Narrating Connection in Intercountry Adoption:

Complexities of Openness in Taiwan-Australia Adoptions

Corresponding Author:

Amy Conley Wright, amy.conleywright@sydney.edu.au; Phone: +61 2 8627 6119

Author affiliations:

1. Dr Amy Conley Wright, Associate Professor and Director, Institute of Open Adoption Studies, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney.
2. Dr Sonja van Wichelen, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology & Social Policy, The University of Sydney.
3. Dr Margaret Spencer, Lecturer, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, The University of Sydney.
4. Professor Yu-Wen Chen, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, National Taiwan University
5. Dr Ching-Hsuan Lin, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, National Taiwan University
6. Dr Chin-Wan Wang, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Tunghai University

Keywords

Intercountry adoption, open adoption, adoption, reunion, connection, identity, Australia, Taiwan

Abstract

Connection is central to adoption, though complicated by geographical, cultural and linguistic differences in the intercountry adoption space. This paper investigates perspectives on connection from the perspectives of adult adopted persons and adoptive parents in Australia, from families of origin in Taiwan and from professionals in both countries. Drawing from narrative interviews, findings provide insight into the complexities of connection and the ways members of each group negotiate some of the challenges to openness. There were two primary themes characterising perspectives on connection: openness to the possibilities of connection was the predominant theme among adoptees and adoptive parents and concerns about disrupting the status quo was most common among birth mothers. While connection in adoption is inherently personal and relational, developing and maintaining connections relies strongly on statutory and institutional policies and practices. The article concludes by discussing implications for policies and practices related to openness in intercountry adoption.

Keywords

Practitioner points

- The study identified how connection is narrated and openness practiced by adoptees, birthparents, adoptive parents, and professionals in Taiwan-Australia adoptions;
- Change in adoption practice should take account of different narrations of connection and life changes that may impact upon openness;
- The study underscores how statutory and institutional policies and practices affect the narration of connection beyond the personal and relational.

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Introduction

Following the trend toward open adoptions that started a few decades ago in the domestic space (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Yngvesson, 1997), there is now a push internationally towards openness and connection in intercountry adoption (Seymore, 2015; van Wichelen, 2018). This development is linked first to a human rights framework, in which international law—in this case the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Hague Adoption Convention—stipulates what has been termed the "right to know", including the right to know one's biological parents and one's birth culture (heritage) and the right to information (often meaning medical history).[1] These changing attitudes suggest the need for re-examining the predominantly closed form characteristic of intercountry adoption.

In Australia, open adoption, defined as regular contact between adopted children and their birth families, is expected and indeed required for a domestic adoption to be approved. The idea of openness is understood to support children's identity development, so that they can acquire information about where they came from, to learn about the circumstances of their birth and the reasons for their subsequent adoption (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). For children with a different cultural background to their adoptive parents, openness and contact with birth family is also expected to support the child in developing their cultural identity (Luu, de Rosnay, Wright, & Tregeagle, 2018). This shift to open adoption emerged in the 1980s after adoptees and birthmothers revealed the negative effects that the closed (and secret) forms of adoption had on their identity and psychological wellbeing (Marshall & McDonald, 2001).

However, the current situation in Australia presents something of a double standard, with a greater level of contact and openness expected and practiced in domestic adoptions than intercountry adoptions. Taking on board the imperative of openness, we aim in this article to shed light on the complexities of connection and openness in international adoption. Our team defines "connection" as more than contact and reunification. It is everything from an exchange of information to a continuing relationship. In short, connection covers anything that connects the adoptee to their family and culture of origin. Much of the scholarship on

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[1] In the CRC the right to information is seen as a subsidiarity right vis-à-vis other domestic children, meaning that to prevent discrimination between adopted and non-adopted people, this right to information should be honoured in the adoption context.

intercountry adoption has focused on the normative importance of open adoption; emphasizing the need to change the closed culture of the global practice and formulating legal and normative principles to do so (Besson, 2005; Besson, 2007; Seymore, 2014). Yet, empirical research describing how openness and connection is deliberated, attempted, and practiced amongst adoptees, birth families, adoptive families, and professionals themselves is still scarce.

