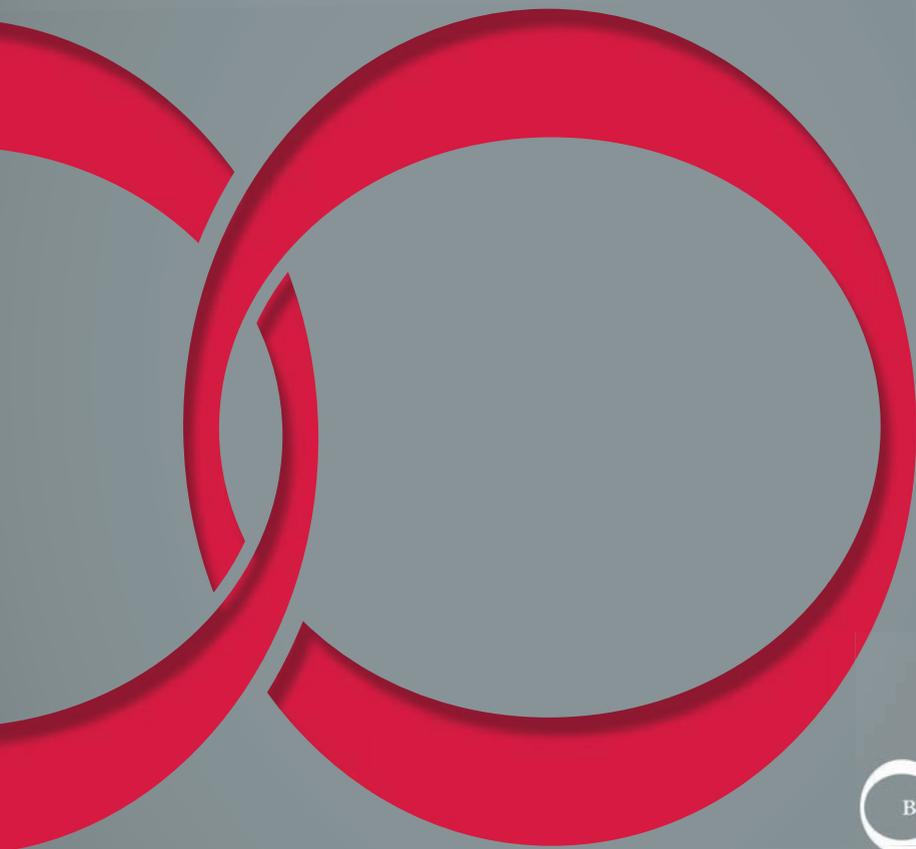


Ten Years After: The Long-Term Outcomes of Adoption Reunions



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Gary Clapton
Editor

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For Jane, and George, Hannah and William

Foreword

10 Years After is the latest of our publications designed to communicate the work of Birthlink and the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland to the public, policy-makers and professionals. It is the result of a year-long study of one of the most highly-charged events in the lives of adults affected by adoption. Reunions between adopted adults and birth families. The accounts in 10 Years After go beyond the first days and months of contact and are drawn from over twenty years ago so as to provide a glimpse of how people's lives have settled and continued together (or not) after meeting with each other. If, like many of us, adoption features in your life or that of your family or friends, I hope that you will take something precious and meaningful from this book.

Gary Clapton
March 2018

Introduction

Adoption, searching, meetings and reunions¹

Most adopted people at some time in their lives will want to know more about their families of origin. Many of those will try to find their birth parents, invariably their mother, at first anyway. Curiosity as to resemblances, medical information and reasons for being adopted all may loom large. A large majority of the parents of children given up for adoption, particularly birth mothers but also many birth fathers, want to know how their child has got on in life, perhaps meet them and explain the reasons for their adoption. There is no troubles-free way of making these two aspirations happen. Despite supportive legislation and policy, adopted people can be frustrated in their searches by red tape, missing records, and costs. A crucial consideration that runs through everything is, should they trace a birth relative, 'how will I be received?' Despite some recent policy and practice shifts, birth parents too face similar obstacles but also wonder if they have the right to look for and meet their son or daughter, 'to barge into their lives'.

All of these anxieties have not stopped people tracing and meeting each other. In the past private detectives have been used at great cost. Today people use social media. In a few clicks you can find a birth mother in ten minutes. The dangers of doing this on your own without a go-between are obvious. The searcher knows what they are doing and has built up to the moment of deciding to make contact, thinking it over, perhaps talking it over with a trusted friend or loved one, whereas the searched-for party knows nothing. It can be a gamble. Better to have a go-between, even better to have a go-between that knows how to shuttle back and forth between two 'relative strangers'. But would it not be even better if **both** knew they wanted to meet each other? This is where adoption contact registers come in. An adoption contact register provides a place where those separated by adoption can lodge an interest in meeting the other. And when, one day, that other party registers, then both can be assured that wanting to meet is mutual.

1. 'Reunion' is often used by professionals to describe the meetings between an adopted person and birth relatives. A reunion between birth mother and her adopted child is, in the physical sense, an accurate description, given that the birth mother carried the child for nine months and may have cared for the child in a hospital or mother and baby home for days and weeks. But it does not similarly apply to meetings involving birth fathers and other birth relatives such as brothers and sisters. Neither is it a word in widespread use by adopted people to describe their meetings with birth parents. More importantly, the word 'reunion' implies joining together again and therefore can impose and raise expectations all round that may not be fulfilled. However, for the sake of readability and because of the lack of a suitable alternative, 'reunion' will be used here.

