Here and now - there and then: Narrative time and space in intercountry adoptees' stories about background, origin and roots

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Lindgren, C., Zetterqvist Nelson, K., (2014), Here and now - there and then: Narrative time and space in intercountry adoptees' stories about background, origin and roots, *Qualitative Social Work*, 13(4), 539-554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325013502376>

Original publication available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325013502376>

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TITLE PAGE

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Abstract

Intercountry adoption policy emphasizes openness in relation to adoptees' background. However, because intercountry adoption is a complex web of relations including individuals, institutions and countries, it is impossible to foresee what background, origin and roots will mean to the adopted individual. The present article examines what meanings adoptees themselves ascribe to background, origin and roots. A total of 22 internationally adopted men and women participated in focus group conversations. The participants were invited to discuss their diverse experiences and opinions on these matters and their stories were analyzed from a narrative perspective. The analysis focuses how time and space were made significant in narratives about background, origin and roots. Two contrasting stories – the here-and-now narrative and the there-and-then narrative – are discerned, but further analysis of the narrative space and time dimensions shows a much more complex pattern beyond these extremes. Adoptee narratives characterized by an open time dimension deal with what could have happened, alternative lives, and the analysis shows how these alternative lives are storied and valued. Furthermore, when adoptees tell their stories about background and roots, 'there', i. e. the birth country, is ascribed different meanings. Our analysis shows that the categorization of space as wide or narrow, in the sense of collective or personal, respectively, is useful in understanding the different approaches to background and roots. Based on the present results, we suggest that social workers may wish to organize their counseling along the time and space dimensions of adoptees' narratives.

Keywords

Intercountry adoption, adoptees' stories, origin, roots, very small focus groups, narrative time, narrative space, post-adoption services

Introduction

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as domestic adoption in Sweden nearly ceased, the number of intercountry adoptions increased dramatically. This change brought with it a discourse on the significance of openness about the adoption and the adopted child's knowledge of her/his background (Lind, 2012a; Lind 2012b; Lind and Johansson, 2009; Lindgren, 2010; Yngvesson, 2003). In subsequent years, the discourse of openness and importance of background was taken up by and integrated into a broader psychological discourse of identity formation, which pressured adoptive parents to affirm their children's origin and encourage them to feel proud of their background (Herman, 2008;

Howell, 2006; Jonson Malm, 2011; Lindgren and Lind, 2009). Later, this was also reflected in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), which declared knowledge of one's ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural background a human right. In 1993 *The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption* established children's right to preservation of their ethnic, religious and cultural background.

This emphasis on openness and transparency has permeated the professional sphere (Neil, 2012). Adoptive parents are encouraged to develop strategies to approach their children about their background and culture of origin. The advent of organized 'roots trips' allows adoptees to travel to their country of origin, and so-called Post-adoption Services offers professional support for adoptees who wish to work through their thoughts on background and roots (Howell, 2006; Lind, 2012a; Lindgren and Lind, 2009; Socialstyrelsen 2008; Yngvesson, 2003).

Given the dominant discourse on the importance of origin and roots, we set out here to examine the significance and meaning of these concepts and issues to the intercountry adoptees *themselves*. Drawing on a total of nine focus group conversations with intercountry adoptees, a number of stories have been analyzed. We specifically examine the ways in which these narratives orient toward time and space. We also discuss the implications of the study for social work.

Narrating intercountry adoption

American anthropologist Barbara Yngvesson discusses how the Western world of intercountry adoptions seems to be imbued by two main stories about the adopted child (Yngvesson, 2003: 7). The first, and oldest, is the legal story of separation in which intercountry adoption is narrated as a clean break from the old life and a new start in a new world. This story of the 'freestanding child' was challenged in the early 1990s by a competing story of the 'rooted child', which stressed the child's right to know about and preserve her/his cultural background and roots (Yngvesson, 2003: 8). These stories are associated with different adoption practices, Yngvesson continues, and are 'versions of a familiar and powerful (Western) myth about identity as a matter of exclusive belongings' (Yngvesson, 2003: 8).

