
Adoption, resilience and the importance of stories

The making of a film about teenage adoptees

Adolescence is a critical time for adoptees because it highlights themes of identity, belonging and attachment. The Post Adoption Resource Centre in Sydney, Australia, ran a group for teenage adoptees in which they created a film about being adopted. The group process assisted participants to explore and enrich their narratives of adoption in the company of their peers. To tell a coherent story of one's life is developmentally important and closely tied with identity formation, attachment and resilience. **Helen Fitzhardinge** presents key themes that arose from the film project and explains why narratives are important in adoption.

Helen Fitzhardinge is a psychologist and family therapist who, at the time of writing, worked at the Post Adoption Resource Centre, a service of the Benevolent Society in Sydney, Australia. She now works in private practice in Sydney.

Key words: adoption, adolescence, narrative, attachment, resilience

Introduction

It's hard to find your identity when you don't even know where you've come from really. And teenagers struggle enough with finding their identity, let alone being adopted. (Hannah, 15)

Adolescence brings into focus some of the most troublesome implications of adoption. At no other time in life are questions of identity and belonging so pressing, dilemmas at the very core of adoption. Why did my birth mother give me up? Do my birth parents think of me? How could life have turned out differently for me? Do I really belong in this adoptive family? Equipped with a greater level of understanding and under the influence of a wider range of perspectives, teenagers outgrow some of the simpler explanations of adoption given to them in childhood. They need to find a way of understanding their circumstances that better fits their developmental stage.

Forming a sense of identity for adoptees is complicated by gaps and contradictions in autobiographical knowledge. It is difficult to establish a sense of self when one lacks information about the beginnings of life and the foundations of

family relationships. The stories that adopted people tell of their lives reveal how they see themselves and how they connect themselves to the people around them. These stories make us who we are; they are the very essence of identity. As Bruner puts it, 'in the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives' (Bruner, 1987, p 15).

Stories are important. Yet it is not the events themselves that matter so much, but rather the way we make sense of them. Attachment theory, the resilience literature and neuroscience all concur on this central argument around the importance of narrative, although they come to this conclusion in different ways. This article explores why stories matter in adoption and what helps adoptees make sense of their lives. It draws on themes arising from a creative project in which adopted teenagers told stories about their lives.

The film project

In 2006, the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) in Sydney, Australia, invited high school-aged adoptees to join us in making a film about adoption. The film was to be the work of and based upon the ideas of the young people themselves, with PARC providing resources and support in a background role. PARC therapists facilitated discussion around adoption themes, while an experienced film-maker trained participants in aspects of film-making, including camera work, scriptwriting, lighting, editing and music.

Eight adopted teenagers (as it happened, all girls) met together for a series of workshops over a period of six months. The participants ranged in age from 13 to 19, with the majority being about 15. Two were locally adopted at birth, while the other six were trans-

racial adoptees, all placed from Asian countries into white Australian families – roughly proportionate to the statistical breakdown of local to intercountry adoptions in Australia currently for that age group (Zabar and Angus, 1995). The process was completed with a formal launch in a local cinema for families of participants and the adoption community.

The end product of the film was always a secondary goal, our main focus being on the process of creating it. That said, we were delighted with the final film. *The Girl in the Mirror* is a dramatised documentary telling the girls' own stories of adoption. It is moving, insightful and keeps an adolescent tone. It seemed that we did achieve our aim of letting the teenagers speak in their own voices about being adopted. More importantly, we were able to provide them with an experience that strengthened their grasp of what it means to be adopted.

Adolescence and adoption

If adolescence can be complex, adoption adds another layer (Triseliotis, 2000). For those who have been adopted, adolescence puts a spotlight on essential questions of identity and attachment. Two primary 'tasks' of adolescence (Moretti and Holland, 2003) are pertinent for adoptees: developing new abilities to reason and shifts in attachment relationships.

