Contact between Children Placed Away from Home and their Birth Parents: A Reanalysis of the Evidence in Relation to Permanent Placements

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critique of the work of Quinton, Rushton, Dance and Mayes (1997) concerning the merits, for the various parties, of the maintenance of contact between children living temporarily or permanently apart from their parents. It contests their view that there is no research based evidence to support the practice of maintaining contact in these placements, and suggests that for a number of reasons their analysis of available evidence is fundamentally flawed. In particular this article questions their view of what the foundations for evidence-based practice should be, highlights central omissions in their review of the research and challenges the accuracy of some of their reporting. It also suggests that a grounded historical perspective on post placement practice would regard the severance of birth relative links, rather than their preservation, as representing what Quinton and his colleagues describe in their article as a 'social experiment'.

KEYWORDS

adoption, contact, permanent placement, post-adoption contact, research

Introduction

QUINTON and his colleagues (Quinton, Rushton, Dance, & Mayes, 1997) recently offered a useful discussion of some of the methodological difficulties in adoption research that have been of concern to British researchers since at least the 1960s (see,

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for example, Parker, 1962). Their article proceeds to review and analyse the research on contact for children with birth parents following both short-term and permanent separation. It considers each study that meets their criterion for inclusion in that (in their estimation) it offers sufficient detail 'to allow some judgment on . . . [its] scientific quality' (p. 394). Where the maintenance of contact in *permanent placements* is concerned they maintain, on the basis of their review, that contact constitutes nothing but a 'social experiment' without 'evidence based practice' (p. 411).

The question of post-placement contact in permanent care is too important to leave their conclusions unchallenged, for there are fundamental flaws in their presentation of the evidence. This article considers some of these failings in respect of their account of contact in permanent alternative care. It aims not only to highlight significant errors and omissions, which place the reliability of their conclusions in serious doubt, but further to advance the discussion in this important area of child-welfare practice.

The difficulty of the task

It would have been helpful had Quinton et al. reflected at the outset on the difficulty of the task they had set themselves in aiming to review the relevant research. Their statement that the assessment of 'scientific quality' is the benchmark by which the inclusion of studies in their literature review would be determined, seems perhaps to indicate a wish to apply the rigorous requirements of research in the medical field to the social sciences, though this is an issue which they do not explore. It would have been helpful, however, had they at least noted that the strict requirements for evidence in medical research can rarely be applied in the domain of child welfare, where randomized control studies are largely impracticable and the relevant comparison groups are created more often than not as the result of (often drastic) legal interventions. The difficulty of establishing causal links follows inevitably and there is ever the need for a respectful ambiguity in the conclusions that are drawn.

Quinton et al. suggest that there is a four-stage process in the development of research leading to studies with representative samples and comparative designs (1997: 410), but such a typology may be thought to oversimplify the huge complexity of child-welfare research. Often the best and clearest messages we can reasonably expect to uncover will emerge when a large body of research, employing a wide range of different designs, points consistently in a single direction. Such messages can only be drawn out after the most exhaustive and wide-ranging review of all potentially relevant research. Within the studies that are reviewed there may be many different designs and indeed many different failings, but there is also a strength in findings that resist the vicissitudes of different, and sometimes flawed, methodologies. The best evidence for 'truth', as Robins (1978) has reminded us, is replication, and 'a truth so powerful that it outs despite the errors and ignorance of investigators is a sturdy truth indeed!' (pp. 611–612). We are not well-served, in considering crucial issues in child welfare, such as the importance of contact, by any review of the literature that does less than justice to the whole range of research endeavour in the field. We may well be better served by the search for commonalities in the findings across the broad research design spectrum than by a search for the 'holy grail' of randomized control studies or their nearest achievable social science equivalent.

An inadequate account of the available evidence

The review by Quinton et al. (1997) of the benefits and disadvantages of contact between children and birth relatives across the substitute-care spectrum falls far short of offering

a comprehensive review of the relevant research. Its omissions are not merely those studies which one might assume were unable to pass their (largely inexplicit) test for scientific merit, it also offers, regrettably, an inadequate and incomplete account of those studies which are included. Furthermore, the accuracy of their reporting sometimes leaves much to be desired. Some examples will serve to highlight these deficiencies and to point to alternative conclusions.

