

# The late discovery of adoptive status

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**There is emerging evidence of a range of ethical implications lasting many years when a person finds out about their adoptive status as an adult, and that this information about their genetic origins was intentionally concealed from them. The research contributing to this article has been undertaken from within an applied ethics framework, and is cross-disciplinary in nature.**

## Introduction

This article comes in response to a recent contribution to *Family Relationships Quarterly* by Passmore, Feeney and Foulstone (2007).<sup>1</sup> This excellent paper concluded that adoptees who have experienced secrecy, lies or misinformation within their adoptive families may require help in dealing with issues of trust and betrayal. Further, the authors stated that these issues of trust and betrayal often transfer into other adult relationships.

Passmore et al. (2007) also noted that what is important for wellbeing is the extent to which adoptive parents are open with their children, rather than whether the adoption took place in a “closed” or “open” system. Significant numbers of those who were adopted under “closed” systems have subsequently been affected by the late disclosure of their adoptive status. Preliminary evidence is emerging that many of these late discoverers feel that they have not received acknowledgment of the particularity of their experience, the long-term effects of this discovery (involving personal losses and disrupted relationships), or recognition that an injustice may have been done to them.

The current research project focuses on those who have found out about their adoptive status as adults (disclosure must have occurred no earlier than 18 years of age). While this research is ongoing, some preliminary findings may be of interest to those working or researching within the area of family relationships.

## The late discovery of adoptive status

Although mention is sometimes made of the traumatic nature of late disclosure (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000; Passmore et al., 2007), apart from Perl and Markham’s (1999) qualitative study initiated by the Post Adoption Resource Centre (PARC) in New South Wales,<sup>2</sup> little research has been carried out in this area to date. The findings of the Perl and Markham study concluded that a majority of late discoverers were continuing to struggle with issues arising from disclosure. This report estimated that up to 9% of the more than 200,000 children adopted in Australia from the 1920s until the mid-1970s could be late discoverers.

Although it is impossible to calculate an accurate figure, even a conservative estimate of 5% exposes the possibility that significant numbers of late discoverers may be affected. As there have been negligible, if any, previous attempts to delineate the parameters of the late-discovery experience, the author’s current research project aims to define, understand and facilitate responsiveness to the complexity of personal, relational and social dimensions involved.

## Method

### Aims

The first aim of the current research was to privilege the voices of late discoverers themselves—to give recognition. The second aim was to delineate the conceptual attributes of the late-discovery experience, and thirdly, to understand what is needed in order for reparation and repair to occur. This need for reparation and repair was first identified by Perl and Markham (1999) and Passmore et al. (2006, 2007), who found that many late discoverers continue to struggle with issues of trust and betrayal, often many years after disclosure has occurred.

1 [www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/newsletter/n5pdf/n5b.pdf](http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/newsletter/n5pdf/n5b.pdf)

2 Of the 99 persons who have contacted PARC about late discovery since July 1995, 40 (34 females and 6 males) agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 82.5% were late-discovery adoptees. They were interviewed by telephone or in person using a questionnaire. The average age of discovery was 38 years, although 30% discovered they were adopted between the ages of 40 and 50. Major conclusions of the study include: 41% were told of their adoption by someone other than the adoptive family, relatives or birth family; 62% never suspected they were adopted, but many felt that it made sense of their family relationships, or that they always felt different; 62% went on to have contact with their birth family; the majority responded with shock at the time of disclosure; and 75% did not require ongoing counselling.

## Participants

Participants in the current research were sourced through Jigsaw Queensland Post Adoption Resource Centre, an online discussion group (in Australia and the United States), media (Queensland only) and a website.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that stories have also been gathered from late-discovery donor-conceived offspring as part of this current research project, although preliminary findings are not included in this paper. It can be noted, however, that late-discovery donor offspring stories express similar themes involving betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving.

Participants were invited to send their stories in written form, although two stories were obtained through taped personal conversation. Twenty-two stories were received. Of the fifteen female participants, twelve were Australian, and one each were from the US, Canada and the UK. Of the seven male participants, four were Australian and three were from the US. Their current ages range from the early 40s through to early 70s. The length of time since disclosure ranged from 1–10 years ago ( $n = 12$ ), 11–20 years ago ( $n = 6$ ), 21–30 years ago ( $n = 3$ ), and 41–50 years ago ( $n = 1$ ).

## Limitations and assumptions

This research is focused on the nature of the late-discovery experience for study participants. It is not concerned with verifying what has occurred, highlighting differences, or attempting to assess to what extent or to what degree a late discoverer may have been affected. Rather, the focus is on the features, characteristics and attributes of the experience. A further limitation of the study is that participants were recruited via non-random methods. Therefore, bias due to self-selection is an issue and the generalisability of the findings is limited.