The Importance of Connection

Connection has always been important in personal adoption narratives, particularly when referring to any real or desired connection between adoptees and birth families. However, the way in which societies have emphasized connection to birth family and birth culture in adoption has changed over time. For instance, before the shift to open domestic adoption in Australia around the 1980s, closed adoptions were common (Cuthbert et al., 2010). While the closed system emphasized the privacy of the birthmother it also produced a culture of secrecy around adoption. Children were often withheld the information that they were not the biological children of their parents, many only finding out perchance as adults. The shift toward openness was precipitated by a number of things, especially the voices of adult adoptees emphasizing deep traumas associated with withholding information about their biological origins.

Concealment of adoption is less possible in interracial and intercountry adoption where children involved are non-white and adopted by mostly white adopters. Nonetheless, the idea of connection to the birthparents or birth culture was not necessarily emphasized in the 1950s through to the mid 1990s. It was generally thought that children were highly malleable and that they could simply assimilate into their adoptive environments. Instead of connection, much emphasis placed on attachment (e.g., Groze, 1992; Howe, 1995; Johnson & Fein, 1991). In other words, as long as emotional attachment between adoptive parents and the adoptive child was successfully established, the child should have little problem in becoming "as-if" one of the adoptive family (Marshall & McDonald, 2001).

Toward the turn of the millennium, intercountry adult adoptees started to voice their concerns about the practice of intercountry and transracial adoption, highlighting a range of issues, particularly their struggles with identity and belonging (see Trenka, Oparah & Shin, 2006). To date, consideration about the importance of connection in transnational adoption practices has been neglected, or even conveniently forgotten to suit preferences to avoid contact with birth mother by prospective adopters in western countries (Seymore, 2014).

Yet there also appears to be a growing awareness of connection to birth family and country of origin among adoptive parents, particularly by parents of transracial adoptees who understand that their ethnicity is distinguished from their child's and therefore they cannot provide the means to accommodate the various socio-political factors that influence the ways in which their child will experience the world (Ponte et al, 2010; Mohanty & Newhill, 2011; Yngvesson, 2003; Yngvesson, 2010). The search for identity and thus connection to countries and families of origin is fuelled not only by adoptees themselves, but often their adoptive parents, and in many cases adoptive parents seem to place more importance on this search (De Graeve, 2015; Ponte et al, 2010; Yngvesson, 2003; Yngvesson, 2010).

Connecting to Birth Families

There is a growing literature on experiences of adult adoptees who search and find their birth families and seek a "reunion" or ongoing relationship (Yngvesson, 2003; Yngvesson, 2010; Kim, 2010; van Wichelen, 2017). Because of increased mobility, it is easier to embark upon so-called "return" journeys to their place of birth. While adult adoptees often describe the experiences of such "returns" and "reunions" as fraught, conflicted and very emotional, the desire to "return" and to find missing pieces of their childhood narratives is considered an important part of developing or recuperating a sense of self and identity (Yngvesson & Mahoney, 2000; Yngvesson, 2003).

However, there remains many barriers when starting and sustaining a search or planning a return to the country of birth, or when confronted with a difficult "reunion". Financial obstacles are one of the key barriers since subsidies exist only in certain countries and only cover the bare minimum of costs associated with transnational searches. Second, traumatic events can arise because of particular circumstances of an adoption. This can pertain to feelings of shame for the abandonment of the child by the birth parent or feelings of rejection by the adoptee. Post-adoption services to assist the adoptee or birthparent in these circumstances are scarce and people are dependent on private arrangements. According to research on adoptees' perceptions to initiate connections and communication with their birthparents, adoptees indicate barriers ranging from uncertain contact identity, fear of rejection and a sense of dissatisfaction from contact outcome (Tieman, Van der Ende & Verhulst, 2008).

Less is known about the perspectives of birth family (by which we often mean birth mother), who have been described as the "forgotten member of the intercountry adoption triad" (Manley, 2006). There are deep social justice concerns regarding intercountry adoption. These adoptions typically involve desperately poor mothers who may be members

of less privileged racial and ethnic groups on one side, and wealthy white adoptive parents in rich countries on the other side (Bartholet, 2005). As Cuthbert et al (2010) explain, "the circumstances in which many birth mothers give their babies up for intercountry adoption reflect many of the circumstances surrounding pre-reform domestic adoption in Australia" (p. 442).

