"I Always Wanted to Look at Another Human and Say I Can See That Human in Me": Understanding Genealogical Bewilderment in the Context of Racialised Intercountry Adoptees

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Abstract: Although there is growing literature on the situation of international adoption, there is a general paucity of research into the salience of the concept of genealogical bewilderment (GB) and racialised adult adoptees' experiences of searching for their transnational birth families. This paper seeks to explore the relevance of the much under-studied concept of GB in relation to intercountry adoption. Through a detailed analysis of a documentary film series—*Searching for Mum*—that serves as an empirical example to develop the concept of GB, this paper utilises four case studies involving adult adoptees to shed light on a number of key concerns, including motivations for genealogy search, belonging, identity, body image/mirror image, and ancestral knowledge. The paper argues that even supposedly well-adjusted adoptees may desire to search for their genealogy and heredity. Moreover, such searches may indicate a quest for belonging and identity in a world where biological ties and processes of racialisation are equated with such phenomena.

Keywords: genealogical bewilderment; ethnicity; adoption; intercountry; belonging; identity

1. Background

Those who have always 'known', never had reason to question or never had the 'truth' of their biological heritage challenged have been 'freed from the obligation to begin' (Foucault 1980, p. 51) contemplating (much, at least) the ways in which the knowledge of biological truth has come to structure everyday lives and how the absence of that knowledge has come to be recognised as an impediment to healthy development and self-actualisation within contemporary society (Ormond 2018).

The concept of genealogical bewilderment (GB) was first introduced in the 1950s, when two psychologists working in a child guidance clinic became concerned about child maladjustment in adoptive families. GB is said to be a condition from which individuals can suffer when they do not know their genetic parents. Sants (1964, p. 133) asserted that "a genealogically bewildered child is one who either has no knowledge of his natural parents or only uncertain knowledge of them". The confusion that results from not knowing about one's birth family is said to result in distress, lack of security, and mental health difficulties. In his efforts to apply the concept to a broader context, Sants argued that the uncertain state of being caused by GB can exist in families where one or both parents may be absent. Thus, GB in children may be found in many family contexts, including lone parent families, step families, and foster families. In our contemporary technological society, such a concept may be equally relevant in families created through donor conception and commercial surrogacy.

Crucially, GB needs to be understood within the framework of western cultures equating biological origins with identity and belonging (Homans 2006).

The notion of GB is not without its critics (Leighton 2012). In an article in Adoption and Culture, Leighton (2012), a philosopher who writes on bioethics, argues that the term has become a convenient label to understand difficult adolescents in adoptive families and to attack closed adoptions within the adoption community. She questions the assumptions on which GB is built to argue that the very existence of this phenomenon is dubious as it rests on a narrowly defined view of a "real" family and a "good" family. Her central argument is, "that rather than addressing the feelings of those who are distraught over what they do not know about their genetic relatives in a way that might resolve those feelings, the diagnosis 'genealogical bewilderment' is itself generative of the very conditions of such suffering" (Leighton 2012, p. 66). Leighton believes that the GB paradigm serves to hinder rather than help the situation of adoptees and donor conceived children, and others who do not have knowledge of their genetic family. It is important to note that this criticism is largely grounded within a philosophical framework, and is not based on any empirical evidence that is grounded in the lived experiences of adoptees struggling to locate and connect with their birth families. Indeed, as others have argued, a western societal context that equates biological origins with identity and belonging, and where histories of colonialism, slavery, and racialization dominate; this may contribute to situations where biological roots serve to provide the much-needed security and belonging (Homans 2006; Kim 2018).

It seems that Sants' theoretical construct is located in the cases in which he was directly and clinically involved in his child guidance clinic. He describes children experiencing GB as being preoccupied and obsessed with their "genealogically deprived" state who believed that "all their troubles would be solved by a solution of this one", that is, the tracing of the genetic link (Sants 1964, p. 133). Thus, he is arguing that children deem such genealogical knowledge to be core to their being, and can begin to search for clues generally from adolescence onwards; to the point where their preoccupation can reach "disturbing proportions". The work of Wellisch and Sants, in particular, focuses on GB and body-image formation. According to Wellisch (1952), our body-image is integral to our sense of self, like a shadow or a mirror image, and is formed through relationships with things and people that "become part of" our body-image. Sants (1964) maintains that a sense of belonging in the family can be impacted by differences in appearances which themselves can prevent children from identifying with their parents. Sants (1964, p. 134) argues that:

> At each stage he [*the child*] appears to seek to establish a stable concept of himself as belonging to his extended environment because feelings of not belonging rouse earliest, deep-rooted and disturbing anxieties of maternal rejection.

In the British context, a seminal study by the late social work scholar, Triseliotis (1973), found there was some evidence of personality problems and/or disturbed family relationships among those with a compulsion to search. This study was influential in directing the 1972 Houghton Committee recommendations that resulted in adopted children in the UK being given access to their birth certificate. Other studies have concluded that the need to search for one's birth family was related to the adoptee's marginal status rather than with an unhappy adoptive experience (Haimes and Timms 1983, 1985). In a paper tilted "*A fresh look at Genealogical Bewilderment*", Humphrey and Humphrey (1986) stress the importance of good and open communication in adoptive families. They argue that, "It is reasonable to assume that those who feel comfortable about both the child's background and their own role as adoptive parents are likely to communicate more effectively, neither glossing over the essential facts nor belabouring them" (Humphrey and Humphrey 1986, p. 136). They draw a link between the child's search for a firm sense of identity and the nature of family relationships in the adoptive family. We would argue that in the case of children adopted from overseas, where there are invariably added complications of ethnic and cultural differences, as well as limited information about the birth family, family relationships are likely to become strained when the child begins to seek information about

their biological heritage (Choy 2018). Below, we identify some key issues and concerns about the experiences of racialised adoptees in international adoption, as identified in the literature.

