Going back to our roots

What factors drive a person to research a family tree, or an adoptee to search for their biological parents? **Jurai Darongkamas** and **Louise Lorenc** investigate

Why do people research their family tree? Why do adoptees search for their biological parents? Could there be similarities between these processes?

This article examines the psychological literature and personal accounts in order to identify common themes of connection, loss and identity. Do searches often spring from dysfunction, and should mental health professionals be alive to this potential marker, and prepared for the possibility of psychological distress as a result of the search?

Watching the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are?* recently got us thinking. What psychological factors drive us to learn about our ancestors? There are anecdotal descriptions of individuals' motivations but no formal studies of this increasingly popular activity (see box opposite).

Talking to a professional genealogist, Janet Carter at Ancestors.co.uk, led us to compare reasons why people trace their family history with the published literature on adoptees' reasons for searching for their biological parents. There is a growing body of literature on the latter (e.g. Farrar, 2003; Feast & Philpot, 2003; Müller & Perry, 2001). Not surprisingly, there seem to be many similarities between why people seek to fill in the branches of their family tree and why adoptees dig for their biological roots.

Some of these reasons are not particularly psychological. Programmes about famous people's ancestors have undoubtedly sparked off much interest, curiosity and sense of adventure. Birthdays and important anniversaries may prompt the research, commissioned for oneself or given as a gift. Interestingly, in the adoption literature 'big occasions or family events' were frequently mentioned (Ludvigsen & Parnham, 2004). Other triggers for adoptees include seeing something in the media or meeting others who have searched (Feast & Philpot, 2003).

Perhaps the simplest motivation is simple curiosity. Adoptees may have 'intense curiosity' about their birth parents (Kohler et al., 2002); over 82 per cent of

Feast and Philpot's (2003) searchers had a 'long-standing curiosity about their origins'. However, for some, searching for biological parents or ancestors could remain 'just curiosity' without the need for action. Some suggest that 'the decision to search for a birth relative is a slowly accumulating process rather than a one-off trigger' (Ludvigsen & Parnham, 2004, p.56). We would assume that this would also apply to those searching for information about their ancestors.

Andersen (1989) groups searchers as into those who view search as an adventure, and those who view search as therapy. This can be kept in mind when considering the reasons people seek to uncover their roots, which we would loosely group under the headings of 'connection and meaning', 'loss' and 'identity'.

Connection and meaning

Some people want, or feel that they need, a sense of a wider connection to see how they fit into a larger world, both currently and historically (see Affleck & Steed, 2001).

For those particularly interested in history, putting oneself or one's family in a historical context can also prompt the research. For example, seeing a written record that a distant relative was 'presented to King Charles II', or finding out that your ancestors took part in certain military events in times of conflict, can be fascinating and exciting, but also runs a risk of being upsetting.

People can also feel the need for a wider social connection, particularly in modern Western societies where small nuclear families and greater geographical mobility may lead to a sense of isolation. Silverman et al. (1994, p.547) point out that there is a tendency for 'this society to want people to stand on their own…[as opposed to]…part of an extended network of care and connection'. Of course in non-Western cultures, more is often known about previous familial generations as knowledge is passed down

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through oral histories, thus maintaining the wider kinship.

The sense of 'place' that this 'larger extended family history' may provide is cited as a key reason why adoptees seek out their biological family history – 'a fundamental striving for a sense of belonging' (Krueger & Hanna, 1997). From an existential perspective, 'striving to find a meaning in one's life is a primary motivational force' (Frankl, 1968, p.99).

Trying to establish a sense of interpersonal connection may help people to cope with another major existential theme, namely that ultimately we are all isolates, despite the dialectical tension between 'separation and fusion'. Yet, Feast and Philpot's study on adoptees found high levels of 'a sense of belonging' and 'feeling loved' by their adoptive parents, alongside feeling 'different'. Could this sense of difference operate as an additional driver for adoptees?

Having children can also trigger a search, possibly as a birth can bring thoughts round to the cycle of life, or as a means of uncertainty reduction whereby the new and unfamiliar can be placed in context. An adoptee's reaction to having her first child, who looked like the father, and wondering about who she herself might resemble is given in Moran (1994).