There are calls for implementation of open adoption in the context of intercountry adoption, with adequate professional support (European Network of Ombudspersons for Children [ENOC], 2018). Given that intercountry adoption is a complex measure, transferring a child out of their physical environment, open adoption may provide an opportunity to know their own family and country. Yet given the limited precedence of openness in intercountry adoption, significant questions remain. For instance, is intercountry adoption compatible with openness? How do practices of openness in domestic adoption, in countries such as Australia, translate to intercountry adoption, which presents barriers of distance, culture and language difference? What are the views of the parties affected by adoption? By examining the intercountry adoption as practiced between Taiwan (a sending country) and Australia (a receiving country), this study illuminates these issues, drawing on the perspectives of adopted adults, adoptive parents, and birth mothers.

Methods

To explore the concept of connection in intercountry adoption between Taiwan and Australia, the research team sought to answer the following question: "what are the needs and wants of various parties for connection in intercountry adoption between Taiwan and Australia?" The two research teams from [redacted for peer review] collaborated throughout the study. In October 2017, the [redacted for peer review] research team visited [redacted for peer review] for a two-day workshop to co-develop the research plan and to develop the research instruments. This visit included consultations with adopted persons and adoption professionals. This visit resulted in development of parallel data collection instruments and a research timetable. In early 2018, each team submitted and received approval from their respective Human Research Ethics Committees. Following this, data collection occurred from April to August 2018, which included recruiting participants, scheduling interviews and conducting focus groups with professionals. In August 2018, the teams met again in [redacted for peer review] to co-analyse data and identify joint themes. From August to November the teams collaborated to write a research report. The teams jointly launched the findings of the

research report in [redacted for peer review] in November 2018, with the [redacted for peer review] team.

Instrument

Given the significant variation in adoption experiences, this study uses semi-structured, narrative-based interviews with adopted persons, adoptive parents and birth parents. This style of interview and analysis has many benefits, as it enables multiple possibilities for the research participant to describe their own understanding of personal events and experiences (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013). In contrast to a fixed interview agenda that may impose the researcher's constructed view of a phenomenon, narrative interviewing encourages the participant to identify aspects of their situation that hold significance to them (Riessman, 2008). The researchers wished to avoid the suggestion or assumption that the adopted person 'should' have made an attempt to connect with their country, culture or family of origin. It is widely acknowledged that many adopted persons have no desire to make this connection. The narrative methodology offers a way to sensitively and safely navigate these dimensions, while maintaining the agency and autonomy of the research participant (Hyden, 2013). By taking this approach, the study aims to explore the concept of 'connection', in its broadest sense, as a means for understanding the multi-layered, life-long, and ever-changing impacts of intercountry adoption.

Sample

There are four cohorts involved in this study: adopted persons, adoptive parents, birth mothers and adoption practitioners. This article focuses on the perspectives of the adoptees, adoptive parents and birth parents, drawing on the data from professionals to provide context on current supports for connection. The purpose of this study is to gain an exploratory understanding of the different factors that shape one's views on connection in intercountry adoption. To enable this, the study uses small samples of participants. In Australia, the participants are adults who were adopted from Taiwan by Australian parents, parents who have adopted a child from Taiwan and intercountry adoption professionals. In Taiwan, the participants are birth mothers whose children were adopted via intercountry adoption and intercountry adoption professionals. A snowball sampling method was used, with recruitment via adoption agencies, social media, and word of mouth from those who had participated in the study.

Table 1 to feature here

Birth mothers

In-depth interviews with 12 birth mothers were conducted by the [redacted for peer review] research team in Taiwan. These birth mothers ranged in age from 25 to 57 years old. Most had their children adopted when they were about 20 and their children were between birth to five years old. Among these birth mothers, their children were internationally adopted to Australia, Denmark, Sweden, and the United States. Interviews were conducted in person. Of the 12, only 5 have had face-to-face reunion meetings.

According to the birth mothers, the main reasons for adoption included unwed pregnancy, financial concern, and lack of family support. Many of the mothers reported that they were pregnant unintentionally when they were young and not yet economically independent, so they were unable to provide adequate care of their newborns, especially when their family were unable provide support. In particular, some mentioned that they wanted to send their child for adoption because their single-parent status could not provide a "complete" family. Others gave up their parental rights due to substance addiction or domestic violence. All interviewed birth mothers expressed complicated feelings about making the decision for adoption. They were very sad about separation but felt adoption might be the only choice to offer their child a better life in another family.