Against this backdrop, Yngvesson suggests an alternative story of the ‘gift child’ who is ‘freed for exchange and links the giver and receiver as partners in the exchange’ (Yngvesson, 2003: 24; see also Yngvesson, 2002). Based on an ethnographic research project on a root trip to Chile for Swedish adoptive families in 1998, Yngvesson describes how adoptees faced a range of challenges in trying to make sense of what had once taken place in another country, interacting with other players such as civil servants from the adoption services, adoptive parents, birth parents and relatives, and other adoptees. The ethnographic findings, Yngvesson argues, demonstrate how the free-standing child and the rooted child are simplified versions of much more complex experiences and events. And, she continues, the ‘physical movement of a child in adoption – the routes it takes from “there to here” – is part of this interdependence and the exchanges through which it is played out’ (Yngvesson, 2003: 24).

In line with this argument, Sandra Patton, in her study of transracial adoption in America, suggests that we, like sociologist John Gabriel, should talk about ‘routes’ rather than roots in relation to adoptees’ background. The concept of routes recognizes not only biology and culture, but also the political and social circumstances that formed the lives of birth and adoptive parents and led to the adoption. It enables an understanding of the displacements and movements, going ‘beyond tracking ancestors to encompass the multiple paths through which people’s lives are formed’ (Patton, 2000: 18).

Yngvesson’s ‘gift child story’ and Patton’s stressing of ‘routes’ provide a broader understanding of the intricate web of spatial relations surrounding the adoptee from the very beginning of life. In this space of relations and places, according to Yngvesson (2003), there are no guarantees as to how one’s background and origin are perceived or made relevant.

In a Swedish study by Martinell Barfoed (2008), the time dimension in Swedish intercountry adoptees’ own stories about background and origin is highlighted. In her analysis, drawing on narrative theory, two overarching storylines appear: *adoption as a complicated experience* and *adoption as a non-complicated experience*. The narrative point of departure in the ‘complicated’ storyline is the moment of abandonment by a birth parent; the personal life story is structured around problems related to these early experiences. A ‘non-complicated’ storyline starts from the moment of encounter with

adoptive parents, with a personal life story stressing a normal childhood and a good life today (Barfoed Martinell, 2008: 219). These two storylines show that the time dimension is significant.

As shown above, intercountry adoption is part of a complex web of global, national and personal relations, stretching from ‘then to now’ and from ‘there to here’ in an adoptee’s life. Given this, it is impossible to foresee how individual adoptees will understand and deal with their background. Previous research has drawn attention to time and space as important aspects of intercountry adoption practices and narratives. However, the dimensions of temporality and spatiality have not been brought together in analyses of adoptees’ narratives. This is what we set out to do in the present article.

The aim is to investigate what meanings adoptees themselves ascribe to background, origin and roots by analyzing, from a narrative perspective, how time and space are made significant in adoptees’ tellings about these issues.

Theoretical tools

In narrative theory, time and temporality have been significant themes (see, e.g., Brockmeier, 2000; Bruner, 2001; Ricoeur, 1988). In our approach to temporality, we draw on Gary Saul Morson, an American scholar of literary theory, and his theory of ‘shadows of time’ and more specifically the conceptualization of narrative time as *open* or *closed* (Morson, 1994: 28; see also Bernstein, 1994). When a teller, in her/his narrative reconstruction of a set of events and lived experience, points out not only the events that *did* happen but also those that *could have happened*, the time dimension is characterized as open. An open time narrative focuses on the different possibilities of a life trajectory and ‘invites us to inquire into the other possible presents that might have been and to imagine a quite different course of events’ (Morson, 1994: 118). By contrast, in closed time narratives, it is as if the present situation is predetermined, with a sense of the inevitability of what led to the current situation, which in turn paves the way for a judgmental approach to the event and the involved protagonists. Narratives characterized by closed time preclude notions of the arbitrariness and uncertainty of human life (see also Zetterqvist Nelson, 2006).

