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The Maintenance of Traditional and Technological Forms of Post-Adoption Contact

Greenhow S, Hackett S, Jones C and Meins E, Child Abuse Review

Abstract

Openness in adoption practice now often includes post-adoption contact with the adopted child's birth family. Traditionally, indirect and direct contact has been supported and mediated by professionals following the adoption of children from the public care system in the UK. However, more recently, the widespread growth in the use of digital technologies has made it possible for both adopted children and birth relatives to search and contact one another through the use of sites such as Facebook without professional support. This practice has been called 'virtual contact'. Using data from interviews with 11 adoptive parents and 6 adopted young people, who had experienced virtual contact, it is suggested that virtual contact works well when it is successfully integrated with the maintenance of more traditional methods of contact but can present risks when introduced without prior contact. Implications for practice are discussed in terms of how virtual contact can become a positive addition to adoption practices by utilising integrated methods of openness through which adoptive relationships can be maintained.

Key words: adoption, post-adoption contact, technology, openness

Key Practitioner Messages

- Technology, used to supplement existing relationships with birth relatives, can be successful within a climate of *integrated openness* where traditional and technological methods of contact are used.
- Prior 'traditional' contact can assist in the development of relationships and boundaries before moving to virtual contact.
- 'Out of the blue' virtual contact, without prior connections, can be challenging and present risks.

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- Integrated openness may not work well for all individuals and it is necessary to assess the appropriateness and value of all relationships irrespective of the methods of contact.

Background

The importance of maintaining post-adoption contact between adopted children and their birth family, particularly those placed at an older age, is now increasingly accepted in social work practice (Neil *et al.*, 2011). Traditionally, post-adoption contact with birth relatives has been conceptualised as direct (face-to-face) and indirect (letterbox) contact, and is typically mediated by an adoption agency, which sets boundaries, facilitates the contact and initiates any changes in contact arrangements (including changes in frequency or the birth family members who are involved) (Henney and Onken, 1998). Despite the acknowledgement that these traditional methods of contact can be beneficial to the child and birth relatives, there is evidence to suggest that contact can also be challenging. This is particularly true where adopted children have a history of abuse and/or neglect and the contact is with birth relatives who may have been involved in this abuse and/or neglect (Howe and Steele, 2004; Smith and Logan 2004). In addition to the potential challenges of traditional contact, a new set of technological practices are emerging that are facilitating search, reunion and continuing contact amongst members of adoptive and birth families without professional mediation. In particular, this includes ‘virtual contact’ (Fursland, 2010, p. 20) defined as ‘post-adoption contact activities between adopted children and birth relatives via social networking sites, email, video calls, or text messaging’ (Greenhow *et al.*, 2015, p. 2).

Currently, adoptees can access their birth records at the age of 18 years in England and 16 years in Scotland, and at these ages can seek information or make contact with birth relatives. Despite high levels of satisfaction in these searches reported by adoptees (Pacheco and Eme, 1993), complexities are evident. For example, satisfaction is much more likely if

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adoptees have initiated the search themselves, as unexpected contact from birth relatives can cause a mixture of emotions, such as surprise, excitement, shock, curiosity and anxiety (Feast and Philpot, 2003). If the search process results in contact and reunion, adoptees then have to manage new relationships, which can involve integrating birth relatives into their lives, considering the frequency of contact, and whether both adoptive and birth families should meet and try to build relationships (Feast and Philpot, 2003). In addition to choosing to formally access their records at the age of 16 or 18 years, some adoptees may wish to take this process into their own hands earlier in their adolescence through the use of internet and social media searches. If internet searches result in virtual contact, the circumstances and purposes of this contact may vary. For example, virtual contact may be used to make initial contact or to enhance an existing relationship. This may result in a range of outcomes.