2. International Adoption

International or overseas adoption, in contemporary society, generally involves the adoption of poor and racialised children from the global south to affluent adoptive parents residing in the global north. The political economy of such movement of children has been discussed in the context of poverty, corruption, and influence (Briggs 2012). In the last 60 years or so, the formal practice of international adoption has created a new norm of the adoptive child and family, where birth parents and their context are invariably given little importance (Pertman 2011). Since the USA as a nation remains at the top of the table for receiving the highest number of international adoptees (Selman 2015), much of the research literature about the situation of children in such settings stems from there. Indeed, in a discussion about overseas wars and conflict (including Hiroshima, Vietnam, South Korea, and Latin America), Briggs (2012) argues that Americans learned to believe that only they could solve the problems that their intervention had caused, leading to an ideology of rescue with a de-emphasis on the child's cultural and racial heritage.

Scholarly literature on international adoption raises key questions about psychological and cultural aspects of the lives of adoptees in the transracial adoption paradox (Lee 2003). Researchers have explored the social and psychological experiences of growing up in a transracial family in terms of identity, culture, and belonging. The efforts of adoptive parents and the adjustments of children have been highlighted in the theoretical and empirical literature to help promote understandings (authors' own, Lichtenstein 1996; Lee 2003, 2016; Yngvesson 2010; Docan-Morgan 2017; Varzally 2017; Choy 2018; Rehberg 2015).

In her book, *Belonging in an Adopted World*, Yngvesson (2010) discusses the notion of a genealogical imaginary that shapes "real" family narratives. In other words, both the birth family and the adoptive family are constant reminders of the genealogical imaginary and real and fictive belongingness. The legal erasure of the birth family challenges the autonomy of the adoptive family and at the same time helps to constitute it as real. Yngvesson (2010, p. 15) argues that considerable "emotional, cultural, and legal work is required to transform adopted families into real ones". Yet, we know from the literature that a relationship that is only "legal", in this case the adoptive family set-up, is always at risk of being seen as only a paper relationship unless there is deep emotional and cultural investment. Scholarly literature points to psychological and cultural concerns and raises questions about the meaning of belonging.

A large quantitative study that compared intercountry adoptees with Swedish-born siblings, immigrant children, and Swedish-born residents reported higher rates of attempted suicide, hospital admissions for psychiatric disorder, criminal activity, and substance misuse among intercountry adoptees (Lindblad et al. 2003). Several other studies reported concern around ethnic and racial identity development and belonging (Tessler et al. 1999; Dalen 1999; McGinnis et al. 2009). Indeed, scholars have argued that, "if children are uprooted from their own culture, their sense of ethnic identity may become confused or conflicted" (Huh and Reid 2000, p. 75). It could be argued that adoptees who struggle with issues of identity and belonging may well be those who have witnessed low levels of emotional and cultural investment. Such struggles are likely to heighten feelings of the genealogical imaginary and lead to searches to trace birth families. The Evan B. Donaldson study noted that Korean adoptees found return visits helpful and that nearly half had looked for their birth families (McGinnis et al. 2009).

Given the vast literature on international adoption that focuses on children's struggle with their identity and ethnic heritage (Lee 2016; Docan-Morgan 2017; Varzally 2017; Choy 2018; Rehberg 2015), we believe that utilising the notion of GB to understand the experiences of adoptees in such settings could be beneficial. As Sants (1964, p. 140) has argued, the "acceptance of the known genealogical facts may well be essential for adequate mental health".

Study Aims and Methods

This paper's key aim was to explore the relevance of the much under-studied concept of GB in relation to intercountry adoption. Specifically, we sought to address two key research questions: (a) What can we learn from the experiences of racialised intercountry adoptees in their desire to connect with their genealogy and heredity? (b) What meaning is given by these adoptees to the importance of their genealogy and heredity?

In utilizing a BBC two-part documentary series *Searching for Mum* (aired in August 2018), as an empirical example to explore the experiences of racialised intercountry adoptees, we employed a case study approach to help advance thinking in the area of GB. The focus of these programmes on tracing one's birth mother (and other birth relatives) helped give shape to the development of the notion of genealogical bewilderment in this paper. The documentary series included four women (three of whom were transracially adopted) in search of their birth mother by visiting their country of birth. Two of the women were adopted from India, whilst the other two were adopted from Sri Lanka. All four women were adopted by British couples living in the UK.

One of the straplines of the documentary was that these four women, "are searching not just for their relatives but also for a lost identity" (BBC 2018). Another media outlet that wrote a commentary on the series posed the following two questions (Kopotsha 2018):

(1).   Can you be confident in your identity without knowing who your biological family is?
(2).   And how do you move on if you never find the answers? (https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/searching-for-mum 22 August 2018).

For us, the *Searching for Mum* series provided a contemporary, innovative, and empirical (visual and textual) resource from which to explore the notion of genealogical bewilderment in the context of an academic discussion. The case study approach provided a rich data source through which to discuss broader issues and concerns. Notably, over 11,000 babies born in Sri Lanka in the 1980s were adopted overseas. As a result of the dubious nature of inter-country adoption practices in Sri Lanka (Smolin 2006), the Sri Lankan government launched an independent investigation into adoption fraud and suspended intercountry adoption (McVeigh 2017). Rajitha Senaratne (Health Minister) pledged that the government would set up a DNA databank to enable adoptees to search for their biological parents and other relatives, and vice versa.

We opted to undertake a qualitative content analysis of the four case studies for the purposes of their paper. Qualitative content analysis can add value to the overall impact of a case. Media content analysis has established itself as a specialized sub-set of content analysis and is a well-established research methodology, including in the field of social sciences research. We therefore adopted this methodological approach, given that it is a systematic method and also a primary research method for studying the narrative of TV documentaries (Johnson 2016). We also favoured utilising qualitative content analysis, as it is conducive to critical and interpretative approaches. The narratives of the adoptees were transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis involving initial and focused coding in the development of key themes (Ritchie and Spencer 2002; Charmaz and Belgrave 2012). The qualitative analysis of the narratives was complemented by the visual materiality of image and affect. Whilst we delineate the themes below, it is important to recognise that there is inevitably some overlap in key areas that focus on belonging, identity, and self-image in the context of genealogy and heredity.