Narrative research has typically privileged temporal orientation over the spatial, according to Mike Baynham (2003). In studies of migration and displacement, space

has been made relevant, and more specifically, the intertwining of space and time has been in focus. Baynam argues, along with de Certeau, that '[E]very story is a travel story – a spatial practice' (de Certeau, 1988: 115). According to Baynam (2003: 353; *italics in original*), the story space in migration narratives, between '*here-and-now* and *then-and-there*', is not straightforward. A closer look, he continues, displays different meanings of what space is and how to understand it. In the present study, we have focused on the ways in which intercountry adoptees orient to space in their stories.

Methodology and ethical considerations

The choice of focus group discussions to collect the material was related to our interest in examining adoptees' meaning-making in relation to 'background', 'origin' and 'roots'. The focus was on these issues as the specific subject matter, rather than on individual life stories, but because this is of personal significance to the informants, we chose to organize very small focus groups (VSFGs) (Toner, 2009). Jean Toner describes how the interactive dynamics of the small focus group allow for a combination of personal stories and 'macro level interpretation' of the shared experiences and stories (Toner, 2009: 187). In our study, it was obvious how the small focus groups provided an opportunity to talk about topics of both an individual and structural character. With one exception, the groups consisted of two or three participants.

The selection of participants involved a criterion-based purposive process, based on ads on adoptee organization websites and on an information website for students at a Swedish university. These ads addressed intercountry adoptees between 20-35 years of age. A few domestically adopted persons responded and wished to participate. Because we wished to take an inclusive approach and show respect for everyone's life experiences, we invited them to take part in the interviews. However, because the present article focuses on intercountry adoption, their specific stories will not be analyzed here.

Respondents who contacted the researchers were provided with more detailed information about the study, allowing them to give informed consent. In accordance with research ethics, the information (written and verbal) stressed the voluntary aspect, including the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time. We also stressed that the material would be treated with confidentiality, that all personal information would

be removed, that pseudonyms would be used and the countries of origin changed in ways that prevent identification without interfering with the main findings.

A total of 26 adopted persons were brought together in nine focus group discussions. Twenty-two of them, thirteen women and nine men aged 20-35, were internationally adopted from eight countries in different parts of the world: Asia (5 countries, 16 persons), South America (2 countries, 5 persons) and Africa (1 country, 1 person). Seventeen of the informants were part-time or full-time university students, and five had a position on the labor market. Fourteen of the informants had visited their country of birth after the adoption.

Participants were not matched for age, gender or country of birth, instead the interview groups were formed based on where and when participants were able to meet. Three of the participants knew each other as members of the same organization and two realized during the interview that they went to school together. The others did not know each other when they met for the interview.

Because confidentiality between participants cannot be guaranteed, the interviews were organized so that each informant could control how much and what kind of information she or he wanted to share with the others. When the focus group participants were gathered, together with one of the researchers acting as a moderator, the discussions were prompted by themes structured as a mind-map consisting of various aspects of background, origin and roots. The moderator had the role of initiating discussions and conversations between participants, rather than asking questions. It was always possible for individual participants to refrain from answering questions from the others and to take part in the discussions on their own terms. The discussions were generally very lively and emotionally intense, often involving great curiosity about one another's personal experiences and ideas. It was obvious how the stories produced were co-constructed in a dialogical sense (Riessman and Quinney, 2005). The participants were highly engaged in each other's stories, listening actively, sometimes interrupting, sometimes supporting and encouraging.

The data collected were transcribed verbatim, based on a simple level of transcription (see appendix). When more than one participant is quoted in an excerpt, the first letter refers to the participant's name and M to the moderator.