In their study involving 87 adopted young people aged 14 to 21 years, Neil *et al.* (2013, p. 244) argue that a 'general climate of openness' within the adoptive family reduces the risks that can be associated with virtual contact for adopted young people, as there is an understanding of the roles and boundaries within the adoptive kinship network. In particular, virtual contact was more likely to be positive when it was used to supplement existing relationships and was supported by adoptive parents. However, when it was used in an unplanned or unexpected way and when adoptive parents were not aware, virtual contact was more likely to have negative outcomes for the adopted young people (Neil *et al.*, 2013).

Studies focusing on the wider general population of young people, beyond adoption literature, can also provide useful evidence regarding the value of digital technologies in maintaining relationships. Cummings *et al.* (2002), having reviewed several empirical studies comparing online and offline communication methods, concluded that the benefit of online communication is felt only if it is used to *supplement* rather than substitute offline relationships. Similarly, Mesch and Talmund (2006), following a survey of 987 young people

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in Israel, argue that friendships that originate online are perceived as less close than those that originate offline and are then supplemented with online communication. This, they argue, is due to the short duration of the relationships and the lack of shared activities and discussion. Furthermore, from their study of 110 18–29 year olds in the USA, Subrahmanyam *et al.* (2008) conceptualise young people's use of social networking sites through a co-construction model, whereby the online and offline worlds of a young person are psychologically connected through the issues they discuss and the people that are included. Subrahmanyam *et al.* (2008) also suggest that young people use social networking sites to strengthen some offline relationships that may not be as strong face-to-face. Their offline lives are *integrated* with their online lives with communicative technologies and traditional methods of communication being concurrently used for *interconnection*.

Considering the impact of communicative technologies on young people following interviews with 1511 9-19 year olds in the UK, Livingstone and Helsper (2007) suggest that young people who are more vulnerable offline may be more exposed to online risks. For example, they may seek online relationships if they lack strong offline ties and if these online relationships are with strangers this could present some dangers. There is, therefore, a clear suggested link between offline vulnerability and the experience of online risk, rather than the internet being the only mediating factor. As a result, it is useful to consider communicative technologies as an extension of daily life and communication rather than a separate challenge that exists in isolation. In relation to children and young people who have experienced adoption, this means it may be important to consider the potential risks associated with virtual contact through an assessment of the current offline context of young people's lives. This context may include their psychological wellbeing, their relationships with adoptive family members and their relationships with birth family members. To explore this further, the present study aims to consider the interaction between offline traditional methods of post-

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adoption contact and the emerging use of online technological contact methods. This study aimed to answer the research question: how do technological and traditional methods of contact relate to one another?

Methods

Sample

The sample comprised members of ten adoptive families who had experienced virtual contact. This included 11 adoptive parents and six adopted young people and adults aged 14-22 years from four of the families (two out of six adoptees were 18 years and above). We were unable to recruit birth relatives for this study due to the fact that adoptive parents acted as gatekeepers to adoptees and birth relatives within their adoptive triangle. None of the adoptive parents were comfortable for us to speak to birth relatives due to the ongoing, sensitive nature of the virtual contact. This sampling limitation must be considered.

Instrument

As this is a new area of investigation, there were no standardised instruments for the collection of data on experiences of virtual contact. We reviewed existing research (as above) but subsequently decided to design our own semi-structured interview tool. The interviews were part of a wider study exploring the experiences of traditional and technological methods of contact. This study comprised an online survey of adoptive parents, and interviews with adoptive parents and adopted young people. In the interviews referred to for the purposes of this paper, participants were asked questions about: their family background and relationships; their relationship with birth relatives and how these may have changed or developed over time; how these relationships have been maintained (or not) through the maintenance of traditional methods of post-adoption contact; the family use of communicative technologies (including social media); and finally their experiences of virtual

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contact and how these related to the wider maintenance of post-adoption contact. This paper focuses on the last section of these interviews: the family experiences of virtual contact and how these related to the wider maintenance of post-adoption contact. In relation to this theme, both adoptive parents and adoptees were asked:

- What contact arrangements do you have in place (if any)?
- How has technology been used as a contact method in your family?