There are many types of adoption contact register, some are official like that for people involved in adoptions that have happened in England and Wales (run by The General Register Office and established in 1991). Others are run by non-statutory support groups such as the contact register that was operated by National Organisation of Relatives and Adopted People (NORCAP, 1982 until 2013, register is now run by the Post-Adoption Centre). And again, there are many online-only, unregulated contact registers. The Adoption Contact Register for Scotland was established in 1984 and shares similarities with other registers in that it provides the same opportunity for registration of mutual wishes to be in touch. However, the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland (ACR) offers much more than the basics of having addresses exchanged. At the point of the registration of second party where a link is made between that person and another who has previously registered, professionals offer their services. Often many years will have passed since the first person registered. Times change, people change, twenty years after expressing a wish to meet, who knows what might have changed? People marry and divorce, curiosity waxes and wanes, minds and feelings alter; in some sad instances the first registrant may not be alive any more.

Birthlink makes professionally qualified staff available at the point of registration and after a 'link' occurs. Help is offered in making the first overture and in discussions with both parties as to what type of contact is mutually acceptable and comfortable (this professional support is equally available in circumstances where a registration fails to produce a 'link'). Contact can take many forms such as letters, email, telephone calls, Skype and so on. Once underway, the process of contact can be supported with highly skilled mediation and counselling is offered to both parties. This is also available beyond any initial contact and meetings. Sometimes after a match on the register, people have taken a year to be ready to meet with each other. Other times, by mutual consent, we have passed over mobile phone numbers within days.

Meetings, contact, 'reunions', whatever term is preferred, can still be fraught events as well as any subsequent relationships that might develop. After all, usually when two people meet after having been separated by adoption, it means not only two lives coming together, but two families as partners, children and grandchildren all come to terms with the unknown, sometimes secret, person in the lives of their loved one.

The Adoption Contact Register for Scotland: the facts

Who is registered?

There are 11,000 names on the data base. These consist of, in decreasing proportion, adopted people, birth relatives (grandparents, siblings), birth mothers and birth fathers. A majority of the adopted people are women and the average age of adopted people at the point of registration is in their late twenties or early thirties, perhaps triggered by imminent parenthood. Calculating the age of birth mothers on the register is more complex. Research tells us that birth mothers are in their fifties when they seek contact, however, given that some will have registered as soon as the contact register was established in 1984 over thirty years ago, the fact is that some will be over eighty years old.

How Many Register Per Year?

About 200 people register every year. This has dropped from a height of 400/500 per year in the late 1990s, possibly because of the use of the internet to search and make contact. After making on-line registration available, in 2017, two hundred and thirty people registered. This welcome upturn was probably because of increased efforts to publicise the ACR. Of this number, three times as many adopted people have registered than others.

How Many Are Put In Contact With Each Other?

There is an average of twenty-four links every year and although there were forty-one in 2001, two links per month reflects longer term trends. Whilst initially involving two registrants, the term 'link' fails to reflect the effect on the wider families that can follow. For instance, in the process after a link has been established many more people are potentially linked with each other. Sons are introduced to sisters they never knew they had, fathers meet grandchildren that they have never seen and half-siblings strive to make accommodations with new-found knowledge of each other's existence. The number of 'blood relatives' drawn into potential contact with each other as a result of a link between two people can be very high. Take the not unusual scenario of a birth mother whose parents are both alive and who has two subsequent children (siblings of the adopted person) and has four grandchildren. When the birth mother is linked with her adopted daughter who has two children (that is, the grandchildren of the birth mother) this makes for contact between twelve

people as a result of one link. Add aunts and uncles and other more distant relatives of the birth mother and the number increases.

What do we know about adoption reunions already?

There is only one other study of research into reunions that have been brought about via adoption contact registers. Additionally, firstly, most of what we know about the outcomes of reunions is from the adopted person's point of view and secondly, we know very little about the long-term outcomes of contact between adopted adults and birth parents.

Some evidence suggests that the level of contact between adopted people and birth parents may diminish over time. Therefore, the high success rate of reunions, found in many studies, may be at least partially attributable to the fact that research participants had had a reunion recently. It has therefore been argued that the impact of reunions would be less positive if they were examined much later after the first flush of meetings. However, in the largest study to date of the key parties involved in reunions, Australian researchers surveyed the views and experiences of 575 birth parents and 432 adopted people who had been in touch with each other for between 12 and 20 months. When asked about their expectations of ongoing contact, 94% of birth parents and 91% of adopted people said that they expected to sustain a relationship.

A consistent finding across the existing research is that for adopted people, a feature of the development of an ongoing relationship with birth mother is that they retain and maintain a sense that their primary familial relationship is with their adoptive family. It has been argued that a key factor involved in success is the existence of relationships between the birth mother and adoptive parents, and that the birth mother needs to negotiate and dispel aspirations to parent the adopted person and be their mum. This, and the suggestion that it is personalities that sustain the relationship and not the genetic link is somewhat challenged elsewhere. Some writers have resisted a downgrading of the importance of physical and psychic links between adopted person and mother and talk of adoption creating a 'primal wound' between the two parties that can only be healed through reunion. And others have suggested that birth mothers ought not to damp down the central – motherhood - aspect of their identity because adoption is based on a falsehood that works to obscure the fact of an indivisible connection between child and mother.

The handful of existing studies that have looked at the actual 'durability' of relationships between adopted adults and birth parents suggest that contact

will continue and evolve into a relationship that has proved difficult to find words to describe. The authors of one of the very few studies that has looked at long-term outcomes (an average of sixteen years since reunion) talk of ‘the adoptive family remaining primary, while the relationship with the birth family emerges as something like an extended family’.

Another finding about ongoing - successful - relationships is that the adopted person and birth relative will have more in common than blood ties – personalities come into play as do common likings and shared outlooks. Differences in class and culture obviously emerge here as an obstacle to successful reunions - the adoptions between 1950-1970 were often ‘out of class’ or culture and there may be gulfs caused by life circumstances at the point of meeting and relationship-formation.

Satisfaction is echoed in most of the studies although a study of the longest relationships concluded that:

The participants in this study lived with ambivalence, a degree of uncertainty and dissatisfaction with these relationships – long-standing though they were – persisted with them.