Although Quinton et al. are offering, in 1997, a review of the research evidence concerning contact, they omit entirely any recent accounts by Grotevant and his colleagues of a prospective study which Quinton and colleagues acknowledge is 'potentially the largest and best designed' (p. 408) study to date (see for example Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; McRoy, Grotevant, & Ayres-Lopez, 1994; Grotevant, 1996; Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1996; Wrobel, Ayres-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrick, 1996; note also the following publications Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, in press; Grotevant, & McRoy, in press; Henney, & McRoy, in press). Indeed they discuss only the very early data from the most preliminary stages published in a brief summary article as long ago as 1991 (McRoy, & Grotevant, 1991). Had a sufficiently thorough internet and database search been undertaken, as a minimum, the research available to Quinton et al. a year before publication of their own article, would have included a monograph and three articles in referred journals.

These publications afford full data on the completed first stage of this important study, comparing 62 adoptive families where there is no contact, 69 with indirect (either time-limited or on-going) contact and 59 where there is 'full disclosure'. The total sample included '720 individuals: 190 adoptive families (including 190 mothers, 190 fathers, and at least one child in 171 of the families) and 169 birthmothers' (McRoy et al., 1994: 5). Most of the placements involved infants, which is particularly important, both because in research concerning children adopted so young antecedent events are less likely to confound the research findings, and because the advantages of continuing contact in the UK often have been attributed to older child adoptions alone.

Taking even the most conservative view of Grotevant and his colleagues' findings on the first stage of their study, they provide support, albeit sometimes qualified support, for continuing contact in adoption. A flavour of their findings in relation to the three parties in the adoption triangle can be gained from the quotations given below.

In 1994 Grotevant et al. compared the sense of security and assurance in the adoptive parent role in families with different degrees of openness. They concluded:

> The strong general pattern is that parents in fully disclosed adoptions demonstrate higher degrees of empathy about adoption, talk about it more openly with their children, and are less fearful that the birthmother might try to reclaim her child than are parents in confidential adoptions. The sense of permanence in the relationship with their adopted child also followed this pattern. (p. 142)

A 1996 article focused on the frequent fear that in fully disclosed adoptions, where children acquire on-going information about their families of origin first hand for example, by letter, through their adoptive parents or through a personal relationship, this will cause confusion for the child and impair relationships with their adopters. They found no evidence for this, although it was also clear that the capacity in children to comprehend the meaning of adoption related to cognitive development and not the availability of information through contact. The researchers note the potential value for children of the level of knowledge that only fully disclosed adoptions bring when they conclude that:

> Age was an important variable for understanding the children's satisfaction [with the degree of openness] and curiosity about their birth parents. Without exception older children were more curious. Older children were also generally less satisfied with their level of openness. Deviating from this position were children in the fully disclosed group who were curious but also satisfied. The older children are approaching adolescence where developing a personal identity becomes an important task. Information about one's past, which for these children includes birthparents, is important for developing their identity. (Wrobel et al., 1996: 2371)

A further aspect of this research (Christian et al., in press, and therefore a study which Quinton and colleagues could not have been expected to have reviewed) has concerned the effect on birth parents of different levels of openness in adoption. Grief resolution issues were examined for 75 birth mothers whose children had been placed between 4 and 10 years previously. For the purposes of this study the category of indirect ('mediated') contact was subdivided into that which was planned as time-limited and that which is on-going. In the abstract to their paper summarizing the findings the researchers state:

> Birthmothers in fully disclosed adoptions had significantly better grief resolution than those with confidential and time-limited mediated adoptions, and those in ongoing mediated had better grief resolution than those with time-limited mediated adoptions. (p. 36)

The failure of Quinton et al. to scrutinize the literature adequately is revealed at many other points. Thus, in their discussion of the findings of a study concerning contact after contested adoptions study (Ryburn, 1994), they have clearly read only a summary article neglecting other sources of more detailed data in refereed journals (Ryburn, 1995, 1996; see also Ryburn, 1997).

In discussing the 'acceptability of contact' they omit any account of the SSI report (Department of Health, 1995) which offers, to date, the best available data on the prevalence of post-adoption contact. In a survey of 371 placements made between April 1993 and April 1994 these researchers found that in only 31% of cases was there either no contact or no knowledge of contact taking place. Even though many of the adoptions had been contested to the point of the final order, in 27% of cases there was continuing face-to-face contact. Adopters are seldom under any legal constraint to continue post-adoption contact and, if it is as wide-spread as this survey suggests, presumably many adopters are persuaded in consequence of its perceived advantages.