Much of the angst and awkwardness of adolescence comes not from physical growth spurts, but rather from the development of new cognitive abilities. For the first time, young people become better able to hold multiple perspectives concurrently, together with multiple ways of seeing themselves and others. Eventually they will come to tolerate contradictory perspectives on the same issue. Simplified explanations that may have been sufficient for years will no longer do and teenagers will seek out a range of perspectives rather than rely on parental views. A much richer understanding of people and relationships becomes possible, sometimes requiring

a reconsideration of ideas that parents may have thought to be already resolved.

Adolescence is characterised by concurrent and contradictory drives, to separate from family but still feel a sense of belonging. Great efforts can go into marking out differences from parents or to choosing aspects of family with which they would like to align. Adolescence can bring to a crisis point lingering doubts about attachment and belonging within the adoptive family. The loss of the biological mother in early life, described provocatively as a 'primal wound' (Verrier, 1991), puts adoptees at risk for attachment insecurity (Hughes, 1997; Gray, 2002; Levy and Orlans, 2003). This insecurity is marked at times by behaviour that pushes adoptive parents away or by an overcompliance designed to keep them near. Attachment insecurity makes the normal adolescent process of individuation far more difficult.

Intrinsically linked with parental attachment is the sense of connection, real or imagined, with birth parents. Fantasies about birth parents and wondering about the possibilities of a reunion are often preoccupying in adolescence (Harper, 1996). This again poses an attachment dilemma, and one of loyalty: if the adoptee feels love and belonging towards the adoptive family, does this mean that they are forgetting their birth family? If they feel curiosity or grief about the birth family, can they still remain connected to the adoptive family? These can be difficult dilemmas to make known within the adoptive family. Adoptees may keep their fantasies and preoccupations secret, or let them remain unconscious for fear of betraying their adoptive parents. This adds another challenge to the normal transition for families as an adolescent repositions herself in her attachment relationships.

What do these changes mean for the teenage adoptee? Developmentally, their stories of adoption require retelling, with their expanded capacity for understanding and in the light of transitions in

attachment relationships. They need to build a richer narrative that can accommodate complex and contradictory truths: they belong in the adoptive family and yet never entirely fit; they are Asian and yet will never feel fully Asian; they can empathise with the dilemma of the birth mother in choosing adoption while acknowledging their own losses too. They may also need to incorporate some troubling information, for example if their birth mother's story included mental illness, rape or abandonment. This sophisticated task is required at a time when the adopted person may be at their most alone – disconnected both from adopted peers and from adoptive parents. Therefore, it seemed important to offer the film project in a group format, in order to support participants as they rethink and retell their stories of adoption.

Attachment and narrative

The stories that adopted people create about their lives are of particular importance because they centre around attachment and relationship. The beginnings of life and the formation of key family relationships for the adoptee are essentially stories about love and lovability. Not all adopted people struggle to establish secure attachments, but certainly a sizeable proportion are affected by the early losses and wounds in their relationships (Howe, 1998; Feeney, Passmore and Peterson, 2004, 2007). It is important, then, to consider what attachment theory can explain about teenage adoptees, and in particular how attachment is linked to storytelling.

In his writing on attachment, Bowlby (1988) proposed the concept of the 'internal working model' as an explanation of how early relationship experiences can influence relationship patterns later in life. Essentially, people build a blueprint of relationships in early life that includes expectations about the self and other in relationship. A child forms expectations about how available and effective people will be in response to them, based on how responsive

caregivers have been. Additionally, the child learns to see her or himself as lovable or unlovable, based on his or her experiences of being cared for (Howe *et al*, 1999). These relationship templates begin at the preverbal stage and are revealed in the stories adoptees go on to tell about their relationships and self-concept.