Participants were given the freedom to discuss these questions in a manner they felt comfortable with and that reflected the way in which contact had been maintained traditionally and technologically in their family. As the interview was semi-structured, prompts were used to guide participants where necessary. For example,

- Why do you maintain contact?
- Why do you think technology was used as a contact method?
- Do you still manage contact in the same way?

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with members of the ten adoptive families. One adoptive parent was interviewed in nine families and one married couple were interviewed together in the remaining adoptive family. In relation to adoptees, three siblings were interviewed in one family and one adoptee interviewed in the three remaining families. The researchers accessed participants who had participated in a survey of adoptive parents (n=2 families) [part of a wider study] and through adoption agencies in contact with adoptive families who had experienced virtual contact (n=8 families). All adoptees were recruited via their adoptive parents who acted as gatekeepers. In all cases, the adoptees gave their informed

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consent to take part and their adoptive parents also provided their consent for their adopted children/adults to take part.

Participants were given the opportunity to be interviewed by telephone or face-to-face. The majority of interviews were carried out via telephone (11 out of 17, including three adoptees), which has been shown to be a valid alternative to face-to-face conversations (Holt, 2010). The benefits of telephone interviews have been identified as offering time and cost efficiency, and a feeling of anonymity for participants due to not facing the researcher in person (Irvine *et al.*, 2013), particularly when discussing sensitive issues (Van Selm and Jankowski, 2006). The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes for adoptive parents and approximately 30-45 minutes for adopted young people. In total, ten interviews were carried out with adoptive parents and six interviews with adoptees. In the case of adoptees, adoptive parents were present for two interviews (both carried out face-to-face), for the remaining interview carried out face-to-face the adoptive parent was not in earshot. However, the researchers cannot be certain that adoptive parents were not in earshot when the three remaining adoptees were interviewed on the telephone.

Ethics

The project was approved by Durham University's School of Applied Social Sciences' Ethics Committee and followed the principles of the British Sociological Association (2002). In particular, all participants gave fully informed consent to take part in the research and anonymity is protected via the use of pseudonym names for all participants (adoptive parents and adoptees). Where individuals are not named, it is because they did not take part in the study but were mentioned by the participants during interviews. In these instances, the individuals mentioned by participants are highlighted by their position in the family (for example, adoptee, birth sibling).

Some specific ethical issues arose due to the sampling strategy that used adoptive parents as gatekeepers. It might be the case that some adoptees would have wanted to participate but their adoptive parents did not pass the information on about the study, and therefore these views were not captured. Participants for this research were recruited from England and Scotland. It is not possible to know how many young people were denied the chance to participate and also if, in some cases, adult adoptees (over the age of 16 or 18 years, depending on location) were not able to participate. There were two adoptees who participated in this study who were considered adults due to the ability to access their adoption records in the country they resided (that is, 18 years and above in England). The two adult adoptees were members of the sibling group of three and their younger sibling, aged 16 years, also took part. Therefore, the adoptive parent in this case gave their consent for all family members to take part in the research. However, the two adult adoptees also gave their independent consent to take part. We felt that it was important to include the views of these adult adoptees alongside those of the adoptees considered as children, despite their differing positions in relation to accessing birth records. This was due to the fact that the experience of virtual contact for them is related to their family as a whole, affecting all three siblings. Therefore, disentangling one from the other two would be problematic and giving voice to just one of them would not have been fair.

Analysis

The data were analysed thematically to look for patterns across individual experiences (Aronson, 1995; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The data were inductively categorised, allowing the themes to be generated from adoptive family experiences of post-adoption contact (both traditionally and virtually). The first author was responsible for analysing the data, which involved an iterative process of reading transcripts and categorising key themes

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across participant accounts. These themes were then refined following discussion amongst the research team, particularly in relation to the naming of the key themes.