Quinton et al. exclude almost entirely (with the exception of Triseliotis's 1973 study and that of Dominick in 1988) the whole body of research in relation to the prevalence of searching among adoptees, post-adoption reunions, and the responses of birth parents and adoptees following reunion. Here the evidence suggests that for some adoptees and their birth relatives the lack of contact as they grow up may have negative consequences and that the opportunity to meet later in adulthood may often be beneficial in a variety of ways, including a strengthening of relationships with adoptive parents (for a 'flavour' of this research see, for example, Sobol, & Cardiff, 1983; Kowal, & Schilling, 1985; Feigelman, & Silverman, 1986; Silverman, Campbell, Patti, & Style, 1988; Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Boult, 1992; Sachdev, 1992; Pacheco and Eme, 1993; Harris, 1996; Lichtenstein, 1996; Griffiths, 1997; Mullender, 1997).

Quinton et al. also, for example, claim that 'only a very small amount of research' (1997: 406) has centred on the consequences for birth parents of relinquishment, and they review just two studies. Their summary falls well short of doing justice to the available research

in a field where there are at least 15 studies of relevance published internationally, including those employing random sampling techniques (see, for example, Sachdev, 1992) and nationwide samples (see, for example, Field, 1991, 1992).

One of the two studies to which they do refer, with apparent approval and without any analysis of its methodological problems (beyond noting 'use of hypothetical responses to some questions' in a table, p. 404), is a study by Hughes (1995). In this research Hughes asked a sample of 30 women in contact with a post-adoption counselling agency whether with hindsight they would now, many years after adoption, have favoured open rather than confidential adoption. Seventeen were emphatically in favour of mediated contact and eight were in favour, with qualification. Hughes found there was generally less support for more open unmediated contact, primarily as a result of anxiety that this could, at this point, disrupt their children's lives.

The validity of this finding, however, which runs counter to that of a good number of other studies, must be in doubt by virtue of the fact that respondents were being asked to think of contact hypothetically and retrospectively, when none had existed. A fear as to the disruptive effects of the sudden commencement of contact would logically be a *non sequitur* in the context of relationships where there had there been regular contact at the outset, something these women may well have chosen had it been an available option at the time their children were relinquished. More than anything, this study highlights the difficulties of retrospective research. It does seem surprising that in this study the methodology is not questioned. In one, much more robust, study, in terms of the criteria the authors themselves devise, key findings are given no weighting because the methodology was thought to be insufficiently reported (see discussion following of Thoburn and Rowe in Fratter, Rowe, Sapsford, & Thoburn, 1991). It is also surprising that Hughes's study, with its obvious limitations, should be singled out, while at the same time other relevant research, such as that noted, is ignored.

There are also many other studies that might usefully have been examined in a thorough review of the evidence concerning post-placement contact in permanent care (see, for example, Thoburn, Murdoch, & O'Brien, 1986; Barth, 1987; Demick, & Wapner, 1988; Sachdev, 1991; Thoburn, 1990; Poulin, 1992; Demick, 1993; Siegal, 1993; Logan, 1996). These, among others that could be cited, together with the studies noted elsewhere in this article, are either studies of which these authors are unaware, or they do not fit their (largely inexplicit) criteria for inclusion.

In accepting the claim of Quinton and colleagues that they will 'review the empirical data [on contact] and the conclusions that can be drawn from them' (p. 394) we are entitled, as a minimum, to expect that every relevant study, and every account of every study, has been included. Furthermore, we should be confident, where studies are not included, that a deliberate, rather than an accidental, omission has occurred.

However, the significant omissions that have been noted thus far in their account of the research, seem far more likely to be accidental than deliberate, given, for example, that some relate to later published findings in studies which, in their initial stages, seem to have passed Quinton et al.'s test for inclusion. The evidence pointing to a significant lack of thoroughness in their review of the research entitles us to ask what reliance can be placed on the general conclusions that are reached.

Ultimately, even if any omissions were planned and deliberate, it is not satisfactory to expect readers to assume that such studies were excluded because of a lack of merit. This is particularly so when the test for inclusion and exclusion is insufficiently disclosed for us to make our own judgments as to its merits and fairness. We need to know that each study in the field was given careful consideration, we need to know which studies were then explicitly excluded and we need to know why this decision was taken.