Adoptees and Adoptive Parents

In-depth interviews with 11 adoptees and 17 adoptive parents were conducted by [redacted for peer review] in Australia. Of this sample, there are four parent-child dyads represented (i.e. both the adoptee and their adoptive parents took part in the study, in separate interviews). The adoptees were aged between 20-50 years old, and the adoptive parents were aged between 40-70 years old. For 6 of the 11 adoptees, there had been no connection with their birth families.The large spread of participants represented multiple generations of intercountry adoption between Taiwan and Australia, spanning as early as the 1970s, to more recent adoption placements that had occurred in the past five years (see Table 2). The interviews took place via phone, as well as on Zoom video calling and in person. This method enabled the research team to reach participants across Australia. The sample included adoption placements that had been processed in four different states: New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia.

Table 2 to feature here

The primary motivation for adoption reported by adoptive parents was infertility. In the majority of cases, adoptive parents had a single or multiple adopted children. Those families with more than one adopted child tended to have adopted from Asian countries, including China, Korea and Vietnam, in addition to the child or children adopted from Taiwan. A couple of adoptive parents made it clear that they had made an intentional choice to create their family through adoption, in addition to or rather than having biological children. Some adoptive parents remarked that they had first tried domestic adoption, but had been unsuccessful due to the low number of children placed, or that they had not applied for domestic adoption because of not meeting criteria or preferring intercountry adoption.

The reasons that adoptive parents chose Taiwan for intercountry adoption can be divided into 'prior connection' and 'the Taiwan intercountry adoption process'. Adoptive parents who had a prior connection to Taiwan included those who already had a Taiwanese or Chinese family member or friend or knew someone who had adopted a child from Taiwan. Adoptive parents who were drawn due to the Taiwan Intercountry Adoption process were referred to this program over other countries in relation to processing times, administration, availability and agency transparency, or simply because it was the only program/agency for which they matched the criteria. The proximity of Taiwan to Australia was noted as a plus by several adoptive parents, because of the relative ease of travel for the adoption process and future visits with the adopted child.

The number of participants is small and from specialised target populations. For this reason, we have taken due care in masking the stories of individuals. The interview data provided linear narrative data particular to a person's story. In the analysis, we identified themes common across the samples. We have used an approach described by Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams and Hess (2005). A theme that applies to all, or all but one case, is labelled "general." A theme that applies to more than half of the cases is labelled "typical." A theme that includes fewer than half but at least two cases is labelled "variant." We have not reported on themes unique to a single individual. The two research teams independently coded the data they had collected, and through discussion resolved discrepancies and reached consensus on two main themes related to views towards openness in adoption.

Results

Feelings toward connection are complex. For adoptees, the desire to have a connection with the birth family or not is deeply personal, ranging from longing for a connection to feeling of disinterest or ambivalence. For birth mothers, some never thought about meeting their child

again, while others hoped they would see their child again in the future, though harboured feelings of guilt that their child might ask why they were given away. For the most part, adoptive parents were supportive of some kind of connection to birth family, and this was much more pronounced for parents who had adopted children more recently compared to those whose adopted children were now adults. The two dominant themes that emerged from analysis of interviews with adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers were 'open to the possibilities of connection' and 'do not disturb the status quo.'

Open to the possibilities of connection

The theme of *open to the possibilities of connection* emerged as a mindset, welcoming of connection, either in the current moment or a clearly envisioned moment in the future. This was a typical theme among the adoptees and adoptive parents and a variant theme among the birth mothers. While mothers were happy to receive information, the typical theme among mother was *do not disturb the status quo*, which was a variant theme among a adoptees and adoptive parents.

Adoptees

A general theme among the younger adoptees (aged 25 and below) was a sense of openness around experience of being adopted and comfort having adoption-related conversations. These participants described familiarity with their own adoption story, and a sense of confidence to ask their adoptive parents any questions throughout their childhood. Typically, their adoptive parents modelled ease and stability when it came to discussing their adoption, and encouraged their child's curiosity. This sense of openness on the part of adoptive parents included providing information about the birth family and willingness to facilitate connection. These conditions made being connected feel natural. One adoptee commented: "It just felt very normal and natural sort of thing. I think, again, Mum and Dad have nurtured that feeling and sentiment towards them [birth family]."