Findings

All family members reported having access to technology in the family home. Although this varied (for example, some adoptive parents did not use social media regularly and some adoptees used mobile technologies more frequently), all participants, and particularly adoptees, had regular access to social media, if they wished to use it. The experiences of virtual contact discussed by participants can be broadly categorised as:

- ‘Out of the blue’ virtual contact, that is, unplanned and unexpected, or
- Virtual contact that supplemented relationships that had already been initiated offline (which we refer to here as ‘supplementary virtual contact’).

Family experiences of virtual contact sometimes depended on the birth relative involved. Three out of the ten families experienced a combination of ‘out of the blue’ and ‘supplementary virtual contact’. For example one family had ‘out of the blue’ virtual contact from the birth mother that was negative, but an extension of existing direct contact with siblings that was positive. Greenhow *et al.* (2015) outline a more detailed discussion of the nuances involved in virtual contact experiences. However, for the purpose of this paper it is important to note that the categories of virtual contact presented in this study are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, within one family it is possible to experience both types of virtual contact and the support needs of adoptive families will be dependent on the specific circumstances encountered. For the purpose of the following analysis, the most dominant form of virtual contact in each family is discussed. ‘Dominant’ refers to the contact that was discussed in the most depth by participants, which was ongoing and held the most significance (whether that was positive or negative).

‘Out of the blue’ virtual contact

Six out of ten families reported virtual contact that occurred ‘out of the blue’ i.e. without existing connections; four of which were initiated by a birth relative (including the sibling group of three consisting of two adult adoptees) and two by the adopted young person. The birth relatives included birth mothers in five cases and siblings in one case. Of the six families, five had maintained letterbox contact with the birth relatives involved and one family had no prior contact. The letterbox contact was infrequent (annual), not consistently maintained or had ceased over time. Adoptive parents and adoptees described challenges involved in these sudden, more direct reconnections online. In relation to the contact, some adopted young people were not emotionally ready to handle unmediated connections with birth relatives (which adopted young people discussed when reflecting on the virtual contact or as described by their adoptive parents), who they may not have spoken with since early childhood. These situations involved the young people trying to negotiate the boundaries of these relationships in adolescence (or early adulthood). This process was difficult to manage due to the fact that the virtual contact could happen at any time, and there was, therefore, a lack of time and space to negotiate a level of contact that was appropriate for all. In addition, the online nature of the contact meant that social work mediation was either not present or was difficult to put in place once adoptees and birth relatives were already in contact.

Participants described the negative impact virtual contact had when it was experienced unexpectedly. Verity describes how the ‘out of the blue’ nature of the virtual contact created an uncontrollable reaction of fear:

‘My mum was like “your birth mum she sent [your sister] a friend request on Facebook and I think she might have sent you one”... I jumped and was shaking and fell backwards then I was crying... and then I got really scared.’

(Verity, adoptee aged 14)

Adoptive parents, James and Hannah, described what their daughter said to them following an ‘out of the blue’ approach by birth relatives on Bebo and the situation that followed. It could be inferred that both James and Hannah’s daughter, and Verity above, were not emotionally ready to deal with a reunion with birth relatives. In the quotation that follows, it is clear that appropriate boundaries had not been negotiated to place safe restrictions on the contact whilst allowing positive relationships to develop over time (as through traditional methods of contact):

“I’m [adoptee] a bit freaked out. I’ve just received this message and I think it’s from my grandma”... When she [adoptee] found out about them it was like the excitement, and she wasn’t in a great place... Then I think she realised that, you know, the type of people that they are [birth family]... it wasn’t what she imagined her family to be.’

(James and Hannah, adoptive parents)

‘Out of the blue’ contact means that established relationships have not been formed between the adoptee and birth relatives, and so when virtual contact occurs, communication may not be in line with the new family boundaries that are created through adoption. An example of this is discussed by Sue, an adoptive parent, who describes the virtual contact that developed following an approach, initiated by her adoptive daughter, via Facebook to members of her birth family:

‘She [Sue’s daughter] got in touch via Facebook with her birth mum and then she got in touch with her older brother. So it was all a big explosion of gushiness... then she doesn’t hear from them for a while... so it’s very chaotic.’