How is it that some people manage to challenge their internal working models and shake off the legacy of past disappointments, while the majority are left on the same path? One of the more hopeful aspects of the attachment literature comes from an examination of how attachment styles are passed on from one generation to the next. Main studied the ways that new mothers made sense of their own attachment experiences as children (Main, Kaplan and Cassidy, 1985; Karen, 1994). In the Adult Attachment Interview, the key predictive indicator of outcome was not the nature of childhood attachment, but the manner in which the story was constructed or explained. Specifically, she looked at *coherence*, finding four distinct categories or styles of storytelling. New parents who told *coherent* (plausible, complete and objective) stories of their childhood relationships tended to have secure attachments with their own children. Those with avoidantly attached children tended to tell *dismissive* narratives about childhood, scant in detail or generalising experiences. Parents of ambivalently attached children would give preoccupied narratives, marked by raw emotion and still consuming in adulthood. Children with disorganised attachments tended to have parents with *unresolved* issues of loss or abuse demonstrated by unrealistic or illogical beliefs (Fonagy, 2001; Holmes, 2001).

What does this mean for adoptees who struggle with their attachment relationships? It presents a far more hopeful view: *it is not what happens to you that matters, it is the way you make sense of it that counts in the end*. If people are able to consider their experiences from a range of perspectives, with

objectivity and compassion, then there is great potential to incorporate them positively and be liberated from a cycle of repetition. If adoptees can make sense of their birth parents' decision to place them for adoption, in a manner that is compassionate both towards the birth parents and to the abandoned self, then they can be freed from preoccupation with love and lovability:

It's not that I'll just forget about her completely, but I can do things without having that in the back of my mind. It makes me feel like I could stop worrying about her, and I could start worrying about myself a bit more. (Natalie, 15)

What is it that enables some adoptees to tell balanced and coherent stories of their origins, challenging a negative internal working model of relationship, while others remain stuck in less productive narratives? To consider this question, it is helpful to consider the resilience literature.

Resilience and narrative

For some children, being adopted can have a significant and continuing influence developmentally, affecting relationships, concept of self and sometimes mental health, throughout the lifespan (Lifton, 1994; Logan, Morrall and Chambers, 1998; Feeney, Passmore and Peterson, 2007; Passmore *et al*, 2005). For others, the impact of adoption appears more peripheral. Arguably, all adoptees have an adverse start to life, with at the very least a challenge to their key attachment relationships and possibly additional losses as well. What makes people experience adoption differently? How do some people take a position of resilience while others struggle?

Resilience literature speaks of 'protective factors' that seem to shield against or help repair damage imposed by loss or trauma in early life (Rutter, 1993). Among these are stable and supportive relationships with adults and financial security. For the most part, adoptive families provide these for their

children relatively well, the parental couple having had to persuade authorities of their ability to provide a stable home for a child. Yet there are less measurable and more silent factors that influence resilience. It is not merely the events that happen in a person's life that predict their outcome. There is something powerful in how people come to see their stories and make sense of their experiences. This is the heart of resilience – the ability of a person to understand their story in such a way that it creates opportunity rather than limits it.

What kind of story-telling contributes to resilience? What kind of focus or construction of a tough story will enable someone to accept it and accommodate it in a functional and productive way? In a fascinating longitudinal study of outcomes for young people who as teenagers spent time in a residential psychiatric facility, Hauser, Allen and Golden (2006) explore just this question. Identifying a small cohort who have fared well in their life and relationships at follow-up approximately ten years later, they track this group back to study interview material from the time of hospitalisation. They look for early indicators in how teenagers made sense of their circumstances that may have contributed to successful outcomes, in contrast to peers with poorer outcomes. The resilient group told narratives that included three aspects: (1) the ability to reflect on self and other; (2) a sense of agency and influence both on current and future circumstances; and (3) a recognition of the importance of relationships. Where young people were able to think in these ways, they moved past the challenges and led more productive lives.