In the analytical procedure, we began by reading through the data (altogether a total of roughly 200 pages), and themes connected with the research questions were identified (Braun and Clark, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). In relation to the issues of ‘background’, ‘origin’ and ‘roots’, two key themes recurred throughout the material: The first was related to the issue of temporality (now and then) and the second to the issue of spatiality (here and there). When re-reading the data, we made a selection of excerpts that could match these themes, first independently, to check the validity of coding strategies, and then jointly. In the next step, we did a more thorough reading of a range of small stories that represented different ways of approaching the issues of ‘background’, ‘origin’ and ‘roots’ along the narrative dimensions of time (Brockmeier, 2000; Bruner, 2001; Morson, 1994) and space (Baynham, 2003). These stories were analyzed with a focus on how time and space were narrated, with a specific interest in narrative time as open or closed and the construction of ‘there’ as wide or narrow.

The presentation of results is structured as follows. First, we discuss two contrasting ways of talking about background and roots, exemplified by the ‘here-and-now’ narrative and the ‘there-and-then’ narrative. In this section, the intertwining of time and space dimensions is clarified. It is followed by two sections in which time and space dimensions are analyzed separately. Finally we conclude the findings of the study and discuss implications for social work.

Contrasting narratives: here and now - there and then

As the interview data were being analyzed, we discerned two extremes regarding narrative focus in relation to time and space: the here-and-now narrative and the there-and-then narrative. One recurrent theme in the discussions was an emphasis on the importance of here and now. Erica’s account of her views on origins can illustrate this.

No but, yeeahh ... it ... I don’t know, I just haven’t had that many questions about origin like that. (Noo) I don’t know why really. No but I guess it’s maybe a little like I said at first that I’m so here and now, all at once. Of course the culture’s there and I get that I well don’t ... that I come from somewhere else and all that. (Hmhm) But it’s never been such an important topic for me sort of, really never. (Noo) It’s been interesting and all, but not like I could imagine living in Ethiopia and learning about my culture and everything.

In Erica's narrative, her origin is portrayed as something that she is naturally aware of, but not particularly interested in. Being born in another country has never been an issue to her, she says, and she has never had many questions about it. Erica explains this approach referring to her way of living 'here and now, all at once'. Thus, in her telling, the time and space of her early life is not significant to her life here and now. Susan's account of her relation to her country of birth displays a similar approach.

A lot of people asked when I'd been in Colombia if it had..., how it felt when I was on Colombian soil and for me I guess it's like if somebody had told me my whole life that I'd come from Chile then I guess I'd've had the same feeling if I landed in Chile, I mean it's what you make of it, a country can't be so important. Of course it was special to go there because I've always heard about it and it's fun to see where I was born, but there's like nothing more...

By saying that it did mean something to her to visit her birth country, but only because she has been told that this is where she was born, Susan questions the objective importance of one's country of birth. She would have felt the same thing for any other country, she says, if she thought that was where she was born. In her account, one's origin is defined as a narrative of origin, rather than the actual origin per se.

In their tellings, both Erica and Susan focus on the here and now. Their life in Sweden today is the fixed point of their narratives, and their lives are not described as determined by their adoption and their early life in another country. The past is not used to explain the present, but the present is the outlook from which the past is talked about. In Morson's (1994) terms, narrative time is open. Time is closely related to space, and in these narratives the significant space is 'here', the country and culture in which one lives. 'There', the country and culture of origin, is not described as central to one's life trajectory, but may be interesting as part of one's past, or the narrative of one's past. Erica's and Susan's stories are examples of here-and-now narratives that occurred in the data, where the adoption and the country of birth were downplayed.

This approach is contrasted by the there-and-then narrative represented by Tina's telling. In this sequence, the focus group's talk revolved around the members' experiences of roots trips. When Tina speaks, the group becomes silent and listens intently to her strong emotionally charged account of what she considers the main meaning of visiting her birth country, namely to confront her birth mother:

- T But for me it's super important to be able to confront, I mean if my biological mother is even alive, that's super important for me. Otherwise I don't want to go to Chile, where I'm from. Not for a very long time, because first I want to visit my bi, biolog, biological family. [...]
- T Yeah, oh yeah, I mean I'm going to go see her right away...
- M Yes
- T ... and tell her what it's been like for me in Sweden
- M Yes
- T And like and tell, and ask why she did this, and the consequences and so on. What's become of the whole thing.
- P Ask all the tough questions
- T Oh yeah, right away, yeah