Other research with a bearing on contact

In addition to the inadequacy of Quinton et al.'s review of the research bearing directly on the question of continuing contact in adoption, one might have expected researchers aiming to offer a thorough review of the evidence in this field to have wished to include data from other well-designed studies, not specifically focused on contact, where evidence emerges nonetheless concerning its benefits or disadvantages. Thus, in a study of nearly 800 intact special-needs adoptions, Rosenthal and Groze (1992) consider the merits (based on adoptive parent report data) of contact with birth relatives (including siblings) for both adoptees and the family in a subsample of 267 adoptions. Their general conclusion is that 'For most children, contacts with relatives were at least moderately positive. These contacts helped children to view the birth family – its strengths and weaknesses – more realistically' (p. 195). The researchers go on to compare their findings, in relation to contact, with another study (Nelson, 1985) of special-needs adoption (also omitted by Quinton et al.), noting that 'Findings in this study very closely mirror those of Nelson (1985). In Nelson's study one-half of the respondents were "glad" (p. 108) that their adoptive child was in contact with a biological relative, while only 9 percent expressed dissatisfaction' (Rosenthal, & Groze, 1992: 195).

Another example of an important study which ought to have rated a mention is that of Eldred and colleagues (1976), since it is one of the few studies to offer some evidence in relation to the possible effects of contact for adult adoptees. These researchers followed up a cohort of all (5500) adoptees placed in Denmark between 1924 and 1947 and derived a sample of 216 using a stratified random-sampling technique. Although their primary interest was in assessing the genetic component of psychiatric illness, the study also provides much useful information about the whole adoption process. Among other findings was the conclusion that despite policies leading to the general discouragement of contact, in the one-fifth of the sample where this had been established there was no evidence of its having adversely affected relationships between adoptees and their adoptive parents, nor was it associated with 'the degree of psychopathology' (p. 288) which adoptees showed.

Quinton and his colleagues focus their study on contact between children and birth parents and state that 'we have found no *systematic* studies of the effects of contact with relatives other than birth parents, apart from Wedge and Mantle's (1991) case note study of sibling placements' (p. 395). Once again they employ a non-specific criterion ('*systematic*') to exclude certain studies. Nonetheless one wonders why some of the key studies of adults who were fostered in childhood or separated from a sibling who was fostered or adopted, were not included (see, for example, Zimmerman, 1982; Festinger, 1983; Vinnerljung, 1996; Mullender, 1997). These studies reveal that a significant sense of loss may result from the severance of sibling relationships. Furthermore, the substantial body of research on the importance of sibling relationships in the non-fostered or adopted population is surely of relevance here and one wonders again why it is not even noted (for broad reviews of this research see, for example, Lamb, & Sutton Smith, 1982; Dunn, 1983; Boer, & Dunn, 1992).

Neither is there, in Quinton et al.'s review, any attempt to explore the relevance to the question of post-adoption contact of a considerable body of research in the related field of divorce and separation. Undoubtedly the main thrust of this research points to the advantages of sustaining contact for children with a non-resident parent. As Schaffer notes, following a summary of research in this field, 'Maintaining contact with *both* (his italics) parents ought therefore to be a priority for all those responsible for arranging these children's lives' (1990: 187). Although the two situations of separation from a

parent in substitute care and separation through divorce are obviously not entirely analogous, one might at least have expected some analysis of the parallels between them, and for there to have been some discussion as to the relevance of this body of research.

Failure to report fully

In addition to significant omissions, which are not accounted for, Quinton et al.'s article does not always appear to report in an impartial way on the studies it does include. Thus the finding of Thoburn and Rowe in a study of 1165 permanent placements (in Fratter et al., 1991), that the single variable that is positively correlated with placement stability is the maintenance of contact is not directly disputed, and neither is the sophistication of the study's methodology. However, no weighting is given to this finding because, we are told, the authors' 'multivariate analyses were not fully presented'(p. 409). The study is in fact unusual in having an appendix, written by the statistician, a distinguished professor of econometrics, which explains its methodology and use of logit analysis. Indeed, since Quinton et al. express an interest in evaluating the methodologies of different studies, they might, in addition to merely noting the study's use of logit analysis, have remarked on the fact that this is a much more appropriate tool when the dependent variable is a dichotomy (e.g. placement success or failure) than are more conventional multiple regression techniques, which will produce misleading results.