(Sue, adoptive mother)

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The use of the word 'explosion' by Sue is a useful description for 'out of the blue' virtual contact as it reflects sudden connections that lack prior planning. This is where previous traditional contact and connections between the adoptive and birth family may help to support the transition to online methods. This also highlights where there may be differences in the way adoptive parents and adoptees view the virtual contact. Sue's daughter seemed to become emotionally involved in the immediate online connection, whereas Sue viewed this as a negative outcome.

Supplementary virtual contact

Four out of the ten families used virtual contact to supplement existing relationships that had developed through the use of traditional contact methods; three of which were initiated by a birth relative and one by the adopted young person. All the families had maintained direct contact prior to the virtual contact occurring; two with siblings, one with birth uncles and one with the birth mother (although this latter case did cause challenges for the adoptive family, which are explained in the next section). For the most part, these online connections were described in a far more positive way by adoptive parents and adopted young people than those participants who experienced 'out of the blue' virtual contact. Communicative technologies were used to supplement positive connections, and the informal nature of online communication allowed individuals to control post-adoption contact in a more 'family-like' (Jones and Hackett, 2012) way. In particular, the everyday nature of virtual contact meant that contact became part of family interactions rather than a formalised process. The boundaries of the relationships had been negotiated through traditional methods, allowing virtual contact to continue these negotiated connections without the need to process new relationships online.

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Where traditional methods of contact had worked well, some families had moved on from these methods and supplemented their relationships with birth relatives in a positive way using online methods. This is highlighted in Diane's family where the traditional direct contact that had been maintained between her adopted son and his birth siblings, had been extended through technology. The regularity of the contact via Facebook had allowed the relationships between the siblings to develop:

'So when he met up with his brother and sister [during direct contact], they did exchange [online] details... I think it was some comfort that, you know, rather than just have a meet up twice a year they could speak to each other.'

(Diane, adoptive mother)

The extension of relationships online also added normality and reality to the child's dual connection to two families. Lee, an adoptee, describes how the various methods of contact, including virtual contact, have allowed him to maintain a real sense of his dual connection to his birth and adoptive families. He talked about how he finds this normal due to the traditional methods used as he grew up and now the addition of technological methods:

'Keeping contact with them [birth family] in different methods... I just think it's a normal way because I've grown up with it and I've got... used to having four of my different family members instead of two.'

(Lee, adoptee aged 18)

Where virtual contact had worked well, participants discussed the interaction between traditional and technological methods of contact and maintained both forms to facilitate positive relationships. This meant that post-adoption relationships with birth family members had online and offline elements.

‘Integrated’ and ‘Technologically Facilitated’ Openness

It could be inferred from the themes discussed above, that prior connections, maintained through traditional methods of contact can lay positive foundations for successful virtual contact, as seen in the stories of ‘supplementary virtual contact’. This suggests that the integration of traditional and technological mediums in the maintenance of contact over the life course could influence whether virtual contact works well. The two broad types of virtual contact that were experienced amongst our sample of adoptive family members, ‘out of the blue’ and ‘supplementary’ virtual contact, describe the way in which technology was used as a contact method within the adoptive family. This was with regards to whether technology was used in a planned way to supplement existing relationships with birth family members that were developed through traditional methods of contact, or whether technology was used in an unexpected way whereby either the adoptee or birth relative contacted one another ‘out of the blue’. Therefore, the importance of prior connections between the adoptee and birth relatives emerged as an important factor that could influence whether virtual contact was working well. Following on from these categorisations of virtual contact, we developed categorisations that broadly explained the way in which technology had impacted on the wider maintenance of post-adoption contact in the families who participated. The maintenance of post-adoption contact within our sample was broadly categorised as:

- *Technologically facilitated openness*: this generally consisted of infrequent (usually annual) indirect contact, with virtual contact occurring ‘out of the blue’ and replacing traditional forms of contact.
- *Integrated openness*: this generally consisted of ongoing (often direct) forms of traditional contact that were supplemented through virtual contact, with both traditional and technological forms of contact used to maintain relationships.