In light of these ideas, we saw the potential in working with adoptees in the film project to develop tools for resilience. We wanted to provide the opportunity for adopted teenagers to tell their own stories, in the company of their peers. However, more than this, we wanted to give them the chance to build richer and more complex narratives of their own experiences. Both attachment

theory and the resilience literature point to the importance of stories and storytelling for successful development. A third avenue of research confirms this view from a more scientific standpoint: the findings from brain research.

Brain development and narrative

Emerging from recent work by neurobiologists are some intriguing overlaps between fields such as psychoanalysis, attachment theory and brain research. Two linked concepts from this literature shed light on why stories and storytelling are important: the capacity for reflective function and neural integration.

Developing a coherent narrative of life events requires sophisticated cognitive and emotional skills. At the core of these is the ability to reflect objectively on one's own thoughts and emotions, as well as interpreting the thoughts and emotions of other people (Hauser, Allen and Golden, 2006). Fonagy (2001) proposed the term 'reflective function' to describe the ability to know one's own mind and the mind of others; Siegel (2001) refers to the same concept as 'mindsight'. Reflective function allows a person to reflect on their thoughts, detect contradictions, consider alternative views and recognise the influence of others on one's own view (Dallos, 2006). At one level, this capacity is similar to the newly developing cognitive capacity of adolescence described above. However, it is more complex because it also involves emotional work and the working through of deep themes of self and self-in-relation.

Siegel (2003) takes this concept a step further to examine what reflective function means in neurobiological terms. He proposes that the development of coherent narrative, as described by Main in the Adult Attachment Interview, is indicative of *neural integration*. Essentially, neural integration refers to the free flow of information between left and right hemispheres. A coherent narrative depends both on the left hemisphere capacity for logic and the explanation of cause-effect relationships, and the right hemisphere

functions of storing autobiographical knowledge and interpreting the mind of self and others. Integration allows for:

the individual to have an internal sense of connection to the past, to live fully and be mindful in the present, and to prepare for the future as informed by the past and the present. (Siegel, 2003, p 37)

The drive towards increasing neural integration is a normal part of brain development but is impaired by traumatic experiences. Ordinarily, it is promoted within the safety of secure attachment relationships.

How do these ideas inform our work with teenage adoptees? If we are to help young people to make sense of complex life stories, they will need to develop their capacity for reflective function. They will need to become more integrated as they consider autobiographical information, drawing in balanced measure both on logical thought and raw emotional material. Reflective function can be encouraged by bringing into consciousness a range of possible interpretations or ways of experiencing similar stories. It has been argued that both reflective function and neural integration develop only in a context of something akin to a secure attachment relationship. We hoped, in the film project, to create both the safe interpersonal environment and the opportunity to reflect on stories, in a combination that might increase capacity for reflective function and move towards greater narrative coherence.

Narratives in the film group

How did these ideas about narrative translate into practice in the adoption film project? Adoption was talked about from the start, as the group decided on what themes they wanted to include in the film. Group members volunteered their own stories and were curious about each others' experiences. From the outset, some different styles emerged in relation to how the subject of adoption was approached.

A number of girls were dismissive of the impact of adoption on their lives. Some initially denied feeling any different to non-adopted peers or wondering about their birth parents. A kind of defensiveness emerged from some participants – ‘let’s make it positive!’ There was discussion of certain adoption stories in the media coming across as ‘anti-adoption’, which some girls were keen to avoid. What would it say about their own families if adoption were to be portrayed as sad or hurtful? Others were quicker to speak about the difficult aspects of being adopted. One participant talked in dramatic and emotionally raw language about her birth mother (‘Why did you give me up?’). In terms of Main’s categories of coherence, some spoke in a *dismissive* way while others seemed more *pre-occupied* in their narratives of attachment and adoption.