Perhaps *not* having children can also be a motivator. People are prompted to search for their roots when faced with not seeing their own hopes in life materialising. So searching for one's genealogy may be prompted by infertility, possibly as a replacement, as a way of reaching cognitive congruence or as a way to reach some psychological resolution (see also Farrer, 2003).

A further motivator for tracing one's ancestors can be that this allows people to contact relatives they have lost touch with or to discover new relatives. Ludvigsen and Parnham (2004) found similar motivations for those seeking contact with adopted siblings.

Loss

Loss of various kinds can also spur us to research our roots: the loss of certainty, of one's own potential, of health and the belief in one's own immortality, or of a significant other.

The loss of certainty – the unearthing of family 'secrets' needing further investigation, the wish to have a family myth or story confirmed – can be a trigger. Family 'secrets' often mean that people cannot find out things directly through living family members. For instance, one could discover that an ancestor has committed bigamy and left behind a whole family previously not known about! Occasionally, people have been told they were the offspring of landed gentry and a maid; some find this more acceptable than both parents being servants. Stories are often told to hide illegitimacy (cf. secrecy in adoptive families).

Other important turning points are considered by Powell and Afifi (2005), who consider issues from the 'uncertainty management and ambiguous loss'
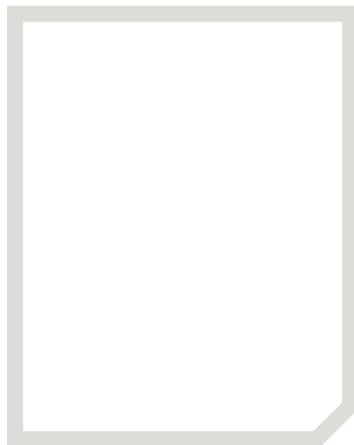

Finding that a distant relative was presented to King Charles II can be fascinating and exciting

literature looking at the different 'ways in which adoptees experience uncertainty and loss'. They suggest that 'uncertainty is a complex phenomenon' citing 'uncertainty reduction may only be one of numerous responses to ambiguous situations' (p.130). This could account for why not all of us are motivated to find out what we can about our ancestors, costs and time allowing.

Being dissatisfied with one's own life circumstances may lead people to search for a better alternative. Perhaps there is vicarious pleasure in finding out that one's ancestors were of the upper classes or had many acres of land? Very occasionally dreams of wealth can also prompt a search, as people hear stories of someone dying intestate and relatives having to be traced by solicitors. Some people may have been told that past family members have been cheated out of their inheritance.

Often there is the hope that one is related to people of high status or wealth, or perhaps someone famous or notorious. This may be a question of reflecting in another's glory to make up for one's own perceived failings. Feast and Philpot (2003) found that 60 per cent of their adoptee searchers 'felt that the result of the search would make them happier' (p.28). Another possible function of the search for adoptees is to 'to achieve a genuine

term outcome of reunions between adult adopted people and their birth mothers. *British Journal of Social Work, 31,* 351–368.

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integration of biological roots and the developmental experience…through active demystification of the original family' (Rosenberg and Horner, 1991). Indeed, they go on to state "the birth-parent romance fantasy can be laid to rest only if the integrity is achieved'. Even just the acknowledgement of the desire to search can be empowering 'in and of itself', regardless of outcome. Moran (1994) also writes of a sense of empowerment and accomplishment.

Another 'loss prompt' could be the loss of health and the belief in one's own immortality. Being in the latter stages of life or having been diagnosed with a serious medical condition can act as triggers; perhaps prompting an interest in something that will outlast the organic self, possibly to leave a legacy of some sort to pass on to your children. From the existential perspective, 'acceptance of death results in the realization that generations of human beings have come before and that future generations will continue to arise' (Krueger & Hanna, 1997, p.198).