Tina positions herself in a narrative that creates a strong emphasis on there and then. In her telling, the abandonment is central, and her life has been shaped by this event. Tina's account is about confronting her mother with the consequences of her mother's actions, and it has strong moral implications. In the subsequent discussion, other participants suggest that her mother gave her up for adoption out of concern, to offer her a better life. Tina says that might be true, but '... still, you have to think carefully, maybe not just once or maybe twice [...] before you give a child up for adoption, or maybe if you should have, used protection or...'. At this point the other participants laugh, but Tina shows she is serious by saying: 'But really, I really mean it.' In Tina's telling, narrative time is closed. The story is characterized by its emphasis on one moment in life being decisive for how the whole life turns out, constituting a deterministic view of life as governed by that particular moment – the adoption. It also conveys a moral standpoint.

In terms of space, Tina's story centers on 'there' but in a very specific way. Tina says that she only wants to go to her country of birth to see and confront her birth mother. She is asked whether she has any relation to her country of birth, and if she feels anything special for it. She answers: 'No, actually nothing. Because whenever you watch TV you know it's always Indians or Spaniards.' Defining herself as belonging to an ethnic minority group, Tina does not identify with 'Indians and Spaniards,' who

according to her often represent her birth country. Hence, 'there' is most central in her telling, but it is manifested in her biogenetic and not her cultural origins.

These stories represent two extremes in the interview data. Tina's narrative articulates what Martinell Barfoed (2008) has called the story of adoption as a complicated experience. It emphasizes the adoption, the abandonment, as decisive for the adoptee's life course. In Erica's and Susan's tellings, on the other hand, the adoption is not described as the determining factor in how life turned out, but as a part of their past that could be interesting but not existentially important. That is in line with the story of adoption as a non-complicated experience.

However, we see great variation in the interview data concerning how adoptees relate to time and space as they reflect on background, origin and roots. In the section below, we explore further how the adoptees relate to time in their telling, focusing on the concept of alternative and parallel lives.

Narrative time: Parallel lives - alternative lives

When analyzing adoptees' narratives in detail with a focus on time, one approach was apparent that went beyond the polarized version of the here and now, there and then. Adoptees describe in comparable ways how visiting their birth country made them think about how their lives could have been. They describe a sense of seeing parallel life-course trajectories, and their narratives stress how arbitrary circumstances and accidental occurrences shape one's life trajectory. In their tellings, narrative time opens up. Bill's telling exemplifies this approach. In the following excerpt, he describes his experience when visiting his birth country and one of its big cities.

No but, like ... yeah but, I also felt all this with like the alarms, the smells, 11 million people ya know. (M: Hm) (yeeah) 46 million in the whole country and just shhhhhooooo ... And YEEAHH! Back to ... and I felt like when you travel around there, like on the bus or subway that you realize that ... it's sort of it's like a ... it's like two parallel lives sort of (M: Hmhm!) in some way. It's not like ... yeah, sometimes ya know you can feel like, sh*t, I should've taken that job or maybe you should've done this, or maybe you should've moved there ... But here it's so different so it's two like parallel lives running alongside each other, like ... here's how it could've been sort of, and it's so unbelievably different compared to the life you have here.

In his narrative, Bill describes how he was overwhelmed by his impressions and felt like he was thrown into an alternative life that could have been his. He refers to other stages in life when he made decisions about taking a job, moving or something else decisive to his life, but these alternative life courses would not have had such great implications, compared to the outcome of being adopted. Bill's way of seeing alternative life courses and talking about what could have been illustrates the concept of 'open time'. Not only does he describe an alternative trajectory for his present life, in this moment he can also imagine, using Morson's (1994) words, another possible present; 'it's two like parallel lives running alongside each other'.