Some studies have delved deeper into emotional impact on those involved in reunions as well as those near to them, concluding that meeting and the establishment of a relationship between each other only partially relieves birth mother grief. Others have gone further and comment that, for birth mothers, although contact is desired, old wounds are opened in the process.

As regards the others that are drawn into the reunion process, researchers have found that the majority of relationships between adopted people and their adoptive families were unchanged or even enhanced. For the birth mother and her existing family (e.g. husband and other children), the ripples caused in the lives of those close to her have attracted less attention. A 2003 report on a year in the life of the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland included reunions and asked the birth mothers involved about relations with other family members. Unsurprisingly these were mixed, ranging from reports of filial hostility, examples of which were: “My children felt betrayed initially and also threatened. At the end of the day the experience has enhanced our relationship but only after a lot of hard work and determination on all sides” and “The boys (her sons) may have been jealous or fed up hearing about her; one boy doesn’t class her as family and is not inviting her to his wedding”. Elsewhere in the families of birth mothers, partners were more supportive: “My husband had never seen me cry until the day I received the letter; he was delighted for me, it has made us closer”.

Relations between the **adopted person** and the extended birth family (e.g. birth brothers and sisters, aunts, grandparents) have also been under-explored and reports of these were generally positive: “I went looking for one person and ended up with loads!” (*Relatively Unknown: a year in the life of the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland, 2003*).

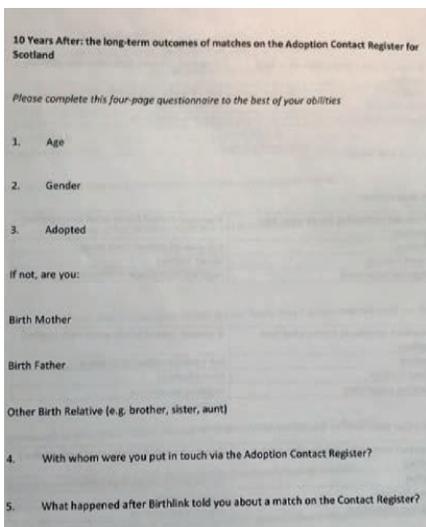
In discussing the disadvantages of all these new relationships for everyone concerned, researchers in one study remark that the adopted people sometimes felt overwhelmed by ‘new family obligations’, although this was not to the point of ending the relationship.

As noted earlier, we remain relatively under-informed about how these reunions pan out over decades. All families of all shapes and sizes are in constant flux and therefore any enquiry as to outcomes of relationships with each other is limited by the fact that it involves reportage from a fluid frontline. Add to the mix the life-long nature of the effects of adoption (what if we were to ask later generations about the effects of their grandmother’s reunion with the child given up for adoption?) and it will be understood that any insights offered here are snatches of lived experiences made complex by adoption. Nevertheless we believe that what follows will be of interest to the many people with adoption in their lives, practitioners and policy-makers.

So what have we found and how did we go about it?

10 Years After: the Study

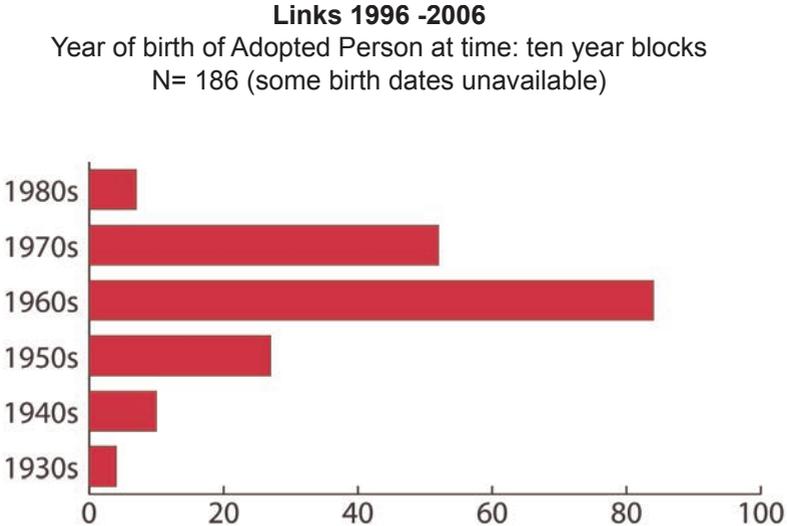
We set out to look at reunions that were at least ten years old. Over 220 links that had taken place via the Adoption Contact Register were identified between 1996 and 2006 (i.e. at least ten years old with some being over twenty years since link). The paper work was then sifted and inadvisable-contact links removed from sample, e.g. those that had ended in severe acrimony and had no wish for further contact from Birthlink. This resulted in a settled sample of 203 links and a list of names and addresses was compiled, resulting in 405 separate sets of names and addresses. For reasons of survey mail-out complexities (e.g. having to include a USA-stamped addressed return envelope), non-UK addresses were



omitted. In total, we sent out a covering letter, a four-page questionnaire and a stamped return envelope to three hundred and sixty eight people.

The Findings

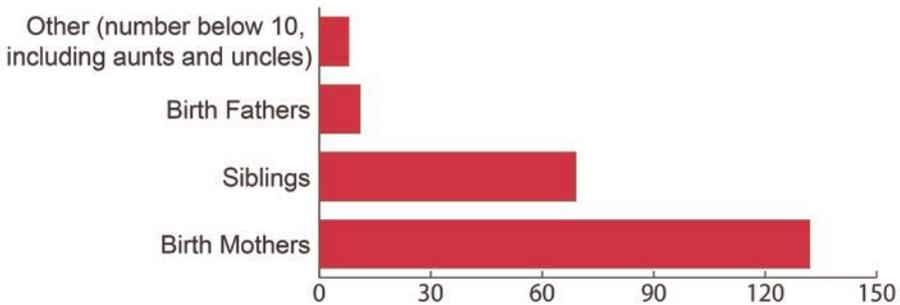
Our Findings are in two parts with the first providing some information from the paperwork held by Birthlink relating to these two hundred and three links between 1996 and 2006.