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The use of the term ‘openness’ in our categorisations refers to what Brodzinsky (2005) calls ‘structural openness’, relating to contact that is maintained between adoptive and birth family members. Brodzinsky (2005) also discusses the importance of ‘communicative openness’ referring to adoption-related conversations within the adoptive family. This latter form of openness is not discussed in this study and therefore the impact of communicative openness on the experience of virtual contact is unknown in this sample.

For six of the families in this study, ‘out of the blue’ virtual contact had replaced the use of traditional methods, which led to ‘*technologically facilitated openness*’. All families who could be included in this category, described the virtual contact as a negative experience due to the risks and challenges presented through unmediated online connections. Where traditional forms of contact were maintained in these families, indirect contact was recommended by social work professionals due to the involvement of the birth relatives (usually birth parents) in the child’s pathway to care, through abuse or neglect, meaning that direct forms of contact may not be appropriate or may have even been traumatic for the child. Therefore, the occurrence of virtual contact within this context meant that this was challenging and in contravention to social workers’ advice, and adoptees were rather suddenly in touch with birth relatives in more direct technological forms.

The four families who experienced ‘supplementary virtual contact’ could be placed in the ‘*integrated openness*’ category, due to the fact that they were maintaining post-contact through traditional and technological methods. Two families described this as positive and two as mixed with positive and negative elements. The positive or negative experience depended on the birth relative involved, with positive integrations of traditional and technological methods generally being used to maintain relationships between adoptees and birth siblings or wider birth relatives (excluding birth parents). In the two families with mixed experiences of virtual contact, the virtual contact had been positively integrated into the

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maintenance of openness amongst birth siblings and wider birth relatives, but had been negative when maintained with birth parents. The integration of technological and traditional methods worked well when an agreement had been reached regarding the level of openness, which was challenging when adoptees may not have been ready to interact with birth parents online.

There was an exception to this dual categorisation, as one adoptive parent described how their adopted child had returned to the care system following the disruption of the adoption. Although there were multiple factors that led to this disruption, the adoptive parent discussed the negative influence of contact to the breakdown of the adoption. However, the virtual contact occurred following the disruption of the adoption, therefore it is unknown what the impact of the virtual contact was.

Discussion

The participants' experiences in this study have informed the categorisation of the experiences of virtual contact and, through this analysis, the importance of *integrated openness* was highlighted. This is where virtual contact was used to supplement existing traditional methods of contact (direct contact), and both technological and traditional methods of contact are maintained concurrently. Traditional contact provided relational foundations to support the progression to virtual contact. Where virtual contact was maintained through *technologically facilitated openness*, the 'out of the blue' and immediate nature of these virtual connections meant that the gradual process of boundary negotiation over time did not occur.

The ability to extend existing relationships through virtual contact was a useful addition to openness for some adoptive families. The extension of relationships online added normality and reality to the child's dual connection to two families. The lack of formality

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allowed the connection to feel more natural and family-like (Jones and Hackett, 2012). Smith and Logan (2004) have argued that traditional methods of contact may not sufficiently facilitate the ongoing exchange of information and maintenance of relationships. In addition, the methods themselves have been criticised. Over a decade ago, Swanton (2002, p. 129) argued that letter-writing, the method used in the majority of contact cases, is not a 'modern-day skill'. Letterbox, often viewed as the easier end of the contact spectrum, can be challenging due, for example, to different levels of engagement from adoptive and birth family members (Sales, 2002) whereas face-to-face contact can feel unnatural (Slade, 2002). Neil (2002) argues that when developing contact arrangements between birth relatives and the adopted child, it may be useful to learn from established family modes of interaction and how the child usually interacts with family members. Therefore, it is important to engage in activities that children currently enjoy, for example communicative technologies. This would ensure that the normally public contact practices can be integrated into the private realm of the family (Jones and Hackett, 2012).