In addition to the girls’ own readiness to face adoption issues was the influence of family – the group were conscious that the film would be seen by their adoptive families. It is likely that loyalty and self-consciousness made participants somewhat wary about expressing more complex feelings in the early stages. As the group progressed and discussion continued, stories seemed to ‘thicken’ and the girls were able to incorporate new ideas and perspectives into their own life stories. At first, more sensitive thoughts and feelings were prefaced with an apology or testiness, as if seeking permission from the group to venture into more difficult territory. The girls became more able to engage in conversations that in the beginning were too difficult, for example discussing thoughts and fantasies about their birth parents. It seemed that the group helped bring into consciousness thoughts that were ordinarily too hard to bear. Raw emotive outbursts settled and became balanced with softer interpretations. Ideas that initially were superficial or trite became richer and more complex. Discussion and exercises related to the creation of the film were certainly helpful in

facilitating richer narratives for the individual girls, but the crucial catalyst for change was the fact that such exploration of narrative was taking place in a group.

Layering of narratives

Most interesting in this project was watching how different emerging narratives overlapped and influenced one another. Changes in the participants would not have occurred in the same way had they not been part of a group. If the power of the peer group is at its greatest in adolescence, it is developmentally fitting that transformation will occur readily in this group context. Some observations of how the group context assisted narrative development are explored below.

1. A shared story of adoption

Coming from fairly diverse backgrounds, the one area of common ground when the group initially met was their shared status of being adopted. Within the first few days together, a sense of ‘sameness’ emerged and strong bonds began to form. Alongside discussion of adoption, the girls brought in family photos and mementos that were important in their adoption stories – sharing of this material assisted in creating understanding and connection between group members. A sense of pride in being adopted developed, evident in little comments made throughout the process. In the early days of the group, the girls came up with the idea of declaring ‘World Adoption Day’. (We were impressed by their boldness in thinking globally, not just locally!) On another occasion, later in the process, one of the girls casually mentioned that it was her ‘adoption day’ that week, to which the others responded with an understanding that would not be found among their usual peers. They claimed unity as a group around being adopted. This experience of feeling ‘in the same boat’ has enormous benefit, as one experiences acceptance and understanding of an aspect of self that is hard to express or comprehend from outside

that group. Being part of a shared narrative of adoption enables the more individual process of meaning-making:

The first couple of sessions we talked about how we felt about adoption and what we thought about adoption. I was enthralled that these new friends were so open to discussion and willing to share their stories. After a couple of meetings, I felt like I had really connected to these people . . . I needed to do this project and it was so important to me to know that my peers were in the exact same situation as me. (Laura, 16)

2. Contrasting adoption stories

Along with a sense of sameness came an awareness of differences among adoption experiences. Some participants were locally adopted, others adopted transracially from overseas; some girls had contact with birth parents while others did not. These differences seemed to be something of a surprise to the group. On the first day of meeting, one Asian adoptee asked if the white Australian girls were really adopted too, not having considered the possibility that adoption also occurred within Australia. The difference between local and intercountry adoption generated curiosity and discussion about growing up in a family from a different 'race'.

There were notable differences between group members with regard to contact. One locally adopted girl had ongoing contact with her birth father; other birth relatives had not been responsive to contact by the local adoptees. For the intercountry adoptees, none had contact and the prospect of locating birth relatives would be difficult, if not impossible. Within the group there was great interest in hearing one another's stories about contact or the absence of contact with birth parents, and a sense that these stories were precious and deeply important. For one workshop an adult intercountry adoptee assisted with a specific task for the film. She took the opportunity to tell the group about her own recent experience of returning to her birth country and her

difficult, but in the end successful, search for her birth mother. The girls were extremely moved by hearing this story and it seemed to bring about a shift in thinking for some of them. One girl who had up to that point said that she was not particularly interested in the idea of searching for her birth parents said she was now inspired to try and find out more. Another who had expressed a similar indifference, said, 'now I'm gutted to know that I can't find my birth mother', realising that in the absence of birth records it would not be possible for her. This was a good example of how narratives that are different can overlay and influence each other, bringing about new possibilities and new responses. Each girl's story was heard in the light of the other girls' experiences. Hearing a different story seemed to allow curiosity and unlock a longing for contact that was previously beyond consciousness.

