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In 2012, I completed a PhD Thesis titled : ***Identity and Genetic Origins: the ethical implications of the late discovery of adoptive and donor insemination offspring status***. This thesis specifically explored the experiences of adopted persons *and* donor insemination offspring who had had their origins deliberately concealed from them and then discovered the truth as adults. In addition, my research has been published in various journals and an edited book. A link to all of these publications and my thesis in QUT EPrints is attached. All of this research explores issues of identity and genetic origins relevant to this inquiry.

While my academic interest lay initially in understanding late discovery (LD) adoption experiences it became clear quickly that adopted people were not the only ones experiencing late discovery. Donor insemination offspring were attempting to join online LD adoption support groups. I found that many donor insemination offspring were experiencing similar psychological harms and trauma related effects in their stories. I wished to provide a space where these LD's could share their experiences of discovery. I sought to explore the question of whether there were themes in common and to do this from a broader ethical perspective than previous research which had targeted individual psychological harms.

My research did find profound similarities between the experiences despite the different practices involved. The stories were gathered from adopted people and donor insemination offspring in Australia, the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom. They were then added to stories available

in existing research and explored as a whole. The difference in my research lay in analysing these stories using a relational, contextual, responsive and narratively constructed ethical framework. Further it demonstrated that these similarities went beyond individual psychological harms to include broader concerns not previously recognised in other research.

These impacts and effects included:

- *the toxic effects of keeping secrets in families.* This was particularly evident in donor insemination families where it was decided to keep the male's infertility a secret. Where this had not been openly addressed, it became a source of confusion and frustration and a growing irritant in the family. Once the secret was out, the suppressed feelings of anger and frustration behind this toxicity were revealed.
- *Late discovery produced overwhelming feelings of betrayal of trust by family and close friends.* This produced profound challenges to identity, self image, agency, autonomy and their sense of place in the world. Further it caused disruption in the LD's ability to trust institutions, government, church, and community organisations etc., many of which actively or passively colluded in keeping the secret.
- *All the LD's in the cohort felt driven to source identifying information, and this journey was often difficult and emotionally draining.* Where the search for identifying information was successful, this led to the equally difficult and emotionally draining search to find biological kin and build relationships where possible. All of these effects were playing out alongside often ongoing fractured relationships with their adoptive or donor insemination family who were perceived to have betrayed their trust.

The themes explored in LD stories can contribute to knowledge for practices where the intentional separation of the biological and social worlds of children are practised or contemplated, and where the ill-defined concept of 'the best interests of the child' is applied. Indeed the inability of current rights discourses to adequately account for 'the best interests of the child' was analysed and found deficient.

Instead, it was argued that the concept of 'the best interests of the child' needed to be strengthened through recognition of a child's need to be treated as a being of equal moral value: with the same identity rights and moral recognition as all others in their communities. This involves enabling legal access to genuine birth records and lack of secrecy surrounding biological connections. Recognition of equal moral value demands that parents/adults respect the child's individuality, their capacity to be empowered beings, and the crucial importance of autonomous

agency in identity construction. To ensure that adults and institutions are not concealing information from them at all critical developmental points in life.

All children should be able to negotiate their place in the world with all available knowledge of their inherited biological traits, personality characteristics and medical information at their disposal without the risk of this being stolen from them. The stories explored in this thesis show clearly how this lack of information about themselves has affected their lives (before and after discovery) and warped their ability to negotiate the world as empowered beings.

The special vulnerability of children and the responsibilities and obligations of parents/adults need to be incorporated into current thinking. Children exist in relationships of intrinsic trust with adults, and with some adults more particularly than others (parents/caregivers). These adults should not only be required to nurture their children, but, just as importantly, to extend equal moral value (rights, recognition, individuality, autonomy and agency) to them, both as a personal necessity to build secure identity but also to meet and be included in socially normative practices.

This means that practices that have little to no accountability in record keeping and that allow and promote secrecy and closed records, are not in 'the best interests of the child'. As it is clear that children do not and can not have an equal voice in the so-called 'rights' debate, it behoves adults to place them at the centre of concern, to place their 'right' to information about themselves, a right that everyone else has and takes for granted, as the most important focus of this review.

https://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Riley,_Helen.html

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.

Regards Helen