To give no weight to one of Thoburn and Rowe's principal findings because all the data was not published in the book seems, frankly, rather lame. Indeed it is common practice when publishing the findings of such large and complex studies for a professional, but not necessarily an academic readership, to publish only key data. Customarily those wishing fuller statistical information obtain this directly from the researchers – a course of action that Quinton et al. could no doubt have pursued had they wished.

One of the other large-scale studies reported on in Quinton et al. is that of Berry (1993), which compared the perceptions of adopters with contact (55% of the sample), and those without contact, in 1307 adoptions. Quinton et al. state that 'approximately two-thirds of adoptive parents were comfortable with contact but under one-fifth thought it would confer benefits on the family or the child' (p. 405).

This summary of the findings is potentially misleading. The proportion who were comfortable with contact is reported reasonably accurately, although of the 824 respondents who had contact only 9% expressed themselves as 'very uncomfortable' with it, 23% were 'somewhat uncomfortable', 37% were 'comfortable' and 31% 'very comfortable'. However, their presentation of the figures for the perceived benefits of contact for the child and family is at best ambiguous. Their summary could easily be taken to imply that apart from the one-fifth who believed that contact would bring advantages, other respondents perceived disadvantages. This is far from true. Nearly half (48%) of the total sample stated they did not know what effect contact would have on adoptees, and a further 18% indicated that they expected it would have little influence, leaving just 16% who believed that contact might have a negative influence. Furthermore, when the subsample of those with *planned contact* is considered, only a tiny minority, 7%, took the view that contact would have a negative influence on the child, 32% perceived positive benefits for the child, 24% expected contact to have 'little influence' on the child and 37% stated that they did not know what effect it would have (Berry, 1993: 250, Table 3).

In addition, Quinton et al. crucially fail to report that those with planned contact expressed significantly higher levels of satisfaction overall with their adoptions, that they were significantly more likely to say that their adoptions had exceeded their expectations

and were significantly more likely to state that they 'would do this adoption again' (Berry, 1993: 251) than were those in adoptions without planned contact. It is difficult to imagine why, having obviously consulted the study, they did not include these findings and bring these important matters to our attention.

In yet another instance, a potentially misleading ambiguity is created in their résumé of the research findings. The authors give a brief account of a Norwegian study in relation to contact in (mostly) long-term foster care (Backe-Hansen, 1994). They state that at placement there was a 'plan for contact with birth parents', but that this had only been 'maintained' (or in some instances increased) by about 'half of the birth parents and their children' on a 3-year follow-up (Quinton et al., 1997: 402). Quinton et al.'s choice of the word 'maintained' coupled with the inaccurate statement that in all these placements there 'was a plan for contact with birth parents' might lead the unwary reader to the conclusion that it was some action on the part of birth parents (most likely) or perhaps children, that led to a cessation of contact. This is far from true. Examination of the original data (Backe-Hansen, 1994: 25–26) yields a very different picture. In an original sample of 46 children, 40 were followed-up 3 years after placement. There were 17 without birth family contact, but this is not because contact foundered. There was never a professional plan at the outset to have contact (10 children under 1 year had no contact) or contact was legally terminated, usually 'after a short while' (p. 26). As Backe-Hansen notes 'The workers' attitude in these cases was that it would be best for the children to have a fresh start. Then, the children were even given new first names, and the parents did not know where they lived' (p. 28).

In other parts of their review Quinton et al. give a less than full account of studies and sometimes omit important findings as the following two examples demonstrate. They fail, thus, to mention in their account of Dominick's (1988) study (see p. 405) the view expressed by 'nearly all the birthmothers who had met the adoptive parents of their child' that it was the opportunity to meet that 'had helped them with their feelings about having the baby adopted and helped them adjust to the adoption' . Indeed 'all but one of the birthmothers [$n = 28$] who had met the adoptive parents were glad, on balance, that they had met' (Dominick, 1988: 1). Although Quinton et al. note in their summary table that adopters who had contact 'were helped in confidence about the task', this does not really do justice to the findings in relation to contact. The study found, in addition to the fact that 90% of adopters ($n = 38$) who had had direct contact were glad this had occurred, that 'Nearly half also felt that contact had helped them to build a relationship with the child, by increasing their knowledge of the child's background, reducing uncertainty as to the child's origins and putting the child in a known context, helping them to understand the child better and enabling them to answer the child's questions honestly' (Dominick, 1988: 2).