Our analysis of the four case studies helped identify key aspects of GB as presented in these films. It is important to recognise that whilst a documentary presents an aesthetic of objectivity and "takes real people and real problems from the real world . . . " (Trinh 1991, p. 33), it is equally important to be cognisant of the framing of the programme maker. In this case, we would like to argue that by using multiple voices and perspectives, the *Searching for Mum* series allows the viewer to be responsible for interpretation (Denzin 2004). Through visual and textual interpretation into the experiences of racialised intercountry adoptees, we sought to help contribute to the literature in the development of the notion of GB. We believe this documentary series provided us with "insider" meanings through the

four adoptee narratives. Whilst we recognise that documentary films have the capacity to influence perceptions, our focus was not on this but on the narratives of the adoptees. The reader needs to be bear in mind the limitations of using such narratives, which may be heavily selected by the programme makers to convey particular social and cultural messages.

3. Adoption Case Studies

Below, we introduce the four case studies to give a sense of the background and history of these adoptions.

3.1. A: Ria

Ria Sloan is 27 and was adopted at just three weeks old from Sri Lanka via a Dutch adoption agency. She was adopted by a Scottish couple and was raised 20 miles from Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. She describes her childhood as being happy, although she reflects that she was, "one of the only brown people in her home town". She is now a chef who lives with her girlfriend Kat near Inverness. She went on to say that she began to feel that she did not "properly belong" and felt "stuck between two identities" while growing up as the only person of colour in Inverness. This led her to begin wondering about her birth mother. Ria said, "I'm wanting to know if she's alive, if she thinks about me, if she does want to see me. I think it would ground me so much if I knew."

As a child, Ria says that she never thought about searching or even investigating her adoption:

> It's only recently I've felt like I'm a bit stuck in between these two countries, and what seems like two very different identities. It's like feeling you don't properly belong anywhere. It doesn't necessary really upset me, but it's there. I always wonder what my life would be like in Sri Lanka.

Ria had a lot of apprehension about searching for her birth mother for fear of finding out what the truth might reveal. It was only when she met her partner Kat three years ago that she felt finally able to fully explore her past: "Now, looking back, I realise there was always this huge question mark—but it wasn't until I was in a really secure relationship that I felt able to try to answer it."

Ria describes her British adoptive parents as being "nothing but supportive". Ria assured them that this was no reflection on them—she just needed to find out who she was.

3.2. B: Teri

Teri (Theresa Godly), age 43, an actor, lives in Walton-upon-Thames. She was born in Kolkata on 26 December 1974. Teri grew up as an only child in South London. The only thing Teri knew about her birth mother was that she had abandoned her and handed her over to Mother Theresa's orphanage (Missionaries of Charity orphanage) shortly after she was born. Teri says that all of her life, she has struggled to understand why her birth mother decided to do this. She still has her adoption papers, signed by Mother Theresa, and had some information about her birth parents. She describes her birth mother as Anglo-Indian and has been told that her name is Yvonne. She thinks that her mother's late husband's last name was Fernandez. Teri describes herself as being "abandoned by her people". Teri was adopted at eight-months-old by Janey and Stephen Godly, who were not able to have a biological baby of their own. She was brought up in Streatham, South-East London and describes herself as "their much-loved only child". Teri says that her adoptive mother had Indian heritage, so, "you would never have guessed I was adopted from looking at the three of us", and she grew up, "always knowing that I was special and had been chosen". However, she described feeling bitter about being abandoned:

> I had a real chip on my shoulder about my birth mother who I assumed didn't care about me at all, I had no idea about the situation in India, despite Mum trying to explain it to me.

Teri says that her views changed when she became a mother herself at 19, to her daughter Chloe and later to her son Luca, which made her realise that giving up a baby would be the most difficult decision for any mother to make:

> I started to understand the magnitude of what this woman must have gone through in her heart and mind. If she had been raped perhaps she couldn't bear to have a reminder of that in her life; whichever way I think about it, I know she suffered and that haunts me every single day of my life.

Teri's desire to search for her birth mother came about as a result of her seeing the film *Lion*, based on the true story of Saroo Brierley, who was separated from his birth family at the age of five in India as a result of travelling thousands of miles on a train. Saroo found himself in Kolkata, where he was taken into an orphanage and eventually adopted by an Australian couple. The film focused on Saroo yearning to trace his birth family despite a happy childhood in Australia. As an adult, he managed to locate his mother and other members of his birth family largely thanks to technology—namely, Google Earth. Teri says that this film provoked her to ask searching questions about her birth mother:

> Where is my birth mother? Is she even alive? Is she still living on the streets? Does she ever wonder what happened to me?

3.3. C: Leila

Leila is 28 years old and was born in Kolkata, and was adopted by a British couple and brought up in Brighton. She was given to an orphanage when she was just one day old by her birth mother. Her adoptive parents had been told that Leila was the result of a love affair between a domestic servant and a wealthy businessman, and that her mother was forced to give her up because of social stigma. Leila has a few documents provided by the orphanage bearing her mother's name and address, as well as a photo of her. Looking at the photograph, Leila shares her sentiments about her birth mother: "For 28 years I've wondered what happened to this lady with the sad eyes who never got to see her baby grow up."

Leila says that she only started thinking that her birth mother may have been forced to give her up in the last couple of years and that she may also be thinking that one day Leila would come back to India to find her. Her view that she "could've lived a completely different life with different parents" has become intensified. Leila was prompted to search for her birth mother as she describes reaching a point in her life where knowing nothing about her birth mother "feels like a massive void and it needs to be filled". Poignantly, Leila discovered during her visit to Kolkata that it is common for both photos of birth mothers produced by adoption agencies and "romanticised" narratives about the circumstances surrounding babies being given up for adoption not to be genuine, which causes her visible disquiet and results in her having even more unanswered questions about her origins than she did at the start of her journey.