3. Alternative perspectives

In addition to the broad-stroke differences (local or intercountry, contact or no contact), more subtle variations within the girls' stories came to light. These were differences in the perceptions or interpretations of facts, or different ways of constructing narratives. One girl describes her response to finding out how she had been conceived:

I found out that my mother was raped . . . I felt angry, and I remember – it wasn't even like controlled anger . . . it felt like I was completely out of control. So everything in my room just got smashed, I just ruined everything and things that really meant stuff to me were just on the ground . . . I was kind of angry that . . . I felt like I ruined her life or something – almost. But it wasn't like that, once I sat down and thought about it. I knew it wasn't my fault, but at that time when I read it, I was just really overwhelmed by it. (Natalie, 15)

Another group member later told of her own similar discovery, but the way she

made sense of her story was quite different. She talked about her birth mother's strength in handling a traumatic experience and related it to her own strength of character. The opportunity to explore meanings around these stories in a group of adopted peers, who make their own offerings of alternative interpretations within the group, can be of enormous value. Narratives were enriched by bringing into consciousness some alternative interpretations and accommodating in a deeper way the perspectives of different people within the story.

4. Narratives that deepen empathy

One of our aims was to help adoptees develop a more balanced understanding of their adoption by seeing it from the perspectives of the different parties: the adoptee, the adoptive parents, the birth parents and wider society. We wanted to help them to reflect on the minds of others, as well as their own. One unexpected way this occurred was through the influence of a parallel 'story'. Working closely with the group throughout the project was our film-maker, Alicia, who was pregnant at the time. The girls watched with great interest as her pregnancy progressed over the six months of the project. While pregnancies often attract attention, in this case there seemed to be an added layer to the interest, as the girls thought about what it meant to bear a child and the developing relationship between mother and baby during pregnancy. How would it feel to give up that child at the end of a pregnancy? Alongside this went the task of sharing baby photos with the group, bringing to mind their own babyhoods. The overlapping story of Alicia's pregnancy may well have enabled a richer identification with their birth mothers and also with themselves as babies:

I lost the chance to have the biological maternal love, the bonding, the breastfeeding, the first cradle, the hug, the nurse, everything – I just didn't get that. I sort of feel sad that she didn't either. (Liz, 14)

Was I someone's breath of fresh air? (Natalie, 15)

5. Narratives that connect

Among the differences that emerged – different circumstances and different ways of perceiving them – were some important points of connection too. A hallmark of adoption is the absence of important autobiographical information. There are gaps in the story and adoptees need to make do with fragmentary pieces of information to make up their life history. One poignant moment came about as the four girls who were adopted from Korea shared their photos, realising that each of them had a photo of themselves as babies sitting on the same red couch in the orphanage with their foster carer. Despite the different lives that each had led and all the possibilities for how life may have turned out differently (with different parents, in different countries), here was one thing that united them as a group. Their different narratives connected them to one another, a kind of shared heritage and belonging, which for adoptees are an elusive comfort.

Bringing fantasies to light

Adoptees will often fantasise about the gaps in their stories. These fantasies can be preoccupying during adolescence (Harper, 1996). What is my birth mother like? Does she think of me? Is she mean and neglectful, or loving and kind? An alternate life story – the 'what if' – develops for adoptees. What if she had kept me? What if I were to find her? What if a different family had adopted me? These fantasies may be elaborate or fragmentary in nature and may change according to the context or mood. Because they can be difficult to speak of within adoptive families, they may remain silent or unconscious. Either way, they inevitably influence the developing sense of self. Generating a narrative is one way of bringing to consciousness these unspoken and unconscious fantasies around adoption (Treacher and Katz, 2001).