In any research, it is acknowledged that the researcher brings prior understandings to the project. In this case, the researcher is also a late-discovery adopted person. While this may inevitably bring particular understandings of the late-discovery experience to this research, it can also provide a richer, more nuanced approach.

## Late-discovery stories

The current research supports and extends the major themes outlined in Perl and Markham (1999), as well as the more recent research by Passmore et al. (2006, 2007). What emerges through situating these stories within an ethical framework, however, is the depth and significance of the feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving. These feelings are often still being experienced, despite many years or even decades having passed since disclosure.

Late discovery stories clearly evidence the depth and significance of these feelings.

Karla<sup>4</sup> (aged 40, 5 years since disclosure) discovered her origins as the result of a family health crisis. “I felt profoundly betrayed”, she said, “the brunt of a 40-year joke”. She described being “obsessed with the unfairness of state-sanctioned laws that prevented me from access to my original birth certificate”. She acknowledged that this was a life altering event for her, likening it to the “hero’s journey” in mythology. “I am forever changed”, she said. She is “less mad [now] about being lied to, although this event still colours everything about my identity and my relation[ship] to my family”.

Feelings of betrayal can occur from having had a “false” cultural identity imposed. “I had fair skin and didn’t know I was of Aboriginal descent” said Markus (aged 47, 19 years since disclosure). He now feels disconnected from both of his worlds. “I am rejected by a society that doesn’t understand me because my skin colour is an enigma to both races. A black man with a fair skin creates its own oddities between cultures.”

Brenda (aged 66, 11 years since disclosure) had the secret revealed by accident by an elderly cousin. She described feeling “absolute disbelief, let down, lied to ... I had been mistrusted by not being told the truth and had spent my life living a lie”. Cameron (aged 45, 14 years since disclosure) found out accidentally upon the death of both his parents. He wrote that he spent hours staring at himself in the mirror, thinking “my whole life was a lie”. He talks about how he internalised the “wrong” and made it about himself. “I have done a lot of personal growth work [since late discovery] and everyone says I have changed a lot”, he commented.

Sally (aged 57, 8 years since disclosure) finds it hard to forgive her adoptive mother. “Not that she adopted me, but the way she handled it and continues to handle it is unforgiveable”, while Peter (aged 50, 10 years since disclosure)

3 It may be argued that those who have responded in this current research might be more likely than others to (a) join a support group and/or (b) tell their story. Those that join support groups or are able to tell their story in some other way would be better regarded as fortunate in locating such support and information, given the lack of knowledge and understanding about late discovery in the community (this includes the broad adoption community as well). Many who contacted the author as a result of media stories commented that they had never spoken to another late discoverer or known of any information or support groups that were available.

4 Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

revealed that he has spent the last ten years in shock and anger. He has “severed all ties with that part of [his] family”.

## Discussion

Brison (1997, 2002), Bracken and Thomas (2005) and Walker (2006) have asserted that talking about a “traumatic” event, and being heard and acknowledged, are pivotal features for achieving repair and recovery.<sup>5</sup> Brison (1997) commented that there can be enormous difficulty “regaining one’s voice, one’s subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or worse, made into someone else’s speech, an instrument of another’s agency” (p. 23). This sense of disrupted or subverted agency is a core feature that emerges in late-discovery stories.

The preliminary findings of the current research project, when combined with the previous findings of the PARC report in 1999, demonstrate that, while the majority of late discoverers appear to have been relatively successful in dealing with their experiences and continue to live productive lives, they continue to express feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving. They experience an ongoing sense of distance from others (aloneness), feelings of rejection, bitterness and frustration, and regret for lost opportunities and relationships (“if only!” or “what if?” questions). Many make demands for rights with respect to knowledge of genetic origins or to not have a “wrongful” identity imposed.

**While the majority of late discoverers appear to have been relatively successful in dealing with their experiences and continue to live productive lives, they continue to express feelings of betrayal, loss of trust and difficulty forgiving.**

It seems clear that part of resolving these feelings and demands should involve recognition from others (individuals, their communities and institutions) that the late discovery of adoptive status is a legitimate matter of interest and concern. This should also include acknowledgment that an injustice was done to the adoptees, even in cases where the decision to conceal genetic origins was taken with the best of intentions. Until such recognition is offered, and agency is restored, many late discoverers are likely to continue to have difficulty regaining self-respect, trusting again, feeling hope, feeling safe or forgiving. Bracken and Thomas (2005) refer to this as a powerful moral quest for justice.

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<sup>5</sup> Brison is referring to her own rape and assault. Bracken & Thomas are referring to post-traumatic stress disorder, while Walker discusses the effects of torture.

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