3.4. D: Rebecca

Rebecca Pararajasingam was abandoned as a baby (aged 3 months), outside a hospital in Sri Lanka. She was adopted by a British couple of Sri Lankan heritage and taken to live in the UK. Rebecca describes herself growing up as a precious only child that had everything. However, she comments that the notion of adoption was taboo in her community. At the age of eight, Rebecca discovered her adoption papers buried at the bottom of her parents' closet. This clearly had a profound effect on Rebecca, as she says in the documentary, "Since I found this adoption order I realised that my entire childhood had been fake and I have completely different family out there where I came from."

Rebecca is now 38 years old and is married with four children of her own. It is evident from the documentary that she has a strained relationship with her adoptive mother, in particular. Rebecca had already made two previous visits to Sri Lanka to trace her birth mother but without any success, and

this was her third and possibly final attempt, this time captured in the BBC documentary. She describes feeling that a big part of her life is missing, "because I wasn't born Rebecca, I was born something else".

The four case studies introduced above demonstrate the strong desire of each adoptee to search for their genealogy and heredity. It is important to note that current adoption legislation, policy, and practice in the UK supports the need for adoptees to trace their biological parents should they choose to do so. This has not always been the case, as the British adoption system was historically based on closed adoption principles, which generally do not favour interaction between birth families and adoptive families. This policy shift has come about as a result of changes in societal attitudes, suggesting the social construction, and the temporality, fluidity, and contextuality of the notions of belonging and identity (Hall and Gay 2006). Interest by adoptees in tracing their birth families has grown over the years, and publicity has also provided a stimulus for raising awareness and a spike in enquiries; for example, following a series of television programmes about the existence of Barnardo's records, enquiry rates from adoptees increased from about 1500 a year to "thousands a month" (Pugh 1999).

It is important to also note that the need for some individuals, groups, and communities to have knowledge of their biological heredity and, indeed, ancestral heredity has emerged for a variety of reasons. Sadly, genocide and displacement can be a motivating factor for some groups or, more specifically, a diaspora, to trace their genealogy—for example, descendants of those who lost parents and grand-parents through the Jewish holocaust are an example of this social phenomenon. A relatively more recent social phenomenon pertains to donor-conceived children and the issue of anonymity versus their rights to have knowledge of their biological identity. The South African Law Reform Commission released a discussion paper in July 2017 asking respondents if they thought the law should be changed to allow children conceived with donor sperm or egg the right to know their biological origins. The commission purported that some of these children might develop GB as a result of not having access to this information, which is congruent to healthy psychological development.

We also have a plethora of television programmes which focus on individuals (often celebrities, such as in the British genealogy documentary series *Who Do You Think You Are?*) tracing their ancestors, focusing on the human stories and social circumstances of an individual's forebears. For example, *Who Do You Think You Are?* is compelling viewing for many, as it reportedly attracts an audience of over 6 million viewers. A blogger who describes themselves as a genealogist suggests that the success of this particular programme is based on the importance of both the subject of the programme and the viewer making an emotional connection with the ancestors that have been traced (https://www.familyhistorywritingstudio.com/who-do-you-think-you-are-what-it-teaches-us-about-story/).

Finally, thanks to technological advances we are besieged by offers to trace our ancestry, often through DNA testing, which is a booming industry although not without its detractors in terms of both accuracy and meaning. Lents (2018) argues that the increasing popularity of genealogy merely compounds the position of adopted persons feeling that they do not quite fit in due to their lack of biological connections.

4. Emerging Themes

In our analysis of the four case studies, a number of themes emerged that related to genealogy and heredity. Our analysis identified the adoptees' motivations for tracing birth roots and the linkage of this to a desire to gain ancestral knowledge. Embedded within these journeys of *Searching for Mum* were the notions of belonging, identity, and self-image. The thematic analysis provided a useful framework to understand the broader context of genealogy and heredity. We recognise that these themes are not mutually exclusive and that there is considerable overlap. These themes, nevertheless, reflect the narratives provided by the adoptees, and therefore offer important insights into their experiences.

5. Motivation for Tracing Birth Roots/Heredity

The four women featured in the BBC documentary series are by no means unusual in their desire to find their birth families. A strong theme that is apparent throughout the two-part BBC documentary series *Searching for Mum* is the need for the adoptees to know the circumstances that led to their birth mothers giving them up so soon after they were born.

Ria expresses this as, "I need to know the story of the first few weeks of my life and why my mother gave me away."

She wrote a letter to her birth mother, which she is eventually able to share with her when they are reunited. She reads from it in the documentary:

> For many years I've thought about you, stared at the photograph I owned and ached for an understanding of my first days of my life. Simply looking into your eyes and knowing you're my mother will give me such comfort.

Ria relayed to her birth mother the "pain" she experienced through not having any knowledge about her, including whether or not she was still alive. As stated in the previous section, Leila described her need to know about her early life as a void that needed to be filled. In spite of three out of the four adoptees appearing to have had positive childhood experiences as a result of being adopted, not knowing the details that led to them being handed over to orphanages/hospitals as babies by their birth mothers appears to have caused them a degree of emotional trauma. Crucially, research also suggests that the majority of adoptees looking for their birth families have not necessarily had negative experiences with their adoptive families or are experiencing other significant difficulties in their lives (Müller and Perry 2001). Howe and Feast (2003) found in their study that 53% of searchers described being adopted as a positive experience. Nevertheless, the intercountry adoptees featured in *Searching for Mum* may well be exhibiting signs of "adoption stress" and GB (Sants 1964) due to their lack of knowledge about their birth families and deep-seated anxiety about perceived rejection as infants.

Ria says that one of the reasons she wanted to search for her birth mother is because she had so many rejection issues throughout her life:

> I thought I wasn't wanted at all. There's a big part of me that wants to know if I was born into this world with love ultimately, and that I was wanted.

Similarly, Teri believed for a long time that she had been "abandoned by her people", which, as stated earlier, caused her to have a chip on her shoulder for a long time. It was a great comfort to her to learn that her birth mother came back to the orphanage to visit her:

> As a mother, having felt that love, I couldn't imagine being parted from my children. Now I know she didn't abandon me.