Drawing out fantasies about the

alternate life was revealing of underlying beliefs. Fourteen-year-old Liz's story had the tone of a fairytale:

If I hadn't been adopted I think I would have been in a very unestablished house . . . I don't think we'd have very much money, and I definitely wouldn't be going to school. The only thing I'd be doing is maybe becoming a dancer or learning self-defence . . . I think about what my birth parents look like a lot. I think my father would be not really tall but tall, and I just imagine he'd have broad shoulders, and, I don't know, be this hero, Prince Charming. And I imagine my birth mother just being about my height and delicate, a dancer – that kind of thing.

Sarah, on the other hand, finds a more objective position, perhaps helped by continual contact with her birth father:

I think it would have been very different . . . They could have been either really strict, or maybe they could have been really fun, they could have been really fun parents as well. Or maybe they could have been just . . . parents, just, you know, your parents. They help you make the right decisions and tell you the right things to do, they give you their opinions and you take them on board, and you live your life. (Sarah, 13)

The opportunity to bring these unspoken imaginings to the fore allows for them to be considered and incorporated into a more coherent sense of self. Paradoxically, the more one probes and explores questions around identity, the less clear the answers become. Yet perhaps it is this very complexity and contradiction that is at the heart of coherent narrative. Coherence does not entail neatly tied-up ends and answered questions, but rather a tolerance of the unknown. Treacher and Katz (2001) propose that a mature sense of identity for adoptees is one that recognises its inherent fluidity and uncertainty. A sense of self is constantly evolving and successful adaptation requires that narratives of self are

rethought and retold periodically in ways that better fit the current developmental needs. Adolescence is an important time for such a retelling.

Conclusion: the importance of stories

Thus it is not only the individual's life that makes the story. In many ways the story also makes the life. (Treacher and Katz, 2001, p 22)

The stories we tell about our lives are the basis of our sense of self. What makes a difference is not life events and circumstances, but the way we make sense of them. This view is echoed by diverse but complementary sources. Attachment theory tells us of the healing possibility of telling coherent and resolved stories, even when the stories are of loss and grief. Resilience studies show how some people move on from adversity by finding a productive way to make sense of their stories. For adoptees, building a coherent narrative is made more difficult by troubling facts, a lack of facts and reluctance to share these struggles within adoptive families. In teenage years, adoptees need a richer and more complex way of understanding themselves and their stories. The challenge of the film project was to help teenagers find the most enabling and coherent story to meet their specific developmental needs.

Not only was it important for these teenage adoptees to consider their personal narratives around adoption, it was also important for them to experience their narrative within the context of other narratives. It was the sharing and layering of these narratives that most effectively led to the enriching of individual stories. People were changed through feeling connected under similar narratives and also by seeing differences between adoption narratives – different stories and different ways of making sense of them. The group allowed a canvas of narratives to be explored concurrently, each affected by and affecting another. Developmentally, it

makes sense that for adolescents the peer group is a fitting conduit for change. This process brought into awareness different possibilities and new ways of interpreting stories.

Our narratives both reveal and determine the way we see ourselves and the way we live our lives (Bruner, 1987). They show how we understand our past and how we use this to make sense of present and future. Our narrative *is* our identity. Within their stories, adoptees reveal perceptions and beliefs, internal working models of relationship, hopes and fantasies. Putting language and story to these fragmentary ideas reveals, both to the listener and to the self, what lies beneath. Once made conscious, it is then available for review, challenge and adjustment. Identity is the central mystery of adoption and there is no more fitting way to clarify identity than to bring to light the stories that underpin it.