Another example of less than fulsome reporting of research findings occurs in their account of Borland and colleagues' study (Borland, O'Hara, & Triseliotis, 1991). This compared samples of permanent placements (both foster care and adoption) that had disrupted with those that were stable. Borland et al. concluded that for *younger* children there was no statistically significant evidence that contact was associated with placement stability, or evidence that it was associated with placement failure. This is presented by Quinton et al. as a finding that applies across all children in the study when they state 'the study provides no evidence that contact aids stability' (p. 409). However, a more detailed examination of the evidence was called for. It is clear in the original report that contact is much more common in the intact placements of children aged over 10 than in those that disrupted for this age group (Borland et al., 1991: 15, para. 3.26). Furthermore, the authors state 'continuing family care during placement was associated with stability

for children placed after being in care for less than two years' (p. 15, para. 3.29). Borland et al., in another account of this research state: 'Among older children it did seem that retaining contact with a member of the birth family was generally helpful. Three quarters of those who remained in placement had kept in touch with someone from the birth family compared with one third of those whose placements had disrupted' (1991: 40).

Similarly their account of Barth and Berry's study (1988) of 120 older child placements concludes, as do the authors of that study, that disruption rates were not 'significantly different between closed and inclusive adoptions' (Quinton et al., 1997: 409), but they might also have noted that 'Among those placements for which contact was arranged, *planned* (my italics) contact with birth parents (but not siblings, relatives and previous caretakers) was associated with stability' (Barth, & Berry, 1988: 152).

A-historical

One further objection to this review is its apparent implication that adoption without contact should confidently proceed on the basis that it has developed as 'evidence-based practice' while for adoption with contact such confidence is lacking. Even using the very crude measure of placement disruption, for children placed without contact, disruptions for some age groups easily exceed 1 in 5 and can be nearly as high as 1 in 2 (Thoburn, & Rowe, in Fratter et al., 1991). Certainly not the sort of 'evidence' that would be weighty enough to continue any drugs trial where human life could be at risk, and certainly not sufficient reason to eschew more inclusive practices in adoption where improved success may result.

When secrecy was formally introduced into adoption in England and Wales it was not because it was 'evidence based'. Openness, at least in respect of adoption records, was opposed by adoption societies at the time adoption was first introduced on the basis of the belief, as summarized by the Tomlin Committee, that 'if the eyes be closed to the facts the facts themselves will cease to exist' (Tomlin Report, 1925: 9, para. 28). However, the right to legal openness was enforced by the appellate courts throughout the 1930s (see for example *Re J M Carroll (an infant)* [1932] 1 KB 317). The Horsburgh Report (1937) conducted a careful enquiry to see whether there was evidence to support the wish of some adoption societies for more secret adoptions and found no evidence for birth-parent interference, a key rationale then, as today, for secrecy.[1] The adoption societies, we are told, when challenged on this point, could adduce no evidence and only three examples of interference were reported from among 1200 public law adoptions under the Poor Law (p. 20, para. 18). The Horsburgh Report concluded that openness was very necessary so that birth parents could 'satisfy themselves personally as to the suitability of the prospective adopters and as to all other matters with which the Court is concerned' (p. 22, para. 19).

The lack of legal openness in adoption has its historical origins not in the demands of practice-based experience, but in the wishes of some adopters and adoption societies to eliminate children's birth origins so that they would be, in both law and practice, as if born to their adopters. There is little hint in the historical record that this had anything to do with the welfare of children. The ground was prepared for mainstream adoption practice to become characterized by secrecy and lack of contact by a private member's bill in 1949. The impetus for Basil Nield's bill was a massive increase in non-marital and extra-marital births and adoptions over the period of the war years, a desire to protect birth parents (often married) from shame, their children from the stigma of the circumstances of their birth and their adopters from the pain of public acknowledgement of infertility. Hardly the 'evidence-based practice' one would wish to endorse and scarcely

arguments to continue with serial number adoption procedures and lack of birth-relative contact in the social milieu of the late 20th century.