Domestic adoptions in the UK usually involve life-story work being undertaken to provide children with some knowledge and understanding about the reasons for their adoption. Whilst there is not a great deal of literature and research about life-story work, Baynes (2008, p. 43) describes it as a social work intervention that was, "primarily developed to meet the needs of children separated from their birth families through adoption or long-term foster care . . . It comprises the creation of a written story that explains the reasons for the child's moves and gives information about birth family members; and the communication of this story to the child in a meaningful way." Ideally, life story works should provide adopted children with what Baynes terms as, "a more coherent narrative of their own lives". Fitzhardinge (2008, p. 60) maintains that it is the "way we make sense of stories" that is the "very essence of identity". Nevertheless, she also points out that coherence does not necessarily equate to neatly tied-up ends or answers to questions, but can help individuals to gain a tolerance of the unknown. In practice, the quality of life story work can be both variable and subjective, and therefore not always a satisfactory resource from a child's perspective; they may go on to trace their birth family and feel aggrieved by the version of events presented to them by the local authority responsible for

their adoption. Nevertheless, it is regarded as an important protective factor in helping children to make successful transitions in both adoption and long-term fostering, particularly with regard to the development of their sense of self (Cook-Cottone and Beck 2007).

The women featured in this documentary series were either bereft of any documentary evidence about their heredity, or conversely, what they were provided with was potentially bogus, adding to their distress and GB. As a result of their journeys, they experienced contrasting fortune, with Ria and Teri re-connecting with family members and being able to piece some of their genealogy together, whilst Leila and Rebecca were unsuccessful in tracing their birth families. In the case of the latter two, this appears to have caused them even more emotional upheaval and subsequent GB, whilst the other two adoptees appear to no longer be suffering from the state of confusion and uncertainty described by Sants (1964), but rather have been alleviated from this condition as a result of knowledge about their heredity and contact with members of their birth families.

6. Belonging

Another key theme that emerges from the case study analysis was the adoptees' need for a sense of belonging. The notion of belonging is invariably discussed in relation to social locations and identity within sociological literature. Ideas of being and becoming, belonging and longing, performativity, and intersectionality are at the core of understanding the social meaning of belonging (Bell 1999; Yuval-Davis 2006). Belonging and longing in the form of relationships, inter-generationality, and location allows for an affective dimension, and identity in relation to a reference group (Probyn 1996). Within international adoption literature, researchers have explored the meaning of belongingness in the context of space and place, and the notion of a "real" family (Yngvesson 2010).

Ria articulates this below in terms of a perceived sense of marginality, space, and belonging:

> It's only recently that I feel stuck between these two countries and what seems like two very different identities. It's kind of feeling like you don't properly belong anywhere in some way. I always wonder what my life would have been like in Sri Lanka?

Rebecca and Leila express a belief that their respective birth mothers also had a yearning to find them. This belief, about the purported act of reverse searching by the birth mothers, suggests a certain pull and a desire to secure belongingness in genealogy and heredity. Rebecca affirms that, "and in the same manner I have been searching, I truly believe that my family has been looking for me."

Conversely, in the previous section, Teri described herself as being abandoned by "her people", which again emphasises the import of the need to belong to one's ancestral past.

Research also suggests that adoptees tracing their biological families are driven by "a fundamental striving for a sense of belonging" (Krueger and Hanna 1997). This is in spite of adoptees having high levels of both "a sense of belonging" and "feeling loved" as a result of being adopted. This was evidenced in a study conducted by Feast and Philpot (2003), who reported that whilst conveying a sense of comfort and belonging within their adopted family, adoptees reported feeling "different". Darongkamas and Lorenc (2008) pondered whether this sense of feeling different acts as an additional catalyst for adoptees to search for their birth families. Adoptive experiences suggest that the desire for a coherent origin story is palpable in the ways in which a myriad of sources help personal heritage practices (Ormond 2018), and that such practices need not be equated with maladjustment, but viewed as central to all people in developing a sense of belonging and identity (Sorosky et al. 1974).

The documentary series shows the experience of 27-year-old Ria being reunited with members of her birth family in Sri Lanka. As she was the only one of the four adoptees to trace her genealogy, the film depicts, through Ria's narrative, family pictures, and the presence of her relatives, the palpability of her sense of connection, longing, and belonging:

> At the same time, I felt very at home there. Pictures of my cousins when they were really young are almost identical to family snaps of me and that was an amazing feeling.

Interestingly, 38-year-old Rebecca met a family who, unfortunately, turned out through DNA testing not to be members of her birth family, but she reported a felt connection with them, stating: "I can see myself in this family, I have never felt like that before."

This suggests that her need for a sense of belonging is so strong that a deep belief in the importance of genealogy and heredity convinced her of a physical likeness and familial connection. Moreover, we witness feelings of attachment to a geographical location and a society in which her birth family resides. Notably, Rebecca was raised by an adoptive family of Sri Lankan heritage in the UK and is also married to a Sri Lankan, and so presumably would have lots of contact with the Sri Lankan community in the UK, yet she still demonstrates feelings of dislocation from both a physical place (Sri Lanka, her country of birth) and human beings to whom she is biologically related. Kohler et al. (2002, p. 95) argued that there is often a need for an "internal sense of human connectedness . . . to construct a more coherent sense of self."

All four adoptees said that they wondered how different their lives would have been had they been raised by their birth families in their countries of origin. All appear to be philosophical and ultimately grateful to their birth families for providing them with the opportunity to live in the West. In the words of Ria:

> I did feel very privileged when I looked at the circumstances in which they [birth family/relatives] lived. At the same time, I felt very at home there. Although Sri Lanka and Scotland are thousands of miles apart, I no longer feel stuck and in between. I am now very firmly rooted in both places.

This is an interesting statement as it suggests a congruity, namely that by locating her birth family in Sri Lanka, not only was Ria able to establish her sense of belonging with her birth family in her country of origin, but also in Scotland, the country where she was adopted. Moreover, rather than one usurping the other they co-exist for Ria, as she appears to value her sense of belonging to both contexts equally.