As one gets older, there may be existential issues confronting the self, such as parents dying, poor health, declining faculties, isolation, questioning the meaning of life. Commissioning genealogical research may be one attempted solution or coping mechanism. In this way, the desire to search is more than adjustment but a move towards 'mental health, wellness, and congruence' (Krueger & Hanna, 1997).
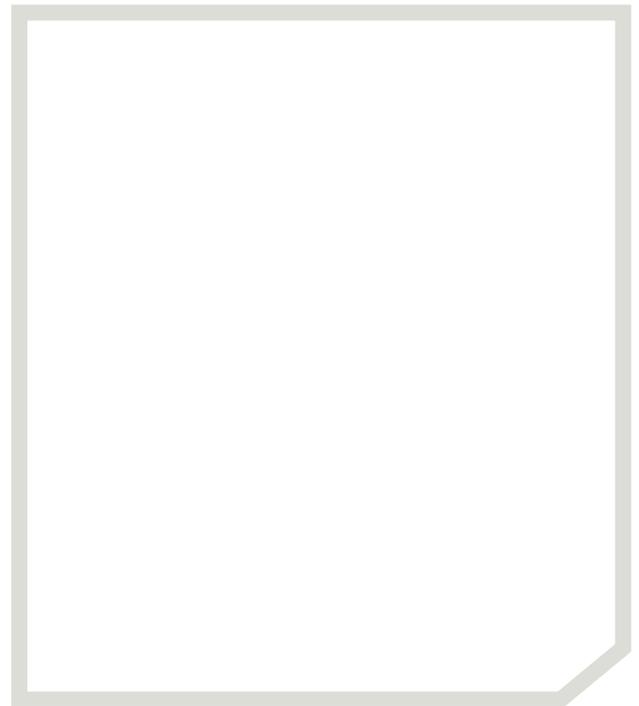
What about the loss of a significant other? When grieving for the loss of a close relative, as part of the working through process, there may be a felt need to explore influences that shaped their personality. The unearthing of old family papers may also prompt interest to know more. Wanting to find out more about one's own parents' upbringing may then become salient. Fitzhardinge (2008) talks of the healing possibility of telling stories and states that 'resilience studies show how some people move on from adversity by finding a productive way to make

sense of their stories' (p.66).

Old age could be viewed as a time in life when one has to face more losses and ambiguities, particularly about the future, thereby challenging one's sense of identity; hence the felt need for connection, for working through existential issues, (Erikson's stage of integrity vs. despair). Family reunions are another possible way in which people manage feelings of grief. Reunions can be historically with previous generations to compensate for a 'shrinking' family. Howe and Feast (2001) acknowledge that reunions are 'as much to do with people's search for identity and the resolution of experience of loss as much as a desire for new family relationships.'

Wanting to find out more about one's own parents' upbringing may become salient

Identity

The motives for searching for one's ancestors may also be viewed in terms of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. He proposed a series of conflicts: identity vs. confusion during adolescence; intimacy vs. isolation in young adulthood; generativity vs. stagnation for the middle-aged; and integrity vs. despair for the older adult. Erikson argued that ego identity involves a sense of sameness and continuity in time and space. Adoptees, however, have actually experienced 'a discontinuity between their genealogical heritage and their upbringing' (Passmore, 2004). One

can argue that general genealogy research is a way of further consolidating ego identity in an age where families have become more fractured.

The search can also help a person to build a more complete sense of identity: wanting to find out more about one's personal characteristics, or ascribing certain personal qualities to members of a previous generation (Passmore, 2004). Finding out about family 'trends', such as the handing down of certain professions, or if one's family had 'itchy feet' and travelled a lot, can validate one's sense of identity. Feast and Philpot (2003) report that 77 per cent of adoptee searchers in their UK study (contacting the Children's Society) wanted to know more about themselves, expressing a need for a more complete sense of identity.

Sometimes there is a need to know

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family medical history if this has not been passed down through word of mouth. Often in psychiatric assessment it is assumed that clients know the psychiatric history of immediate family members. This lack of knowledge affects adoptees, 'who experienced high uncertainty and loss throughout their lives' (Powell & Afifi, 2005, p.140) but can also impact on families where such information has been considered taboo (e.g. where a family member is found to have been in the workhouse or incarcerated in an asylum). Finding this 'biological root' and building 'a more authentic sense of self' was cited as an important motivation in Hertz's (1998) account of an adopted woman's search for her birth parents. Hertz suggested that 'sealed records leave adoptees in a state of genealogical bewilderment' and that knowing 'their ancestry, inherent talents or biological weakness' (p.103) could be important.