The indication here that majority of adopted people involved in the reunions were born during the 1960s and 1970s is commensurate with our existing understanding of the decades when adoptions were at their highest. The figures indicate that the adopted people in our study were in their late twenties and early thirties and this is also what we know about the age of adopted people at the point of seeking information and possible meeting with their birth parents.

Who were the adopted people linked with?

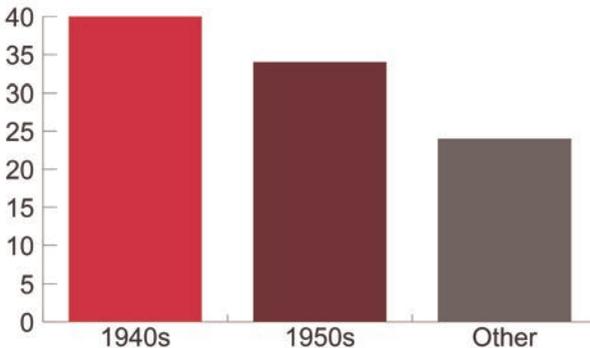
N = 219 (a small number of links were between more than one person at the time)



What this chart tells us is again similar to existing research that points to the first person the adopted person is reunited with is their mother. This does not tell us who might be the second person sought for, e.g. there is evidence that once a birth mother has been contacted, a search may commence for the father. An interesting finding is that over sixty **initial** links were made with a sibling who had registered, though this is not to suggest that birth parents are not also subsequently drawn into the process.

Birth Mothers: decade in which born

N= 96



*Other: 1930s (10), 1920s (6), 1960s (7), 1970s (1)

37 dates of birth of birth mothers were unavailable. This finding, as for year of birth of adopted person, confirms what we already know, that, given the peak of adoptions being the late 1960s, most birth mothers were teenagers or in their early twenties at the time of the adoption of their child. It also tells us that the average age of birth mothers when they were linked was in their fifties,

although it worth pointing to the six birth mothers that were in the seventies or older at the time of the link.

The first of our links in **1996** is suggested as typical. Helen was the first to register with us and did so as Thomas's birth mother. She was born in 1942 and gave birth to Thomas when she was twenty-two. She was fifty-four years old when Thomas registered in 1996 when he was thirty- two years old.

Ten years later in **2006**, David registered when he was thirty-seven (research also tells us that adopted men leave searching and possible birth parent contact later than women). His birth mother, Jackie was born in 1949 and therefore fifty-seven at the time of her link with her son. She had him when she was twenty.

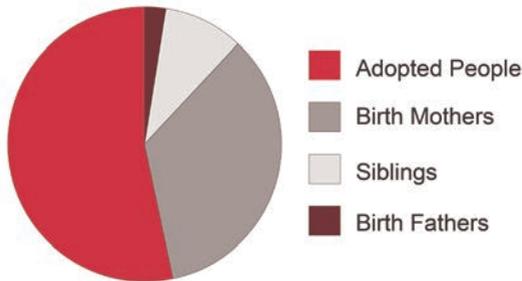
The next highest category of people linked with the adopted person is that of siblings. There were 69 links with siblings recorded of which twenty-two dates of birth were unavailable. In the case of the remaining 47 adopted people, the highest number were born in the 1960s (17), followed by nine in the 1970s. Nine percent of the links involved one of the parties living outside of the UK (37/405). Two brothers, James and David, separated by adoption, lived one in Edinburgh and the other in Hong Kong. Yet Andrea (born and adopted in 1962) and Maxine, her birth mother, who was fifteen when Andrea was born, lived in the same Perth post-code as each other at the time of the link. The distances between those involved in the other links was generally not as extreme.

Lastly, in this overview of our study of the two-hundred and three adopted people involved, one hundred and twenty-three were women. This is noteworthy for what it tells us about the number of male adopted adults who decided to register an interest in meeting their birth relatives. Eighty is a high number for men (40% of the total). Previous research has suggested that up to 80% more women than men decide to search. This study puts the proportions as being more women who search and seek contact, but a somewhat more even 60/40 in their favour.

The next section gives a voice to those who responded to our questionnaire. As noted above we mailed out three hundred and sixty-eight, four-page questionnaires. 75 replies came in. We believe that over 20% is a successful rate of return given that the links in our study were at least ten years old and some from twenty years before. Many letters were returned 'address unknown' or 'addressee gone away'. However, those that did come back, arrived in all sorts of ways. We received photographs, short notes, lengthy covering letters, follow-up emails, as well as dutifully-completed questionnaires.

Who replied?

N = 75



The following is drawn from three central sets of questions that we asked. 'What happened after the link, did contact continue onwards or did it cease?'. 'What has happened in the ensuing years, does contact exist and what does it consist of?'. And 'Did contact cease and why?'. These were followed by the opportunity to say more: 'Is there in anything else that we have omitted to ask?'.

It should be noted that because of the uneven nature of people's circumstances, e.g. some birth parents were deceased, others could not be found or declined to respond, there were very few returns from both parties in the initial link.

We begin with the reports from adopted people

What happened after the link? Did contact continue onward or did it cease?

37/40 links with birth mothers continued onwards:

A typical account of this first phase was: "My mum and I wrote to each other for 2 months and emailed, we arranged to meet after we got to know each other by writing. We met on 8th May 1999."

Of the three that did not continue all were links with their birth mother, one said: "We corresponded a few times via letter until contact eventually fizzled out" (but was pleased this contact had taken place). Her feelings now are "It was ok". However, "I wish now that I had asked her more direct questions. I am none the wiser really of anything. She died in 2007".