7. Identity

The theme of identity was prevalent in the four case studies. A key question posed by the programme makers was whether it is possible for the adoptees to be confident in their identity without knowing who their biological families are. Leila is described in the programme as searching, "for the missing part of her identity". As a result of being reunited with her birth family, Ria's reflections are: "I totally underestimated how important my identity was until I found it."

Rebecca, on the other hand, has a very different perspective about issues to do with her identity, and purports:

> Maybe if I was happy as a child, I wouldn't be searching so hard. My identity was created for me by my adoptive mother. She made me who she wanted me to be. Finding my birth mother goes back to my primal root of who I actually am. I will now be able to form myself for what it truly is not what people want it to be.

Rebecca is clear that she has experienced conflict with the formation of her identity from the age of eight when she stumbled upon the fact that she was adopted. Her desire for authenticity and her real self is evident in her accounts.

According to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, ego identity comprises a sense of sameness and continuity in time and space, but this is not the experience of adoptees who have experienced "a discontinuity between their genealogical heritage and their upbringing" (Passmore 2004). Hence, it can be argued that the four adoptees featured in this documentary series searched for their biological families in order to try to address this early fracture in their ego identity.

Rebecca appears to be rejecting the identity bestowed upon her by her adoptive family, looking to replace it with, in her words, her "true" identity, which it would seem can only be derived from

her biological family. As Krueger and Hanna (1997, p. 197) argued, "it is through authenticity that one genuinely experiences being-in-the-world . . . it may be that the need for authenticity leads to the search." Needless to say, such authenticity is considered to be located within genealogy and heredity. Rebecca's expression of her emotions about the pain she feels about not knowing and/or having knowledge of her birth family and the impact this has had on her identity is evident in her narrative.

The documentary contained footage of a particularly harrowing experience for Rebecca, when she discovered that there was no record of her birth, as this may well have been removed to protect her biological mother. Rebecca is visibly shaken and upset by this discovery and concludes that on the basis of there being no documentary evidence of her birth that she is a non-person and that she does not exist:

> Seeing an actual book with my court case number on it but seeing an actual dash for every part of me that would have been my identity, it's like someone has completely erased my existence from this planet. I'm an invisible entity. I don't exist.

In a discussion about a young woman, called Joanna Rose, conceived by her parents by the use of an anonymous sperm, who feels that her true genetic identity is inaccessible to her, Leighton (2012) contends that whilst she recognises that individuals may be distressed by not knowing about their biological heritage, they cannot be said to be harmed by this experience. In this paper, we are not evaluating distress and/or harm, but simply reporting the meaning and importance of genealogy and heredity as interpreted from our four case studies.

Our analysis showed that the other three adoptees do not appear to share Rebecca's non-acceptance of the identities that they have forged as a result of being adopted and brought up in the UK. Rather, their needs seem to be associated with a completion of their identities through acquiring knowledge of their biological families and reasons for their abandonment at birth or as very young babies. This analysis was borne out in the Feast and Philpot (2003) UK study, which found that 77% of adoptee searchers (who contacted the Children's Society) wanted to know more about themselves, in order to gain a more complete sense of identity.

Ria's success in finding members of her birth family appears to have given her a sense of peace and confidence in her identity as both Scottish and Sri Lankan; since returning to the UK she has stated that she has plans to go back to Sri Lanka as soon as she can: "I'm very aware that we live very different lives, but that doesn't matter. I have a strong yearning to go back."

Whilst Teri's mother had passed away, she discovered after her trip to Sri Lanka that two of her sisters were still alive, which enabled her to gather a lot more information about events surrounding her birth and also after her mother had given her up for adoption. She was very interested in finding out what kind of person her mother was and, in turn, this appeared to help her to relate to her birth mother through gaining a better understanding of her life experience. Like Ria, this appears to have quelled a number of Teri's fears about rejection, as well as providing her with a much greater sense of her mother's identity and the kind of life she and her siblings had led in India.

Leila's experience of attempting to trace her birth mother, on the other hand, was quite a troubled one. The sense of identity that she had derived from the account given to her by her adoptive parents about being a child born out of a loving relationship and given to an orphanage at birth due to social taboo was brought into serious question by her visit to Kolkata. Rosenberg and Horner (1991, p. 77) contend that it is important for adoptees "to achieve a genuine integration of biological roots and the developmental experience . . . through active demystification of the original family", and that "the birth-parent romance fantasy can be laid to rest only if the integrity is achieved". Yet, this is not an easy proposition for an adoptee such as Leila, who describes the narrative given to her adoptive parents as romantic and something out of a fairy tale. As a result of her search, she is confronted with a more plausible but unseemly reality; she discovers that the adoption industry in Kolkata in recent years has been characterised by systematic cover-ups and the falsification of thousands of adoption papers, as well as having links with child trafficking. The details of mothers were often false, addresses were

incorrect, and adoptees were provided with misleading accounts by the orphanages about the reasons why babies were given up for adoption (Smolin 2006). One can only imagine how devastating this experience was for Leila, who has even less surety about her identity than she had prior to her trip to India, albeit the information in her possession was not necessarily factual. In this respect, Leila may find herself in the position of having an even greater number of issues to work through.

Leila and Rebecca's experiences demonstrate poignantly the detrimental impact caused by either the complete absence of information or misleading information pertaining to the identity of adoptees. The right to an identity is, after all, a human right: "Everyone shall have the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law" (Article 6, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). Adoptee narratives in these four cases bring into sharp focus the devastation that can be caused to those lacking information about their genealogy and heredity and how this impacts their identity formation.

8. Physical Symmetry (Body Image/Mirror Image)

The need for a sense of self/mirror image in relation to finding members of their birth family was a common theme among the adoptees. As outlined above, scholarly work indicates that our body-image is integral to our sense of self, like a shadow or a mirror image, and is formed through relationships with people, places, and objects that "become part of" our body-image (Wellisch 1952). Indeed, Sants (1964) argued that a sense of belonging in the family can be impacted by differences in appearances, which themselves can prevent children from identifying with their parents. In the context of intercountry transracial adoptions, where there may be racial and cultural differences, the situation can become even more pronounced.