It must also be noted that Quinton et al. seem to view 'evidence-based adoption practice' from a very narrow, and one might say, parochial perspective. There is evidence in many accounts in social anthropology and history of the successful practice of inclusive forms of adoption and permanent placement where birth-relative links are retained (see for example Ancel, 1958; Marmier, 1969; Benet, 1976; Goody, 1983; Boswell, 1988; Ban, 1989). Internationally legal systems (including those of some of our European neighbours, see for example Verdier, 1988) are at least as likely to enshrine some continuing role for birth relatives following permanent placement as they are to extinguish irrevocably all former ties.

Finally, in what is an a-historical account, Quinton et al. exclude from view the fact that legal adoption, in the form in which we currently practise it, has always also included the practice of openness and contact. Thus they could, for example, have found reference to post-adoption contact in important early studies such as those of Goodacre (1966), Kornitzer (1968), Seglow and Pringle (1972), Eldred et al. (1976) and Raynor (1980). They might usefully have mentioned also the historical research of Kawashima (1982), and Carp (1992, 1995), indicating a continuing tradition of more inclusive adoption practice in the USA. In addition they might have reported on early practice accounts of openness such as that of Richards (1970), or they may have noted the journal article by an adopter Kenworthy-Wood (1964) who advises in relation to contact that 'in my own case I found the meetings very helpful, and the contacts comforting. It seemed to help me in some curious way to accept these children whom I loved so dearly, as my own flesh and blood, while remembering that in fact they are not' (p. 148). They might also have observed the call, in 1961, of an eminent British psychiatrist, working in the adoption field, for more agencies to emulate the practice of those *already* arranging meetings between adopters and birth parents (Gough, 1961) and the first UK consumer survey on adoption undertaken by *Woman's Hour*, in 1957, highlighting as it did the painful consequences of secrecy.

David Quinton and his colleagues state that 'For permanent placements the case advanced for the benefits of contact leads to some specific testable hypotheses' (p. 411). These, they state, are reduced disruptions and better adjustment in children and birth parents alike, adoptive parents who are more secure in the parenting role and adoptions where the parenting task is easier. We certainly do not have sufficient evidence to be fully satisfied in all these areas (nor do we in most other areas of child-welfare research, including outcomes in later life for adoptees of closed adoptions). However, we are very much further down the road to having the evidence we need to guide us in practice than Quinton et al.'s incomplete and, one must at times conclude, somewhat partisan account of the research might have us believe.

There is, as there has been some opportunity to note in this article, a growing and significant body of research which indicates that in permanent placements, where there is the planned maintenance of birth-relative contact, advantages may accrue for all parties. These advantages centre on higher levels of child, adoptive parent and birth-parent satisfaction, greater placement stability, a greater sense of security and permanence in the parental role for substitute parents, and improved adjustment for children.

Contact in permanent substitute care is not a 'social experiment that is currently underway' (Quinton et al., 1997: 411); it has a history stretching back more than 4000 years to the Summarian and Babylonian codes (Cook, 1903; Driver, & Miles, 1952), and it has been practised across many lands, cultures and legal systems. Historically, it is the practice of severing all ties for children with their families of origin that constitutes a

middle-to-late 20th-century experiment in some few Western jurisdictions. It is a practice born largely from the pressures and demands of adults who are involuntarily childless and their professional advocates. A more child-centred practice, which recognizes from the messages of research, that for some children the irrevocable severance of their ties with birth relatives may have harmful and irremediable consequences, is beginning at last to emerge.

Quinton et al. are right to note that practitioners working in the adoption and permanent care field need guidance for practice on the evidence of research about the advantages and disadvantages of the maintenance of contact for children with their birth relatives. It is a matter of regret, therefore, that the review of the evidence they present does not come close to offering a full, thorough and consistently accurate review of the substantial body of relevant research in this field. It would be a matter of much greater regret if practitioners and policy makers were to make crucial contact decisions in the lives of vulnerable children on the basis of the the conclusions reached by Quinton and his colleagues. When all of the available evidence is examined, it points with increasing clarity to the potential benefits for all parties of the maintenance of contact between children in new placements and their important figures from the past.

Note

1. Although arguments centring on birth-parent interference continue to be advanced as a primary ground on which to oppose continuing contact after adoption (see, for example, White, 1991) this claim is unsupported in evidence (see for example Department of Health, 1995) and there appears to have been but one reported case in which this has occurred (see *Re O (Contempt Committal)* [1995] 2FLR, 767).

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