A similar approach is found in the way Calle describes how he wandered the neighborhoods of his birth town, where he knew his biological mother and brother had lived. During a longer stay in his country of origin, he often visited the area, watching people.

But then I felt sort of, when I was standing there or sitting on some bench like, that well ... yeeah, I mean it could've been here ya know. I mean like who knows and I'm not at all unhappy with anything in my life here or my childhood. I thought I had one of these fairy-tale childhoods. But just when I sat there it just felt like ... it could've been so very different ... Or it could've been a whole different life really, and I'm never going to have that. [...] It was simply grief.

Just like Bill, during a visit in his birth country Calle encountered a situation that could have been part of his life if he had grown up there. He describes how visiting his mother's and brother's neighborhood evoked sentimental feelings and made him sad. His narrative is not about wanting another life, however, but about the sorrow of not knowing what an alternative life would have been like.

While Bill's narrative is about how he was overwhelmed and fascinated by sensing the possibility of an alternative life, Calle expresses sadness about not being familiar with this alternative life. They both, however, embrace their alternative lives and talk about them in positive terms, as something to be curious about. Another way of relating to this parallel life theme was demonstrated by Amy and Ray. Amy visited her country of birth, the Philippines, and her narrative depicts a key situation:

- A I've also had that feeling, what's my ... what would my other life have been like if I hadn't been given up and adopted in Sweden. But when we got to ... when we were in the Philippines now I got I guess a sense of how people might have seen me. (Hmhm) Because it was just once when I was walking and holding my super-blonde boyfriend's hand and then a guy comes up and pulls on my boyfriend's arm a bit and shows him a picture of 14 Philippine girls and asks him fucky fucky? (B: Hm)
- M Yeah, right ...
- A And it was like ... I mean, he sees that we're walking and holding hands. I mean I could have been one of these fucky fucky girls actually.

In her narrative, Amy describes how her speculations on what could have happened if she had not been adopted turned into an actual experience of an alternative life. When her boyfriend, during their stay in the Philippines, was offered prostitutes' services she realized she could have been one of those girls and that people on the streets might have thought that was exactly what she was: 'Because you ... mainly from other tourists could get these looks ... ah ha he's gotten one of ... those.' One way of handling this and shunning the public gaze was to avoid holding her boyfriend's hand and not showing they were a couple.

Amy shows no sentimental feeling in her telling. Instead she strongly rejects the kind of life that could have been hers. In that moment, when she was looked at as a would-be prostitute, that parallel life became tangible in her present life. In her story, gender was made relevant in relation to an alternative life. Ray had a similar gendered outlook on what his life might have been, reasoning around the prospects of an orphaned boy, and later young man, in his birth country:

I think about what I'd've done otherwise like, what would I have become otherwise, ya know maybe I'd've ended up in an orphanage and institutionalized, and what other institutions are there when you're older, or yeah right the army in an oppressive country – what kind of person does that make you then...

Here, Ray assumes that even if he had not been given up and adopted in Sweden, his life would have been one without contact with family and parents. The alternative he sees is therefore a life in another institution for young men, for example the army, and

he rhetorically asks what that would have done to him. Like Amy, he expresses no sentimental feelings, and he rejects the alternative life he describes.

The above narratives are all characterized by an open time dimension, dealing with what could have happened, alternative lives. The different premises, however, and the adoptees' different life experiences affect how these alternative lives are storied and valued.

Narrative space: 'There' as wide or narrow

Because the intercountry adoption process involves a transfer of a child from one country to another, space is an obvious theme in adoptees' narratives. In the focus group discussions, adoptees talked about their country of living, Sweden, but the issue to be addressed here is the many different ways in which they related to 'there', i.e. their birth country. In talking about the adoption and one's origin, what represents 'there'? Is 'there' made important, and how?