The second described a brief exchange of letters then no meeting and the

process being “very sad and confusing”. The third person met her birth mother once and described the link and meeting as a “negative experience”.

What has happened in the ensuing years, does contact exist and what does it consist of?

Of the 37 adopted people that went forward from their first link and meetings with a birth parent or birth sibling, eighteen remain pleased to the extent that they report both parties attending each other’s family events such as weddings, describe contact as regular, and talk of “being in each other’s lives”. Seven would have been considered in this category were it not for a brother, sister, mother or father’s death, that is, up until then they had had a positive experience of life after a link.

After many letters/emails I travelled down to Essex to meet my birth mother. I felt nervous at first, then on meeting I was at ease. We got on well. My daughter said she couldn’t believe how alike we were (looks and gestures!) As we live over 500 miles apart it is not possible to see each other on a regular basis, and we are both pretty bad at writing. Over the years my birth mother has been to Scotland 3 times and we have been down to visit her 3 times. I think this would have been more but due to health issues (I have had cancer and she has had surgery on her back and a disabled sister to look after). Both my adopted parents died in 2008 and my adopted brother died in 1987 so apart from my children I have no family. I have always wanted to ask how my birth mother sees me, Obviously my adoptive parents will always be my parents but it would be interesting to find out what my birth mother’s relationship with me is. I have never had the courage to ask this.

Did contact cease and why?

Seven describe their relationship has having eventually ceased (but they also report that they are glad to have met members of their birth family). In the case of five, they described their contact as having levelled off to “occasionally”, e.g. exchange of Xmas cards or Facebook acknowledgements. They too report no regrets about the contact. One woman reports mixed feelings about her contact with her mother:

I really wanted to find my father!! My natural mother thought I would move from London to Vancouver Island to look after her, She was angry that a) I had not sought her out earlier and b) that I could hardly leave a senior job in corporate management. Subsequently, she cut me from her will.

For one woman, contact was on and off and on again:

“My birth father was initially very positive and after our first meeting in the UK he persuaded us to visit him in Australia (my husband and I). Once we arrived he changed his attitude towards me and avoided being alone with me and didn't seem to want to spend time with us.

I spent the next eleven years wondering where I had gone wrong, with brief interludes of moments between us which were very rewarding. We saw each other about every two years, emailed every couple of months in that time. We shared some very poignant experiences together, for example the death of my (birth) grandfather when I felt I was at last able to be a daughter to my father and support him and my grandmother.

At one point we did not contact each other for about 6 months as we had had a disagreement. His third wife was instrumental in keeping in touch so that I knew where he was as he moved around a lot. I made contact with him again and our relationship became stronger.

In 2013 my father learned that he had terminal cancer and at this point he visited the UK on his own and we spent a day together just the two of us for the first time in our lives. It was during that short visit that he later told me that he had suddenly felt hugely connected to me and his grandchildren. From that point for the next 3 and a half years we were very close. We emailed each other several times a week, facetime regularly and spent two holidays together.

The second of those holidays was overshadowed by my father's battle with cancer as it was clear that he was very sick. Despite this we spent a wonderful 7 days together staying with his friends in the special place of his childhood, Trinidad. We had both travelled there alone and this meant we had lots of time together without our families present. I think this was very important that we had time without the pressure of those other relationships.

We talked about lots of things important to us both. We discovered more similarities and enjoyed our shared sense of humour and our shared interests. I was able to talk with him about my birth mother and the complexities of living a life without ever knowing her (her choice not ours).

When we had first met, my father had inspired me to take up running and like him I fell in love with it. On that second last day together it happened that there was a 5K race in town and though my father was not well enough to take part, he was bursting with pride watching me complete it in the 30 degrees heat. The photo taken at the finish line is one of my most treasured.”

Lorna's account (page 15) is repeated word for word because it sums much of what is often described as the 'emotional rollercoaster'. It is unusual for its account of meeting with a birth father but also reflects a common theme of geographical distance needing to be negotiated. In half of the cases of adopted people who reported that their relationship had ceased, they took time to acknowledge this but also added that they remained pleased that the link and initial contact had occurred. And finally, another characteristic of these links involving birth parents in their fifties at the time and now twenty years later, was the occurrence of birth parents becoming frail or unwell.

One man's contact ceased in a painful-to-read manner:

Got on with mother but sister was jealous, a nightmare. Mother was weak, sister had power over her so I told them to stick it. Time later was asked back, told sister sorry. Stupid me went back. In that time father died. As older brother, I helped them. Found out my brother getting married but I was not invited. I confronted my mother, knew it was my sister's doing. Told them it's over and they disgust me. Total waste of time, they're dead to me.

Is there anything else that we have omitted to ask?

In this section of the questionnaire, our correspondents volunteered considerable context and background to their descriptions of the progression (or not) of relationships after the link with each other. The following two accounts are rich in detail:

After my adoptive parents died, I tried to find out more about my Birth Mother. I was offered help to contact her but I refused, being afraid of rejection. Now knowing what I do, I regret my decision because I believe she would have been very pleased to see me. When I reached my 70th birthday - knowing that I alone was able to get information on my Birth Family, I asked my daughter if she would like to know more about my family. She did - and so began the journey. I obtained birth certificate but they (my brother and sister) said 'adopted'. due to getting Father's name (legal system). So I put my name on the Birthlink register. Meanwhile my sister being told she had a sister when she was 10 years old (she never forgot) and her husband died she decided to find me in England (my birth parents are English). A friend, knowing she had Scottish connections persuaded her to try registering in Oban. Next day she found I was on Birthlink register. This was a very short time

after I registered and quite miraculous!