This was in stark contrast to the adoptees of earlier generations who felt as though they couldn't process complicated feelings relating to their adoption, as it was not openly spoken about in their families. Many of these adoptees were discouraged from acknowledging the adoption or maintaining a connection to Taiwan and their birth family. When looking back, adult adoptees reflected that they experienced confusion and regretted that they had not received more information at an earlier point:

> "I was basically kept in the dark, and that's not fair. Whether they loved me, I have no doubt about that, but it's still not fair that I was kept in the dark…it should have been done [openness about the child's origins] when I was younger. Because it doesn't

have to be something that's – it's not bad or it doesn't have to be scary. It can be
communicated and to be shown as not a scary thing."

Some of the older adopted adults, who typically received little information on their roots,
spoke about experiences of repressed emotions that caused significant tension between them
and their adoptive parents later in life. Older adoptees who attempted to connect with their
birth families generally had less success, due to lack of information or incorrect information.

Adoptive parents

Adoptive parents in more recent years typically express a strong interest in maintaining
connection to their child's familial roots and cultural heritage. Some parents also shared how
the child's birth mother, and Taiwan, are a part of 'their family' now and how the experience
of adoption had a change in their own personal identities. This was seen as beneficial for the
family unit as a whole with all family members engaging in discussions about familial roots
and cultural heritage, not just the adoptee. Some adoptive parents of older generations
admitted that they underestimated the importance of this connection to family and culture
when raising their child. The right to know this information was not customary in the earlier
intercountry adoptions, and was actively discouraged as it was believed it to be better for all
parties.

Adoptive parents appeared to play a critical mediating role in terms of their children's
feelings about connection. For the majority of adoptive parents, particularly those who have
adopted in the last 25 years, there was a general view that facilitating connection with
familial roots and cultural heritage can only be beneficial. One adoptive parent commented "I
hope it continues and I think it's good for [her], it can only be of benefit to everyone really
and I think really it's part of our daughter, part of her history, part of her, her birth mother so
I think it's really important that we do that."

Birth mothers

For the birth mothers, although some hesitated about connecting with their child, they
preferred to keep receiving reports from the adoption agencies. This report includes photos,
videos, story books, or other documents regarding the child's development and everyday life.
Many birth mothers expressed that watching the video and/or looking at the photos was
enough to understand how well their child is treated by the adoptive family. However, as time
goes by, when the adoptive family is not required to send back reports, lack of information
could motivate birth mothers to reach out for connection. For example, one birth mother
mentioned that after receiving fewer reports after the first year, she and her mother began to
feel the loss and they requested more reports and even an online meeting if possible. She said

"If possible, I still want to ask how they are doing. I am afraid that they could become less familiar with everything in Taiwan. Maybe I know some [adoptive] families would think "who are you?" or something like that. But I never mean to interrupt, and I just want to see [the children]." This birth mother struggled between wanting to know more about the children's current life and worrying about disturbing the adoptive family.

Some birth mothers stated that they became interested in knowing more about their child's life. They stated they were willing to connect, either via letters or face-to-face meetings, because something happened or changed in their life, such as having a newborn (i.e., the adopted child's sibling), marrying to a new partner and having a new family, or the death of current husband/partner. Under these conditions, some mothers expressed that they felt ready or had a reason to meet their child. For example, one birth mother initially refused to show up at a reunion meeting requested by her 10-year-old child adopted to Australia. She changed her mind after giving birth to a baby boy. She decided she would like the two brothers to meet with each other and know they both exist during their childhood and adolescence.

> "I didn't show up because I didn't know what exact mind or attitude I should have to meet him. Actually, I decided to meet him this time because of his younger brother. Meeting him could let his brother know that they are related. Otherwise, I was not willing to meet him."

Do not disturb the status quo

The theme of 'do not disturb the status quo' emerged as a sense of either not wanting to be disturbed or not disturbing the others involved in adoption. This was a typical theme among birth mothers and a variant theme among adoptees and adoptive parents.