In the adoptees' narratives, 'there' could signify places and be represented by the country as such, a specific city, a neighborhood or an orphanage. It could also refer to people such as the people and culture of the country, orphanage staff and foster parents, or biological parents, siblings and other relatives. To analyze and understand these ways of relating to 'there' as part of one's origin, we suggest that talking about 'there' as *wide or narrow* is helpful. A widely defined 'there' can focus on the country as such but also on its people, and a narrowly defined 'there' can be represented by the hospital where one was born or by biological parents or siblings. The difference, we would argue, is whether the narrative focuses on the adoptee's relation to a collective 'there', i.e. the nation-state or its population, or to a 'there' defined by the individual's life course, such as an orphanage or a biological relative.

In Mike's narrative, it is his country of birth that is made important. Mike says he knows the names of his parents, but nothing about them as individuals, and that he feels a stronger connection to the country than to them:

I was born there. Yeeah. So there's always gonna be a connection to the country, which has made me, yeah I'm interested, check the news and read a little extra and stuff. So it's part of your personality, it ... It is you know, but I guess it's the country more than my parents themselves.
(Hmhm)

Being born in this country connects him to it, Mike says, and makes him interested in what is happening there. He has never been there, but would like to visit in the future. In Mike's narrative, 'there' is the country and not a specific place or certain people related to his personal history. His definition of 'there' is thus wide and collective. Celia, as well, focuses on the country as such. She describes how she wanted to go there for fun without expectations of searching for relatives. She therefore chose to travel with a company that wanted people to 'be able to experience the country, the language, see as much as possible, experience the food'. In her story, 'there' is represented by the country, its culture, food and language, not by specific places and people connected to her early life.

Jill went back to her birth country when she was 10 years old, together with her adoptive parents. She did search for her biological parents, and she found them:

[...] the last week we had left there I got to see them and my aunt was also there and I have two older brothers there except I didn't get to see them, so I think it was really a pity but we or I anyway am going to go back and then I hope I get to see them.

In Jill's story, 'there' is represented by kinship and personal relations. In other narratives, however, narrowing down one's 'there' like she did is described as complicated.

Dave was born in India and went back for a visit when he was 13 years old. He then visited the orphanage where he had lived and realized that the mental images he had created of what it would be like were actual memories. He also met with the orphanage staff. They recognized him and he recognized them. In his telling, traveling back meant reconnecting with places and people he had known as a child. In Dave's narrative, 'there' is represented by places and people that were part of his own personal history. He is not willing, however, to go further and search for his biological relatives. He says he does not know how he would handle information about his relatives, or meeting with them.

Ray, who has a great deal of information about his adoption and biological parents, has chosen not to contact them. They have built a new life and he does not want to disturb it, but he also says: 'I don't know if it's some self-defense mechanism or if

it's genuine concern. I feel like it's wrong'. Here, Ray touches upon the moral implications of contacting relatives, a theme found in other narratives as well. A wide 'there' is sometimes portrayed as easier to deal with. When 'there' is narrowed down, i.e. connected to one's personal life story, it may include relations, as well as emotional and perhaps ethical responsibilities. Bill says he could probably find his biological parents if he tried, but he is not willing to do it, at least not yet.

I think it's hard ... Because you know I've talked to other people who've also contacted their biological parents. (yeeah) And it's not like you contact them and okay – yeah yeah ... Yeah, so that's what you look like. And then fine ... and then you just close the book and then you're well done. (A: Noo) [...] Instead you open up all over again ya know. (yeeah) And then, okay and what kind of contact do they expect to have with me. (yeeah) What kind of contact am I expected to have with them. And then there are their like desires and maybe like ... yeah, then maybe they want to have contact ya know or they hope I'm successful like and then you have to sort of live up to their ... hopes and stuff.

Bill describes how turning 'there' into people connected to one's personal history means you are subjected to other people's opinions and expectations. Accordingly, if your past is narrowly construed, you may get involved in relationships you cannot control on your own. As long as your past is collective and wide, however, you are in charge of your relation to it. Amy, who is part of the discussion, affirms Bill's way of reasoning and pinpoints the dilemma, saying 'I don't know what the consequences could be. I'm not ready to face them'.