The second account speaks to a truth at the heart of adoption:

I can never thank Birthlink enough for putting me in touch with my birth family. It undoubtedly changed the course of my life back in 2000. I know myself so much better now from knowing my father and grandparents. Being able to recognise familial traits has meant so much to me now that they, my birth family have gone. My adoptive parents gave me a wonderful childhood and both of them were supportive of my search for my birth family. Before I started my search I used to say “I was adopted.” However once the journey started and the emotions began to flow I realised that adoption for me is not something in the past tense, I will always be adopted, it’s not something that finishes. With the highs of “reunion” also comes deep feeling of loss at the life you didn’t have with the people you were meant to be with. It took many years for my birth father and me to have a secure and loving relationship but I never gave up on it and I’m so glad that I persevered.

Here, our writer tells us that adoption is not just an event but is also a life-long and central aspect of her identity.

Whether the relationship has become very satisfactory, has settled down or eventually ceased, nearly all are pleased that they have had the opportunity to have contact with their family of birth:

I waited until my adoptive mum and dad died before trying to get in touch, may have left it too late. Did not ‘hit it off’ with sister and her family. No bad feelings just different circles. Glad I did at least make contact, found info about my birth mother. Absolutely no regrets finding out.

One woman who had met her birth mother once, reported “negative feelings”, but did not elaborate.

Next, here are the accounts from twenty-six birth mothers

What happened after the link? Did contact continue onward or did it cease?

Unlike the positive reports from the majority of adopted people, birth mothers' accounts and assessments were more varied. Ten mothers reported that the link with their child had developed into a satisfying relationship ranging from absolute pleasure ("in each other's lives") to regular meetings and contact between both sets of family members.

Five mothers reported a mixture of 'positive/mixed' feelings. These were the result of post-link relationships levelling off to occasional contact by email or Facebook. Six mothers were unhappy and reported the link and subsequent experience to have been a negative one. Here contact was reported to have ceased quickly, "he lost interest".

The next steps after a link and in the process of getting to know each other had other complexities for five more mothers. Two cases were tragedies. One birth mother's son died ten months after they met, the other mother died three months before she and her son were scheduled to meet face-to-face. In the other three instances, birth mothers reported other kinds of unforeseen event that occurs in many families, for one mother a new partner was hostile to her relationship with her daughter, and another's son underwent a breakdown, after which their relationship did not recover.

What has happened in the ensuing years, does contact exist and what does it consist of?

Worked out very well for all concerned. Meet regularly and would meet more often if not for the distance involved.

Contact has continued over the years and it is a good feeling to know that my daughter comes and goes freely to my house and she doesn't feel left out. We remember to include her in everything and I see her about every 3 weeks which I feel is ok as she is busy and has a very fully schedule. Hope this continues for both of us and it seems to work well. Can't ask for any more.

Contact is good. We have the same background and values (his adopted family much like my birth family). He is very generous towards me, including me in a half term visit to the country and

“ ”

“Initially we met jolly often on neutral territory. My son met my sister and husband on several occasions. As time passed we met just the two of us, fairly often. We shared a lot of views about life and philosophy. After about five years our contact diminished and he became understandably more engaged with his young daughter. I anticipated this development and always took the view that this was not only appropriate but was representative of the rhythm of normal family life.”

-birth mother linked with son in 2006

earlier visits when his family were in NY and HK. But sometimes conversation is a bit stilted - really good affection but not so much in common. So a couple of meetings a year and birthday and Christmas cards works well. We would probably see more of each other if we lived closer.

Did contact cease and why?

Sometimes contact after a link remains at a distance with the expectation that things will be taken at each other's pace. However, now and then, contact fails to develop at all:

Although David had mentioned in his first letter to me 11 years ago that he would like to meet me one day, this has never happened. Original contact was by letter, and then email which dried up for a year. Birthlink got us back in touch but now the only contact from him is by 'liking' the photos which I put up on Facebook. He has a full brother and a half brother and sister who would love to meet him. Also a little nephew 20 months old. I have repeatedly told David that I would love to meet him.

In other cases, relationships were begun then ceased. A variety of reasons were given including the influence of new partners (jealous) or an adoptive parent whose feelings about the link and relationship were not encouraging. However reports of supportive adoptive parents were also included, see below.

Is there in anything else that we have omitted to ask?

Again, as for the adopted people in our study, birth mothers volunteered considerable context and background to their descriptions of the progression (or not) of relationships after the link.

My daughter encouraged by her mum had also decided the time was right to look for me. She had a very happy home life along with a brother who was adopted by the family. I have explained why I had to give her up. I travelled to the mainland to meet my daughter's adoptive mother and was finally reassured she had been well looked after and had been happy throughout her childhood.

Others provided lengthy hand-written backgrounds and one birth mother contacted the researchers to say that she was very angry to have been included

in the research. After a long 'phone call in which the distress of a ceased relationship with her son was revealed, she said:

He will always be my child. Always thought of him as first of my three sons. Carried a locket around all the time with his photograph inside. Maybe we met up too soon. Emotionally draining meeting. Liked daughter in law better. Eventually contact ceased although my daughter may have subsequently met her half-brother.

Two things seem to emerge from these birth mother accounts. One is the practical difficulty of physical distance. Some sons and daughters were overseas, or the other end of the UK. However, a more subtle theme emerges and this is the provisional or delicate nature of some these relationships even at a minimum of ten years after first contact. Some mothers report insufficient contact in their relationships, others wrote of the relationship being subject to external and negative influences such as hostile partners, others write of differences:

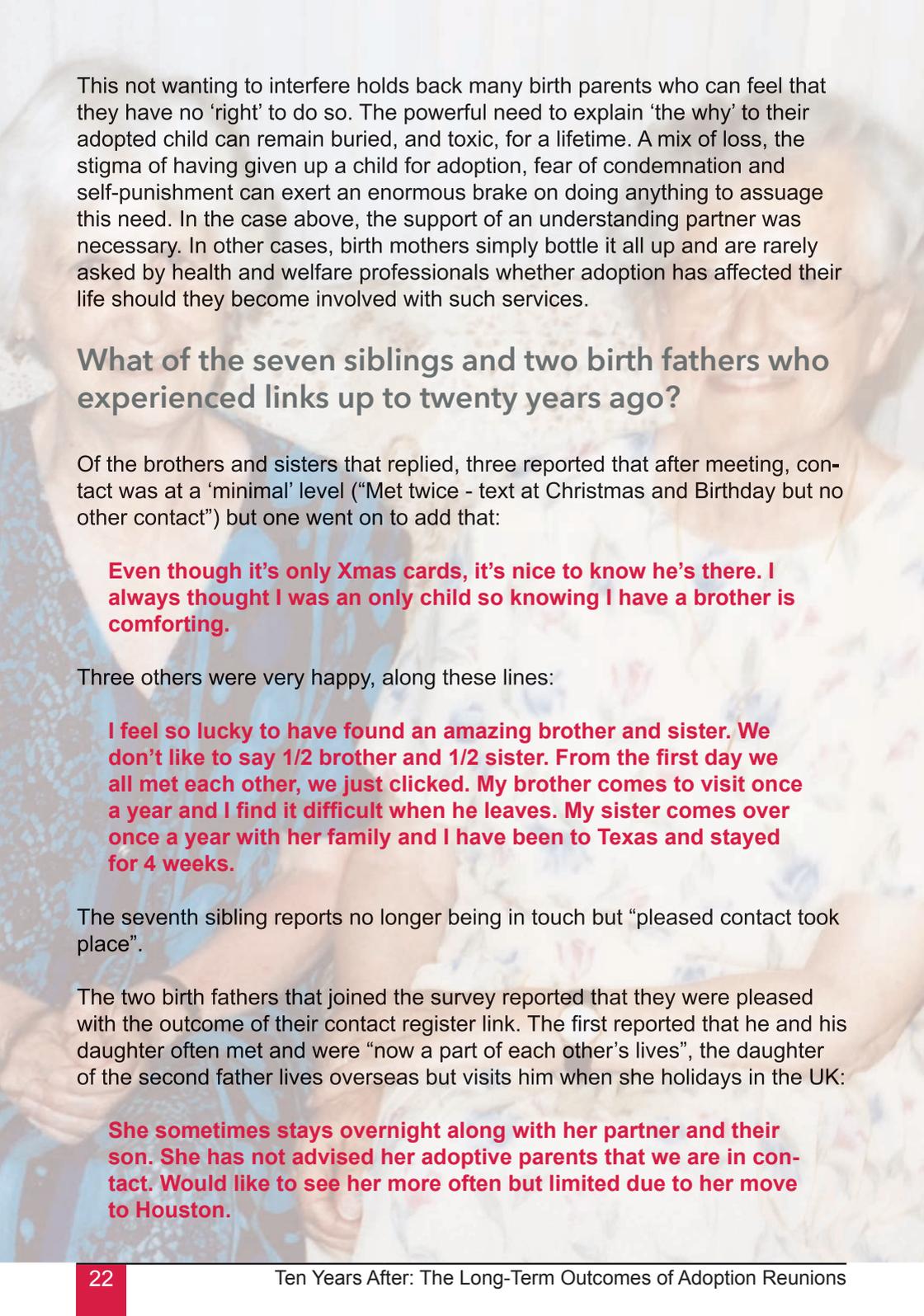
We keep in touch at Christmas but we have little in common. My family ethos is quite different to the one she was brought up in. For example, I taught English and she has poor literacy. I found her to be quite suspicious and lacking curiosity about the facets of her adoption. So a strange bond exists, with little affection.

Another mother wrote:

Contact is occasional, which is fine for both of us. We aren't close geographically and transport is a problem. Generally, we keep in touch by mobile phone - he's abroad a lot. It's tricky, I think we are both aware of the awkwardness of the history. And we disagree strongly about politics and various other things. Have to tread carefully. And I'm still guilty about it.

This mother not only captures the awkwardness present more than a decade after first meeting her son, but she also expresses something about the long shadow in her life that was cast by adoption.

A theme that recurs throughout all the writing on birth parents is that of wishing to avoid interfering "I originally did not want to disrupt my daughter's life but finally decided, supported and encouraged by my husband, to try getting in touch".



This not wanting to interfere holds back many birth parents who can feel that they have no 'right' to do so. The powerful need to explain 'the why' to their adopted child can remain buried, and toxic, for a lifetime. A mix of loss, the stigma of having given up a child for adoption, fear of condemnation and self-punishment can exert an enormous brake on doing anything to assuage this need. In the case above, the support of an understanding partner was necessary. In other cases, birth mothers simply bottle it all up and are rarely asked by health and welfare professionals whether adoption has affected their life should they become involved with such services.

What of the seven siblings and two birth fathers who experienced links up to twenty years ago?

Of the brothers and sisters that replied, three reported that after meeting, contact was at a 'minimal' level ("Met twice - text at Christmas and Birthday but no other contact") but one went on to add that:

Even though it's only Xmas cards, it's nice to know he's there. I always thought I was an only child so knowing I have a brother is comforting.

Three others were very happy, along these lines:

I feel so lucky to have found an amazing brother and sister. We don't like to say 1/2 brother and 1/2 sister. From the first day we all met each other, we just clicked. My brother comes to visit once a year and I find it difficult when he leaves. My sister comes over once a year with her family and I have been to Texas and stayed for 4 weeks.

The seventh sibling reports no longer being in touch but "pleased contact took place".

The two birth fathers that joined the survey reported that they were pleased with the outcome of their contact register link. The first reported that he and his daughter often met and were "now a part of each other's lives", the daughter of the second father lives overseas but visits him when she holidays in the UK:

She sometimes stays overnight along with her partner and their son. She has not advised her adoptive parents that we are in contact. Would like to see her more often but limited due to her move to Houston.