Birth mothers

While birth mothers expressed interest in information, a typical theme was worry about disturbing the status quo, in their own life and the lives of the child and adoptive family. They wanted their child to have a better future with the new adoptive family and to cut off all the past connection with the birth family. Also, connecting with their child may make them feel guiltier and more depressed that they should have not given away their child. Some birth mothers even wanted to cut off all the connection with adoption agencies, so that they could start a new life and experience relief from the emotions of having their child adopted in the past. Significantly, connections with adoptees may place birth mothers at risk of the exposure of their secret. Some birth mothers keep the adoption story a secret from their family

members or friends. The disclosure may disrupt their current life or family relationships which they have been trying hard to maintain or improve.

For birth mothers who are still struggling with issues motivating the adoption, such as substance use or poverty, they expressed not wanting their child to see how miserable they are now. Also, since most birth mothers held a belief that the adoptive families are in better financial condition and able to provide a better material life to the child, many expressed that they would feel uncomfortable to let their child know they still live in poor conditions. Thus, these birth mothers are still concerned about sharing their current information or meeting the adoptees. For those who have improved financial conditions and are experiencing a good life, they feel more ready to meet their child. Thus, some birth mothers who have not connected with their child yet indicated that they would prefer to meet their child in the future after they improve their financial status.

On the whole, birth mothers assumed their child is having a good life, and they did not want to interrupt the adoptive family and anything regarding the child's development. They thought the adoptive parents are the most significant persons for the child, compared to the birth family, since they have given the child away:

> "I think this [decision] is good for each other. Right. Maybe adoptive parents are also not willing to [connect]. We have to stand at their point of view. I don't know how they think, but from my point of view, if I were adoptive parents, I would think [not wanting others to disrupt]."

Adoptees

Concern about disrupting the status quo, particularly regarding the life of their birth mothers, was a variant theme among adoptees and adoptive parents. They raised concern about if they were to try to connect with their birth mother it may be invasion and risk exposing their birth mother particularly if she had not told people that she had a child whom she relinquished for adoption. For example, this adoptee commented:

> "And now I just think out of respect for her – like she could have a new life and she might not – (a) she might not have told anyone that I exist, or (b) she could have her own family that she's not mentioned it to. And if I come on the scene, it could ruin her life or it could – you just don't know the outcome that it's going to have on them if you were – and she's been selfless in that she's put me up for adoption to give me a better life. And I wouldn't want to go back to her and kind of throw a spanner in the works for her if she's sorted her life out now. So, I don't think that's too fair."

Adoptees also expressed concerns about disrupting the status quo within their adoptive families. These concerns related to possible changes in the relationship dynamics, out of concern that initiating a connection with birth family would result in a sense of betrayal or hurt in the adoptive family. One adoptee commented:

> "So, I was really nervous and worried about how I would even start this communication with her. I did feel really happy that she [birth mother] wanted to make communication. But I didn't know how my mum and dad would feel, and my brother, I didn't know how they'd feel about me starting communication with my birth mum. I just wanted them to make sure that you are my parents. Even though she is my birth mum you are my mum and you are my dad and you are my brother. I'm a person that wants to make sure that things are okay."

Adoptees also commented about timing in their own lives and waiting for a time in their lives when connection might not be too disruptive. These adoptees recognised the potential emotional risks of reconnecting with birth family and the time and energy required. For younger adoptees, they were busy with normative life activities like education, establishing a career, romantic partnerships and peer groups, and later having families of their own. One adoptee commented: "I've been thinking about it [connecting with birth family] for a long time and just putting it off and then I got busy, I was at uni and just things like that. It never was a good time."

Adoptive parents

While adoptive parents were generally willing to have open conversations about adoption and typically would assist with making connections to birth families, some held back out of concerns regarding the birth mothers and cultural differences around openness in adoption. An adoptive parent commented: "It feels like they [in Taiwan] don't have quite the same value of family contact [in adoption] that Australia does." Some adoptive parents expressed awareness of cultural differences regarding shame and stigma of adoption for birth mothers in Taiwan, and concern about exposing what might be kept secret. This scenario of reconnection uncovering a secret occurred with two sets of adoptive parents who arranged reunion meetings with their children's birth mothers. One adoptive parent noted that the reunion with their daughter's birth mother went well, but an ongoing connection was complicated because the birth mother kept her daughter's birth and adoption a secret from her new husband. Another adoptive parent spoke about how connecting with the birth mother of her adopted daughter was very a delicate balancing act:

"This is the cultural thing like often it's kept secret because if you have a child over there and you're a single mother there's a strong possibility you won't marry and you won't have a future. See it's all those cultural differences..… Like letting a secret out that's going to be very detrimental to her future, we'd never want that for her because we connected to her too, we want the best for her as well.

