidentiality and privacy would be in place to protect both the adoptee and their birth family (Fursland, 2010). This study suggests that a key difference in birth family contact via social media and other technology versus more traditional methods of telephone, letter writing and in person contact, is that contact is happening very quickly and people are getting in contact with multiple birth family members at the same time.

Normalisation of Contact

A 'normalisation' of contact seems to be occurring for participants in this study as a result of social media and technology. Participants describe exchanging pictures and videos using messaging apps and using video platforms to see and use body language to interact with birth family despite not being able to communicate verbally. This normalisation is demonstrated by this participant's contact with his birth family while on holiday:

… we rented it a car, a supercar, and we went out on the autobahn and I rang (facetimed) her out on the road, that was the last time I talked to her properly that was only a few weeks ago. (Frankie)

This resonates with experiences of migrant families who are using visual communication to create 'mobile intimacy' and build and maintain 'normal' relationships (King-O'Riain, 2015; Francisco, 2015; Cabalquinto, 2017). The important role that visual communication plays in the normalisation of contact in this study is described by participants including Laura, who waves at her birth parents on Face Time when they pop into the calls with her siblings. For Laura, who like most of the participants in this study does not share a language with her birth parents, the use of FaceTime allows her to communicate with her birth parents (albeit in a limited way) and create moments of intimacy.

Conversely, some participants would like more contact, the contact does not feel 'normal' and the ability to see that a birth family member is online and not communicating can cause upset and distress:

I'd love it to be normal like, I'd love like to be able to ring my mam and I'd say, morning mam, how are you? I hope you have a lovely day. To be normal. Not this thing of looking is she online and she won't even write you a message like you know, I just find it so strange like, it's very strange, you know look maybe that's her mindset. I don't know. (Emma)

Digital Literacy

Participants described moving between platforms as they become more useful for their needs over time and describe switching between translation platforms (e.g. google translate) and messaging and video calling platforms. A significant amount of digital literacy is required to switch and move between platforms in this way:

…like the language barrier so we always just talk through Facebook (messenger) or WhatsApp. I'd be lost without Google Translate… Then like obviously sending photos, videos, like they've been showing me their town, their area and stuff and like I've been doing the same for them. So, like even kind of being able to show each other the two different worlds and stuff like. It's just mad like. They are the other side of the world. (Margaret)

Like migrant families, intercountry adoption dyads must engage in digital mobility, the ability to be together using technology and mobile devices if they want to have contact (Urry, 2007). In order to engage in digital mobility, network capital is required. In this research, age appeared to be the main barrier for people engaging in digital mobility. Birth parents seemed to be impeded by the technology and in most cases their communication was mediated by their children, the participants birth siblings. This finding is similar to Cabalquinto (2017) study of migrant families where age was the main factor that caused unequal ability to engage in mobile intimacy and older participants usually asked for younger family members to help them to use the platforms. However, unlike the participants in this study, migrants' families usually share a language and this study suggests that the lack of a shared language may be posing an additional barrier to developing mobile intimacies.

Managing Boundaries

Boundary management is a frequent theme in adoption research (for example Black et al., 2016; Goldberg et al., 2011; March, 2015; MacDonald and McSherry, 2011; Brodzinsky and Goldberg, 2016) and was also identified

as a theme in this study. For some participants the frequency and ease of access facilitated by social media and technology can leave participants feeling obliged to be in contact or feeling guilty for not interacting:

They write on my timeline quite a bit and then they tag me in stuff, but I'm very bad with checking Facebook and like, because I'm too lazy to reply. So I don't reply as much as they probably want me to, but I do like, I like their posts and stuff. (Laura)

While Laura does not always reply to her siblings Facebook posts, she manages this by using the 'like' feature in Facebook which shows that she is 'listening' and seeing their posts. Emma's strategy for managing the contact on social media was to set up a separate Facebook account which she uses exclusively for birth family. Frankie has been in contact with his birth aunt for a number of years but has just recently felt ready to connect on Facebook:

I've finally given that leap in the last year to let her have my Facebook account and then she sees all, she's like, she's funny, she's liking everything like back to the first day ever so she's obviously done a good old search (Frankie).

Participants in this study experienced breaches of boundaries and these mainly occurred in a social media context. Social media and technology comes with complications regarding boundaries and the rules of interaction are not yet fully established (Bryant and Marmo, 2012). Social media allows birth family to communicate in a very public way by liking and commenting on pages. Participants describe mixed feelings around this type of public contact. Laura has also had the experience of friends of

her birth family getting in touch with her over Facebook and she manages this by not accepting their friend requests. Participants are demonstrating ongoing vigilance in terms of managing boundaries when using social media and technology to stay in contact with birth family. They are constantly negotiating what feels right and comfortable for them and their birth family and this appears to evolve and change.

Online vs Face to Face

Eight of the participants have met birth family members in person and they are very definite that virtual contact does not compare to meeting in real life. Meeting in person was a very surreal experience and the importance of touch and the opportunity to do everyday things with birth family was emphasised by participants:

…the only way you actually can say that it's true is by touching the person like physically grabbing their arm or their hand and just figuring out are they, is this real or not. (Frankie)

…just to spend time with them, come on let's go to the shop or come on let's go for a coffee or something to eat, you know it was the social media all things that I really loved you know. (Abby)

Virtual contact seems to act as a safe place for adoptees to develop and explore their relationship with their birth families before meeting face-to-face:

…it helps a great lot, messaging each other forward and back and literally just seeing each other on Skype, on video, on Facebook on you know only for that you wouldn't have anything like…it was a great help…you kind of knew what you were preparing for (Abby)

Participants (n=3) who have not met their birth family in person, are clear that virtual contact is limited, and it will be important to meet.