Others feel that offering 'to identify with or belong to a history or a time line' helps with identity formation and consolidation: 'it is through authenticity that one genuinely experiences being-in-the-world…it may be that the need for authenticity leads to the search' (Krueger & Hanna, 1997, p.197). There is often a need for an 'internal sense of human connectedness…to construct a more coherent sense of self' (Kohler et al., 2002, p.95).

Fitzhardinge (2008), suggests that it is the 'way we make sense of' stories that is the 'very essence of identity'. She notes that 'attachment theory, the resilience literature and neuroscience all concur… around the importance of narrative…it is the way you make sense of it that counts in the end' (p.60). Fitzhardinge describes how coherence does not entail neatly tied-up ends and answered questions, but rather a tolerance of the unknown. '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' (p.66).

A product of dysfunction?

Consider this statement from Cubito and Brandon's (2000) paper:

Mental health professionals should be alert to the possibility that searching for one's biological heritage, however valuable it may be to the adult adoptee, could be either a stressful

process or a marker for psychological distress' (p.412).

Most of the motivations we have examined have slightly negative connotations: something has been lost, or seems incomplete. But motivations are not always 'unhealthy' – Müller and Perry (2001) point out the psychopathological model does not account for the motivations of all searchers, nor does it fit in with their summary of the research on adoptees.

Sometimes when people have achieved their life goals by mid-adulthood they might want to catalogue their origins as a fresh challenge. Conducting or commissioning the research can feel like a personal challenge; having the view that it is there and so it can be done. The perception of greater availability of material on the internet leads people to believe it will be a relatively quick and easy thing to do. (However, not all the information required is on the internet and some records do still have to be searched manually. The trick seems to be knowing where to look, to make the endeavour as productive as possible.) Similarly, after the series of TV programmes about the existence of Barnardo's records, enquiry rates from adoptees soared from about 1500 a year to 'thousands a month' (Pugh & Schofield, 1999).

The strength of feeling can range from general interest, seeing it as a bit of harmless fun or a hobby, to being impassioned to discover something of historic importance. In more recent years the floodgate has opened for adoptees to search for their biological parents. There is an increasing acceptance that providing the facilities for people to search is important.

What can we learn from a consideration of the motives behind adoptees searching for their biological parents that can be applied to those searching for their more distant ancestors? There seem to be mixed views about the psychological status of those adoptees who instigate a search versus those who do not (see Smith, 2002). However, 'despite its various shortcomings, research clearly shows that the majority of searchers are not psychologically troubled and have not experienced

dysfunctional family relationships.' (Müller & Perry, 2001, p.31). Howe and Feast (2003) described 53 per cent of their searchers as describing their adoption as a positive experience yet found that 'feeling ambivalent or negative about one's adoption might be one factor'. They also conclude that 'the decision to search is unlikely to be the result of a single or simple psychological process' (p.165).

We must assume the same for non-adoptees who embark on a genealogical search. We have explored various possibilities in this article. Most of these are benign, along the lines of managing existential issues, attachment and loss as well as helping with issues of identity. One key difference is that those searching for ancestors, unlike adoptees, are not constrained by a fear of betraying adoptive parents (e.g. Feast & Philpot, 2003). However, they might be constrained by feelings of guilt about uncovering family secrets that those close to them thought it best to keep secret. This could also engender feelings of betrayal, especially while those people are still alive.

Whatever the starting point of a search, dysfunction could well be the destination: or at least a loss of innocence. Although people may start off without any issues to 'work through', as a result of researching some may go on to find 'disagreeable knowledge' (see Müller & Perry, 2001). For example, one man discovered that one of his ancestors was a 'tyrannous ruler who viewed murder and torture as sport' and watered the land 'with the blood of the people' (Gooderham, 2008). TV personality Stephen Fry found some of his discoveries 'harrowingly moving' (Ford, 2008).

But we should perhaps remember the advice of Fitzhardinge (2008, p.61), who describes the heart of resilience as 'the ability of a person to understand their story in such a way that it creates opportunity rather than limits it'.

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