Some adoptive parents expressed concern about the risk of disrupting the status quo for an adopted child--that is, the child's sense of stability and security, out of concern that the child might be too young to cope with information about their adoption or that it might set up false or unrealistic expectations about connection. In some cases, adoptive parents found that rather than being disruptive, openness to connection was a positive experience. One adoptive parent who was concerned that taking her adoptive daughter back to Taiwan would be an unsettling experience reported this was not the case and in fact the trip had a settling effect:

"I thought there'd be a lot of emotional fallout when we came home. I don't know. There might be a bit of anxiety or wanting to go back but instead it's just been really – I think it's just putting the missing piece of the puzzle into place."

Discussion

This paper highlights complexities around openness in the context of intercountry adoption. Connections preserve adoptees' right to know their familial roots and cultural heritage. Adoptees benefited from gathering information and narratives about their origins, learning about why he/she was put up for adoption, and meeting their questions around identity. By helping their adopted children to forge connections, adoptive parents realized their responsibility to keep their children connected to their family and culture of origin. For birth mothers, connecting with their child could validate their past decisions, leading to a sense of relief and reduced guilt. Yet for birth mothers, feelings about connection were particularly complicated. Shame and stigma surrounding certain circumstances of adoption (such as poverty or unmarried pregnancy) contributed to some birth mothers not wanting to be located.

Connection or family search may have a tremendous emotional cost. Even when the connection leads to positive outcomes, birth mothers have to face what they may have intentionally avoided for years. Some birth mothers may feel happy and thankful, while others may feel guilty, shameful, and anxious. All birth mothers have to recall the feelings of giving their own child away for adoption. They may also have to re-examine whether their past decision was right. Ongoing support, including counselling services and frequent

contacts provided by adoption professionals, may be necessary to address the birth mother's complicated feelings before and after connection.

This study has limitations and strengths. The sample size is relatively small and the convenience snowball sampling method may have led to involvement by people affected by adoption who had a particular interest in connection, and therefore their views may not be representative of others involved in adoption between Taiwan and Australia, or intercountry adoption in general. A strength of the study is that it is the first, to the knowledge of the authors, in its focus on intercountry adoption on both sides of the adoption process. Despite the limitations, the findings from the current study have implications for adoption practice, including recommendations for adoptive parents, adoption professionals and intercountry adoption policy.

For intercountry adoptions between Taiwan and Australia, as with other sending and receiving countries, there is no institutional responsibility to facilitate and support ongoing connections. By contrast, state or territory statutory child protection authorities in Australia are expected to support foster carers who are in the process of adopting a child from the out-of-home care system to build a relationship with the child's birth family involving face-to-family contact (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Government authorities are also required to provide access to adoption information, and in some states also required to provide access to counselling, for adoptees or birth family members who are seeking to reconnect (Australian Government, n.d.). The Australian Government Department of Social Services funded a free Intercountry Adoption Tracing and Reunification Service from July 2016 to June 2018, but this funding was not renewed (International Social Service Australia, n.d.). In Taiwan, while adoption agencies do not receive any funding after the formal adoption process, agency staff who were interviewed voluntarily provided assistance for reunions in terms of the search process, emotional support for mothers, interpretation and translation, and planning the event. The Australian Association of Social Workers (2015) notes that the process of search and reunion can be challenging and much greater support is needed.

The right to know, and particularly to know one's biological family, as an underpinning of openness in intercountry requires due consideration. A right implies obligation and fulfillment. Yet with intercountry adoption, crossing cultures means connection may have different meanings and consequences to the different parties. While in intercountry adoption arrangements between Taiwan and Australia, there is an expectation of openness on the part of the receiving country and adoptees and adoptive parents, for the most part, the issues surrounding openness and ongoing connections for birth mothers are

complicated and surface issues of stigma, shame and unresolved trauma. This difference across countries risk enforcing the right to know for one party over the right to privacy of the other. As openness in domestic adoption become normalized, the discrepancy in intercountry adoption will need to be considered and the needs of all parties to adoption will need to be supported.

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