…not talking to them, because of the language barrier, but just be able to like hang out with them and get to know them better, what they're like and stuff, because there's only so much you can do over text message…to be able to hug them and stuff would be great. Yeah. Give them a bit of a high five sometimes. (Laura)

Laura captures the sentiments of participants which indicates that despite the advances in communication technologies which allow people to be together visually and audibly in the moment, it does not remove the feeling of needing and wanting physical togetherness. This corroborates with migration literature, which suggests that online contact does not necessarily compensate for physical proximity and intimacy and can further emphasise the distance between participants (King-O'Riain, 2015; Cabalquinto, 2017; Cuban, 2017). Sam likens the contact with his siblings to contact with someone on an online dating platform and feels that until they meet in person they cannot develop a bond or take the relationship forward. For participants in this study, where sharing news and emotions was constrained due to language, being physically together seems to be particularly important.

Engagement with Online Support

A small number of participants (n=3) are members of online support groups and just one, Margaret, is an active member:

I don't know how many groups I'm a part of but yeah no it's great. Because they are

all obviously adoptees, it was nice. Kind of being in that community of people like that understood you know some of the feelings or the triggers that you may have, and you didn't feel like, oh like I thought I was the only one. Oh my God there is a whole world of us out there. (Margaret)

Margaret has found it very helpful to access other people through social media groups who are in a similar situation to her. Some Participants (n=4) have also told their story online through blogging, making documentaries or YouTube videos. Initially, Margaret started her blog to help to publicise her search and it was shared widely by over 30,000 people. This helped her to find her birth family. An unintended consequence of this was the support and well wishes she has received through her blog. The small number of participants engaging in online support groups was surprising in this study, there has been limited research on this topic but a recent Australian study by Fronek and Briggs (2018) found that the majority of participants (8 of 11) were engaging in online adoption support groups and found it particularly helpful for practical and emotional support.

Considerations for Social Work Practice

1. Greenhow et al. (2015) suggests that where contact occurs in intercountry adoption using social media and technology, it is less likely that there will be professional support or guidance involved. Ten of the eleven participants in this study are not accessing any post adoption support. While not everyone who has contact with birth family will need or want to engage with social work support, the limited availability of post

adoption support for adult intercountry adoptees in Ireland may also have an impact on this. Given the complexities of contact in ICA, there is arguably a role for social work in supporting adult adoptees in navigating these relationships.

2. The findings point to the complexities and 'new' challenges of navigating relationships and managing boundaries when using social media and technology. Adoption social work services will need to take this into account in training and assessment of adoptive parents and post adoption services in both domestic and intercountry adoption services.

3. The importance of face-to-face contact has been highlighted by this study. It is clear that technology supports and prepares people for this contact but without exception, participants referenced the importance of meeting in-person. This is important to consider where many intercountry adoptions continue to be closed adoptions with little information available and limited possibilities for contact due to factors specific to ICA including distance, culture, language, cost and digital infrastructure.

4. The lack of a shared language and differing levels of network capital seems to be impacting on participant's ability to build relationships with birth family. This suggests a possible role for professional support in terms of managing the relationship and access to professional translation supports. This also emphasises the importance of adopted children learning the language of their birth country.

5. Birth families in this study did not

have any formal support. A number of participants who met their birth families in person used translators or legal professionals and where this was the case some support seemed to be provided for birth families by these professionals. This suggests a role for the international social work profession in supporting birth family members in the birth country.

Conclusion

This study is the first empirical research that has focused on the role of social media and technology in reunion for adult intercountry adoptees. It brings forward earlier research on the role of social media and technology in adoption contact and reunion by Greenhow et al. (2015); Black et al. (2016) by focusing specifically on the experiences of intercountry adoptees. Participants described mainly positive feelings regarding their use of social media and technology in facilitating contact and developing relationships with birth family. However, along with the ease of access and opportunities for connection that social media and technology provides, some associated challenges are also identified. While social media and technology allowed participants to normalise contact with birth family, it also requires a level of digital literacy and access to technology which members of birth family and particularly birth parents did not always have. Other challenges related to managing boundaries and the pace, frequency and type of contact. While social media and technology is facilitating contact; relationships and moments of intimacy with birth family, all participants were clear that it did not replace the need for physical proximity and togetherness. It is hoped that this research

will be beneficial to adoptees who embark on searching for and making contact with birth family; adoptive families; and adoption social workers and professionals.

In 2013, O'Brien suggested that the pace of change in this is area is so fast that research, practice and legislation has not yet caught up. In 2019 this continues to be the case. A recently published audit of Irish adoption research found limited research on search and reunion and in relation to people who are adopted from abroad (O'Brien and Mitra, 2018). Social networking and technology have not been addressed in recent adoption legislation and anecdotally practice continues to grapple with the issues and challenges involved. This study indicates a need to build a professional knowledge base on the role of social media and technology in reunion in ICA as a search tool, a communication platform and a support network and it is hoped that this paper contributes to this.

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