Despite the suggestion that *integrated openness* worked well for participants in this study, it is important to note that this form of openness may not work well with all birth relatives, as it may be that mutually satisfying boundaries cannot be achieved with all individuals. Some participants in this study were managing successful integrated openness between the adopted child and their siblings, but had not managed this with the child's birth parents. Therefore, it is not as simple as promoting the concurrent maintenance of traditional and technological methods for the success of virtual connections. Rather, it is important to consider which relationships are important and positive to each adopted child through traditional methods before the progression to virtual methods. In addition, the offline vulnerability (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007) of each adopted child in relation to their psychological wellbeing should be considered, as this vulnerability can be transferred online

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and make it difficult for the child to manage virtual connections with birth relatives.

Therefore, the prior relationships maintained traditionally may need to be positive before being extended virtually. If prior relationships with birth relatives are problematic these challenges may be transferred online.

Further research is needed to explore whether the categorisations in this study can be applied to wider samples of adoptive families. Currently, the categorisations stem from the analysis of data from a small sample of ten adoptive families. However, when comparing the categorisations to the research of Neil *et al.* (2013) and wider studies looking at the value of online and offline relationships outside adoptive families (Cummings *et al.*, 2002; Subrahmanyam *et al.*, 2008), it seems similar patterns emerge. These patterns suggest that online communication can be meaningful and beneficial if it is used to extend existing offline relationships. However, the value of e-communication can be lost when it is used to initiate 'out of the blue' connections. Prior offline connections can facilitate greater closeness (Mesch and Talmund, 2006) that can be taken forward into online networks.

It is important to recognise that although the dichotomous categorisations suggested in this study may provide a useful starting point, they may not capture all experiences of virtual contact. For example, further research is needed to explore cases where 'out of the blue' virtual contact could work well and be positive, and therefore whether 'technologically facilitated openness' could become an appropriate method within adoption practice. In addition to the importance of the *existence* of prior relationships for virtual contact to work well, there is a need to also consider the *value* of these prior and ongoing post-adoption relationships.

Limitations

It is hoped that the categorisations that have developed from the data in this study can provide an indication of the ways in which virtual contact is experienced. However, there are several limitations in this study that must be noted. Due to the small sample size, this study can only claim to be exploratory in nature and further research would be necessary to substantiate the findings. This study also gathered a sample mainly of children who were adopted from the public care system. The data may, therefore, not reflect the experiences of other types of adoption, for example, international and infant adoptions. In addition, an important limitation of this sample is the absence of birth relative views and it is unknown how many adoptees were prevented from participating in the study. Therefore, the complete experience of virtual contact from all perspectives of the adoption triangle has not been captured. Finally, it is important to explore the views of social work practitioners in relation to the support services that are currently available and how these may need to develop.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that *integrated openness* creates conditions for technological methods of contact to work well. Virtual contact that is used to supplement existing connections that have been maintained traditionally, exists within a context of ongoing support, negotiated boundaries and established relationships. If the negotiation of relationship boundaries has already been achieved through previous traditional contact methods, then the transition to technological methods of contact may be an easier one to manage for an adoptee. This is where 'out of the blue' contact can be problematic. When prior connections are not present, the unmediated nature of virtual contact can be challenging, as the time to carefully negotiate relationships in a controlled and supported manner is not there. It is, however, important to consider the value and appropriateness of relationships on an individual basis, as integrated openness may not be positive for all. Further research to explore the value of the

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categorisations proposed in this study would allow for a stronger evidenced-based typology of the ways in which virtual contact is experienced to be developed.

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