Note

Names have been changed. The author acknowledges the contributions of Janet Henegan, Alicia Walsh and the adoptees who participated in the film project. *The Girl in the Mirror* is available for purchase from PARC: www.bensoc.org.au/parc

References

Bowlby J, *A Secure Base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*, London: Routledge, 1988

Bruner J, 'Life as narrative', *Social Research* 54:1, pp 11–32, 1987

Dallos R, *Attachment Narrative Therapy: Integrating narrative, systemic and attachment therapies*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2006

Feeney J A, Passmore N L and Peterson C C, 'Adoption, attachment and relationship experiences', in Bowles T (ed), *Relationship Transitions: Proceedings of the APS Psychology of Relationships Interest Group 4th Annual Conference*, pp 58–62, Melbourne: Australian Psychological Society, 2004

Feeney J A, Passmore N L and Peterson C C, 'Adoption, attachment and relationship concerns: a study of adult adoptees', *Personal Relationships* 14, 129–47, 2007

Fonagy P, *Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis*, New York, NY: Other Press, 2001

Gray D D, *Attaching in Adoption: Practical tools for today's parents*, Indianapolis, IN: Perspectives Press, 2002

Harper J, 'An overview of developmental issues in counselling adoptive families', *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 6:1, pp 125–32, 1996

Hauser S T, Allen J P and Golden E, *Out of the Woods: Tales of resilient teens*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006

Holmes J, *The Search for the Secure Base: Attachment theory and psychotherapy*, Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001

Howe D, 'Adopters' relationships with their adopted children from adolescence to early adulthood', in Hill M and Shaw M (eds), *Signposts in Adoption: Policy, practice and research issues*, London: BAAF, 1998

Howe D, Brandon M, Hinings D and Schofield G, *Attachment Theory, Child Maltreatment and Family Support: A practice and assessment model*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999

Hughes D A, *Facilitating Developmental Attachment: The road to emotional recovery and behavioral change in foster and adopted children*, Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1997

Karen R, *Becoming Attached: First relationships and how they shape our capacity to love*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994

Levy T M and Orlans M, 'Creating and repairing attachments in biological, foster and adoptive families', in Johnson S M and Whiffen V E (eds), *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*, New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2003.

Lifton B J, *Journey of the Adopted Self: A quest for wholeness*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994

Logan F A, Morrall P M and Chambers H, 'Identification of risk factors for psychological disturbance in adopted children', *Child Abuse Review* 7, 1998, pp 154–64

Main M, Kaplan N and Cassidy J, 'Security in infancy, childhood and adulthood: a move to the level of representation', *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 50:1–2, pp 66–104, 1985

Moretti M M and Holland R, 'The journey of adolescence: transitions in self within the context of attachment relationships', in Johnson

- S M and Whiffen V E (eds), *Attachment Processes in Couple and Family Therapy*, New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2003
- Passmore N L, Fogarty G F, Bourke C J and Baker-Evans S F, 'Parental bonding and identity style as correlates of self-esteem among adult adoptees and nonadoptees', *Family Relations* 54, pp 523–34, 2005
- Rutter M and M, *Developing Minds: Challenge and Continuity across the Life Span*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 1993
- Siegel D J, 'Toward an interpersonal neurobiology of the developing mind: attachment relationships, "mindsight" and neural integration', *Infant Mental Health Journal* 22:1–2, pp 67–94, 2001
- Siegel D J, 'An interpersonal neurobiology of psychotherapy: the developing mind and the resolution of trauma', in Solomon M F and Siegel D J (eds), *Healing Trauma: Attachment, mind, body and brain*, New York, NY: WW Norton & Co, 2003
- Treacher A and Katz I, 'Narrative and fantasy in adoption', *Adoption & Fostering* 25:3, pp 20–28, 2001
- Triseliotis J, 'Identity-formation and the adopted person revisited', in Treacher A and Katz I (eds), *The Dynamics of Adoption: Social and personal perspectives*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000
- Verrier N, *The Primal Wound: Understanding the adopted child*, Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 1991
- Zabar P and Angus G, *Adoptions Australia 1993–1994*, Child Welfare Series No. 11, AGPS, Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1995

© Helen Fitzhardinge 2008