These narratives make clear that space is as central as time when adoptees tell their stories. 'There' can mean many things and be dealt with in different ways when talking about one's adoptive background. The analysis shows that the categorization of space as wide or narrow, in the sense of collective or personal, respectively, can be useful in understanding different outlooks on background and roots.

Conclusion and implications for social work

The aim of the present article was to investigate what meanings adoptees themselves ascribe to background, origin and roots by analyzing, from a narrative perspective, how time and space are made significant in their tellings about these issues.

In the analysis, two extremes regarding time and space were discerned: the here-and-now narrative and the there-and-then narrative. The here-and-now narrative focused on the adoptee's life in Sweden today. The adoption, background and roots were not presented as key elements in the story of life. The opposite was true of the there-and-then narrative, which described the adoption, the abandonment, as decisive to how life turned out. There are parallels between these narratives and the contrasting myths or storylines about adoption identified in research, such as the preservation story versus the clean break story (Yngvesson, 2003) and the story of complicated experiences versus that of uncomplicated experiences (Martinell Barfoed, 2008). Most importantly, however, these stories made clear that time and space are central aspects of adoptees' narratives about their lives and backgrounds. A more thorough and detailed analysis then showed much greater variation and complexity that went beyond these extremes.

One aspect of the open time dimension was the concept of parallel lives. It opened the door to the possibility that life might have been different, and alternative lives were discussed and described in both positive and negative terms. In adoptees' tellings, visiting one's birth country could evoke intense experiences of alternative lives. Here, time and space were intertwined.

In relation to space, 'there' was represented by both places and people, and defined along a scale from wide and collective to narrow and connected to one's personal history. The possibility of 'narrowing down' one's 'there', and go from visiting the country to searching for personal connections, was discussed as a decision requiring careful consideration in relation to one's own willingness to engage in new relations and to how such contact could affect other people's lives.

In their daily lives, intercountry adoptees get questions such as: What is your origin? Have you searched for your roots? These questions imply that these are important issues and that there is a commonsense meaning of 'background', 'origin' and 'roots' in relation to adoptees. Along with Yngvesson (2003), however, we have argued that intercountry adoption is a complex web of relations and that it is an open question what it will mean to the individual.

Our analysis demonstrates that a discussion of background, origin and roots must be related to the different experiences and outlooks adoptees express. It also shows that the alternative to a one-sided picture, according to which all adoptees share the same

interest in their background, need not be a simple reference to each individual's unique experience. When scrutinizing time and space dimensions in adoptees' narratives, patterns can be identified that allow us to discuss what is common, without losing sight of the individual. Moreover, the adoptees' ways of moving along the positions available in narrative space and time dimensions in creating their story exemplify the provisional and constantly changing nature of identity. As noted in previous research, adoptees' narratives 'unsettle for all of us a discourse of origins and authentic identity' (Yngvesson & Mahoney, 2000).

Based on the present results, we suggest that social workers who meet with adoptees may organize their counseling along the time and space dimensions of adoptees' thoughts and experiences. In relation to the time dimension of adoptees' narratives, one aspect to explore is whether the individual adoptee considers her/his life to be predestined or open and influenced by coincidences, and whether she/he has ideas about an alternative life, the life that never was. One crucial question in relation to this is whether being adopted is construed as having been abandoned or 'saved'. Regarding space, it would be important to explore what origin and roots mean to the individual. Is 'there' defined as wide or narrow, or both? Are places or people in focus, or both? Also, it would be fruitful to inquire into alternative definitions and conceptions of origin and roots: What *could* they mean and what *could* they be? And the most important question: What would the adoptee her-/himself *want* them to be?

These themes and questions, emerging from the study, enable the social worker to help the individual adoptee process and sort out her/his experiences and thoughts on background, origin and roots, without presupposing what they mean, what is important and what is not, and how and why this is the case. It allows for a respectful dialogue focused on the adoptee's own definitions and standpoints.

Appendix: Transcription conventions

... = longer pause

[...] = parts removed

() = comments from the moderator or other participant in the group

M = moderator

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council.

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