Whilst travelling in Sri Lanka, Rebecca asserts: "I am always looking to see if anyone looks familiar. Do they look like me? That could be me as well. That could be my way of life."

Ria describes how she felt when she comes face to face with members of her birth family for the first time in Sri Lanka: "It's really exciting. I always wanted to look at another human and say I can see that human in me."

One of the first members of her extended family who Ria met was her uncle, to whom she bears a striking resemblance.

The documentary series shows the transracial adoptees to have had very positive experiences of being raised by their adoptive families. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that they were not aware of being different to their families and the local communities in which they spent their childhoods. Ria, who lives in the least diverse part of the UK compared to the other three, noted that, "I stuck out basically like a sore thumb".

Searching for physical similarity in others is a legitimate need for some adoptees in the development of a positive sense of self, including self-esteem and even more so, arguably, in the case of transracial adoption with regards to intersectionality (Barn 2018). Kim (2018), a South Korean transracial adoptee and scholar in the USA, notes that for transracial adoptees, finding a safe, permanent family is not the end of the adoption journey. She argues that in addition to experiencing the loss of a birth family and culture, and in some cases, country, transracial adoptees may be negatively impacted by other historical and cultural factors, including colonization, slavery, war, forced immigration, and discriminatory laws and policies. She further asserts that it is important to recognise that a good home, nice family, and a stable life does not eradicate a transracial adoptee's need for racial, ethnic, and cultural support. Yet, this does not necessarily accord with the UK Government's view. In recent times, it has been highly critical of local authorities' matching processes in adoption practice in England, claiming that many Black and minority ethnic children are not being adopted or, at least, are remaining in the system too long as a result of local authorities being preoccupied with finding the right ethnic match, resulting in revised statutory guidance being issued, making it clear that a child's ethnicity should not be a barrier to adoption (see Barn and Kirton 2012). Michael Gove (whilst serving as Secretary of State for Education) is quoted in the Guardian by Oona King, former Member of Parliament, as being "determined to ensure that 'race doesn't matter' when it comes to finding families for children in care",

yet she concludes, "we mustn't ignore ethnicity if we don't have to" and that as an adoptive mother of three mixed-race children she realises that "some of the complexities of race can't be swept under the carpet" (King 2012).

It would appear that genetic resemblance and symmetry may be especially important for those seeking to connect with their birth families. In societies that continue to be race conscious, where biological origins are equated with a sense of self, genetic likeness is given considerable weight. Narratives of transracial adoptees from our case studies reveal that although adoptees may have had comfortable childhoods, their desire to connect with their past and search for similarity remains powerful. Gaps in their knowledge and understanding of their familial, social, and cultural history continue to influence their everyday lives.

9. Importance of Ancestral Knowledge

Some understanding and knowledge of their ancestry was deemed important by the adoptees to help frame a sense of belonging, identity, and connection. One of the adoptees, Rebecca, held a press conference in Sri Lanka in an attempt to publicise her search for her birth mother. She declared:

> So, I have returned to search for my mother, for my roots and essentially for myself. Not a moment has gone by since the age of 8 that I have not thought of my birth mother and my extended family who live here in Sri Lanka.

Ria, who is also searching for her birth mother in Sri Lanka, recognises that it is not just about her biological tie with her mother but also, "It's about a whole group of people". As a result of her trip to Sri Lanka, she discovered that not only did she have a birth mother, but also a grandfather, aunts, uncles, and cousins:

> It was quite overwhelming. I had no idea I was going to be presented with so many family members—and to hear that they already knew about me was really special. It was a turning point mentally in terms of everything I thought I knew.

Passmore (2004) argues that being reunited with one's biological family can help adoptees to acquire a more complete sense of identity. This includes discovering more about one's personal characteristics and how they might relate to members from a previous generation. This can help adoptees to gain more extensive knowledge about generational trends, such as the kind of professions ancestors belonged to, what talents they possessed, and whether these have continued to be prevalent in subsequent generations. Medical history is often also cited as an important feature of ancestral knowledge amongst adoptees, as this can be critical in terms of having a history of health conditions within birth families. When this knowledge is not available it can have a profound impact on adoptees, "who experienced high uncertainty and loss throughout their lives" (Powell and Afifi 2005, p. 140). The discovery of information about biological family members can sometimes be distressing and difficult to digest, such as family members living in dire circumstances. This is often portrayed in programmes about individuals tracing their ancestors. It was certainly a feature in the *Searching for Mum* series and, in particular, the case of Teri. As a result of extreme poverty, she discovered some harrowing facts about the hardship that her mother and other biological family members endured. Nevertheless, Hertz (1998, p. 103) maintains that it is important for adoptees to discover their "biological root" as a means of establishing "a more authentic sense of self" and that, conversely, "sealed records leave adoptees in a state of genealogical bewilderment", therefore, it is preferable that they have knowledge of their ancestry, including both their "inherent talents or biological weakness". Therefore, identifying with or belonging to a history or a timeline helps with identity formation and consolidation.

10. Discussion and Conclusions

Having explored the understandings and experiences of racialised adoptees in intercountry adoption above, we seek here to offer an analysis of the dimensions of genealogical bewilderment

that can help us to understand the experiences of adoptees, particularly international and transracial adoptees. Through this analysis, we aim to discuss the relevance of the notion of GB in the context of adoptee experiences.

We began this paper by identifying Sants (1964) contribution to genealogical bewilderment in relation to adoption. In particular, we stressed Sants' key arguments that a child who has limited or no knowledge about their birth family is likely to experience confusion and bewilderment about their genealogical roots. Moreover, it is possible that they may lack security, and show signs of distress and mental health difficulties. Sants argued that the importance of genealogical rootedness was core to their very being. Notions such as belonging, identity, body-image, and mirror-image in the context of familial and social relationships were also identified as central to the concept of GB.

In this paper, through an analysis of adult adoptees' search for genealogy, we were able to shed some light on their views and experiences. We used the framework of genealogical bewilderment to discuss these findings.

Our findings contribute a focus on racialised intercountry adoptees to help develop further understanding of GB. By utilising narratives from a documentary series, we explored five key areas of significance in relation to GB:

(a)   Motivation to search for birth family;
(b)   Belonging;
(c)   Identity;
(d)   Physical symmetry (body image/mirror image);
(e)   Ancestral knowledge.

Much of the adoption literature tells us that since adoption has shifted towards a more open model, adoptees who have little or no knowledge of their birth family may at some stage in their adult life be motivated to search for their birth family (Howe and Feast 2001; Müller and Perry 2001). Moreover, such a search will be governed by and manifested in a range of states and emotions, including the need for belonging, identity, physical symmetry (body image/mirror image), and ancestral knowledge. Scholars in the study of domestic and international adoption, particularly transracial adoption, have identified these areas as crucial (Barn and Kirton 2012; Barn 2013, 2018; Feast and Philpot 2003; Godon et al. 2014; Lee 2003, 2016; Yngvesson 2010; Docan-Morgan 2017; Varzally 2017; Choy 2018; Rehberg 2015). We would like to argue that searching for birth roots does not necessarily suggest serious concerns around confusion, distress, and mental health difficulties. Similarly, it also does not indicate that adoptees' childhood experiences have been traumatic to their well-being. Nevertheless, our adoptee narrative analysis showed that even supposedly well-adjusted adoptees may desire to search for their genealogy and heredity (Kim 2018). Moreover, they may report distress, insecurity, and mental anguish at the disconnectedness with their past/birth history.

Factors such as their "racial conspicuous-ity" may be the added driving force for motivation to search, as well the inhibitor to their sense of belonging and identity (Godon et al. 2014; Choy 2018). Indeed, it is possible that the racial asymmetry prevents a holistic embeddedness, leading to a longing to belong and a yearning for rootedness that can help provide ancestral knowledge and genetic familiarity. For example, the need for a "completion of identity" through acquiring knowledge of their biological families and reasons for their abandonment at birth was clearly identified by the adoptees in the *Searching for Mum* series. Recognition for such wholeness and connection is echoed in the songs of the Vietnamese adoptee, Jared Rehberg. In his album *Chasing Dragonflies*, Rehberg (2015) writes, "I want to run with ghosts, across empty fields—I'll fish on the delta with past by my side". The songs also speak of loss, bereavement, longing, belonging, and marginality. Such marginality is amplified in everyday life in western societies where these racialised adoptees reside. The processes of otherisation and marginalisation serve as a constant reminder of being an outsider. It is not surprising therefore, that even though adoptees may have had a well-adjusted, comfortable and happy upbringing, they may still wish to search for a sense of "completion of identity".

What is particularly striking about intercountry adoption is that adoptees are invariably children from poor and racialised groups from the Global South, and the adoptive parents are almost always white, affluent, and from the Global North (Briggs 2012; Raleigh and Rosales 2018). The marketisation of these children also suggests that unethical practices exist to satisfy the demand and supply economics, where adopters are given the status of client/customer. Indeed, our analysis, above, of the *Searching for Mum* series shows the heartbreak and disappointment of the adoptees when they realise that their adoption papers may have been falsified, amounting to what Smolin (2006) has called the laundering of children. The added burden of a social, cultural, political, and economic history and its ongoing ramifications may play out in the everyday lives of racialised intercountry adoptees' sense of identity and belonging (Kim 2018). This is an important intersectional insight into the experiences of intercountry adoptees and requires social work attention.

In his book *The Politics of Adoption*, O'Halloran (2006, p. 4) argues that:

> Adoption addresses the act of the adopter ... It's an act that brings that child into the adopter's family with all the implications for sharing in the family name, home, assets and kinship relationships which are thereby entailed. As a corollary, that act also implies a severance by the adopter of those same links between the child and his or her family of origin. But it remains an artificial and fundamentally a legal relationship. It fails to wholly displace all incidents of the child's pre-adoption legal relationships and fails to also fully subsume him or her into the adopter's family.

Our analysis of the *Searching for Mum* series illustrates O'Halloran's thinking with regard to the adoption context and its sense of relationality and belonging. Whilst the adoptees can be said to have had, on the whole, positive experiences of being adopted, they express a deep longing to know about their genealogical roots, history, and heritage. As adults, they want to re-connect with members of their birth families. In the best-case scenarios, such as Ria's and Teri's, this enabled them to have a sense of valuing the identities that were bestowed upon them from both their birth families and their adoptive families. This provided them with a greater sense of stability and sense of self. Prior to that, Ria had articulated that she did not have a sense of belonging.

In the realm of social work policy and practice, there are clearly complex and sensitive issues that have to be grappled when children are adopted from care. However, this does not negate the necessity for practitioners to contemplate the needs an adoptee will have in terms of their identity formation throughout the life course. It is evident that the central focus should go beyond integrating adoptees successfully into their new families and providing them and their adoptive parents with post adoption support. This may take the form of therapeutic services to address the trauma they are likely to have experienced as a result of abuse and neglect. Equally, life story work is a very important facet of providing children with a narrative about why they came to be adopted, but does not necessarily address in great detail issues about their genealogy. To help improve current adoption practices, we would suggest, in the first instance, that space is created for a discourse to take place at policy level and that its starting point must be the adoptee. The importance of identifying and addressing the ongoing needs of an adopted child should be at the core of good adoption practice.

As to the relevance of the notion of genealogical bewilderment in understanding international adoption, we would argue that our paper offers important contemporary insights to understand the key facets of this phenomenon. These include a focus on the sociological notions of belonging and identity in the context of ancestral knowledge, and biological symmetry. The need to trace one's birth family constitutes a crucial part of this journey. We would argue that the key facets of GB may not necessarily be viewed as distress, insecurity, and mental health difficulties, although for some adoptees this may well be the case. It is pertinent to realise that a deep sense of belonging and identity and a connection with their biological past remains a central concern for racialised intercountry adoptees.

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