“I now have intermittent contact with my half- sister. We have had different life experiences and only meeting when I was in mid-fifties and her in late-fifties, it is difficult to find things in common. I believe that she wishes we were closer and she has some more troubles in her life than I have in mine. I have no regrets about making contact as this is the only way I could learn about my birth story, but ongoing relationships are not easy and need careful handling. The contact we have is sufficient for me and sometimes I am pleased that we live quite far away!”

- 58 year-old adopted woman, contact with family of birth begun fifteen years ago

Reflections

A long view of reunions will inevitably include many of the usual milestones in the lives of people and families. Births, marriages and deaths are always with us however, adoption brings an added dimension to these events. In adoption, deaths can matter an even greater deal. Sometimes searching for birth family connections has been postponed because of a perceived lack of loyalty that might be felt by adoptive parents. This study has heard from adopted people that their search has been successful in finding their family of origin but too late for contact with their birth mother. Staying with death, after returning her completed questionnaire, one of our study respondents emailed to say that she was now embroiled in a legacy dispute concerning her birth father's estate.

Births and marriages are also highly-charged events at the best of times, however, here, after reunion, adoption poses the extra question of who else should be invited. Both sets of mothers and fathers? The births and existence of children of adopted people also means having the challenge of organising and naming all the possible grandparents and grand-relatives in the lives of a child.

Elsewhere we have heard from adopted people and birth parents and relatives of their ups and downs with each other, sometimes exacerbated by geographical distance but often by the emotional and social distance between each other's lives. This is a fact of adoption. However, although in adoption much is lost, much also abides. Connections felt are made real in reunions and, for want of a better phrase, people become more whole – summed up by the woman who refuses to see her adoption as an event of the past and now regards being adopted as part of her identity. This has striking parallels with the birth mother of two children who now, after meeting her first child, is proud to say, when asked, "I have three children". In the end isn't it all about our need for identity?

A second reflection is more upon a fact. Yesterday's adoptions are different to those of today. The links on the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland that have been tracked in this study are related to adoptions of the 'closed' period of adoption when adoptive parents were invited to bring up a child 'as if born' to them, adopted people were seen as having a chip on their shoulder if they sought out their family of origin, and birth mothers were told to get on with their lives after the adoption of their baby. Unlike then, a large majority of today's adoptions are concerned with children that are in public care, are older and have known (and continue to know) members of their birth family.

In contrast to the period up until approximately the end of the 1980s when contact between an adopted child and their birth family was rare (a 'closed' adoption), contemporary adoptions are often accompanied by arrangements for relationships to continue between children and their birth parent or birth relatives (e.g. a brother, sister, or grandparent). This means that a service that facilitates reunions between people that have never met will eventually not be needed. This is not to say that families estranged from one another by today's adoptions will not need help in re-uniting.

Having noted this, and returning our attention to this study's focus, it is worth pointing out that in the sixty years between the time adoptions were first officially recorded and the end of the 1980s, over 80,000 adoptions have taken place in Scotland. This makes for 160,000 adopted people and their birth mothers. Not counting birth fathers and the possibility of birth brothers and sisters being involved, this is a considerable number of people whose lives have been affected by adoption. Yet the Adoption Contact Register has about eleven thousand people registered – a small fraction of those who could be registered. It may be that some people do not wish to find others from whom they have been separated by adoption, others might be doing their own search, contact and reunion work. And still others might want to find their mother or son or daughter but not know how to – or as indicated might feel it is not their place to do so. Until adoption is acknowledged as more than about children and is in fact a life-long process, then it is impossible to tell who might benefit from registering a wish to find someone.

In its time, based on an average of two links a week, the Adoption Contact Register has facilitated around 700 matches and this study's exploration of a sample of these shows that, by and large, whether contact has ceased, or relationships have not proved to be as fruitful as hoped for, these connections have been immensely fulfilling. However, what the figures also tell us is that just a small fraction of the people registered on the Contact Register have found some kind of peace and answers in their lives.

If this publication helps to convince you or someone you know to use the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland and Birthlink's services, then it will have achieved its aim.

Our Other Services

- The Scottish Adoption Registry provides details of the whereabouts of adoption records;
- Non-Disclosure Agreements with adoption record-holders, many of whom are local authorities, allow searching on behalf of birth relatives who approach these agencies;
- Obtaining copies of birth certificates, legal papers (Court Process) and case notes and files (the latter on behalf of people who have been fostered);
- Informative publications such as *Relatively Clear: A Search Guide for Adopted Adults in Scotland* (2009) and *Relatively Unknown: a year in the life of the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland* (2003);
- Training for social workers and other professionals that briefs busy workers with up-to-date information regarding practice, policy and the law and shares expertise and experience drawn from thirty years of service provision to adults affected by adoption;
- Provision of a regular support forum for Scottish after-adoption practitioners.

Our origins

The agency now known as Birthlink can trace its origins to 1911 when the Eastern Branch of the National Vigilance Association was established, its aim being to protect women and girls on the street. The Association increasingly found itself helping pregnant women and single mothers and doing casework with individuals.

In 1941 the Association became the Guild of Service, working with single mothers offering support, arranging fostering and more and more often, adoption. In 1954 the Guild was registered as an adoption agency. By 1975 social changes meant there were fewer babies available for adoption – the Abortion Act was implemented; contraception was more effective and there were improvements in housing and benefits for single parents.

In 1975 the Children Act gave adopted adults the right, for the first time south of the border, to access their original birth certificates and trace their families of origin. Even though this had always been a right in Scotland, it had an obvious knock-on effect to work here. By the late 1970s more and more adopted adults were returning for help to find out about their origins, and birth mothers were also approaching us to ask what had become of their children lost to adoption in the past.

In 1978 the name of the agency was changed to Family Care. In 1984 Birthlink and the Adoption Contact Register were established by Family Care (the renamed Guild of Service). In 2007 after feedback was obtained from service users, we became 'Birthlink', a name which better reflects the services outlined in this booklet.

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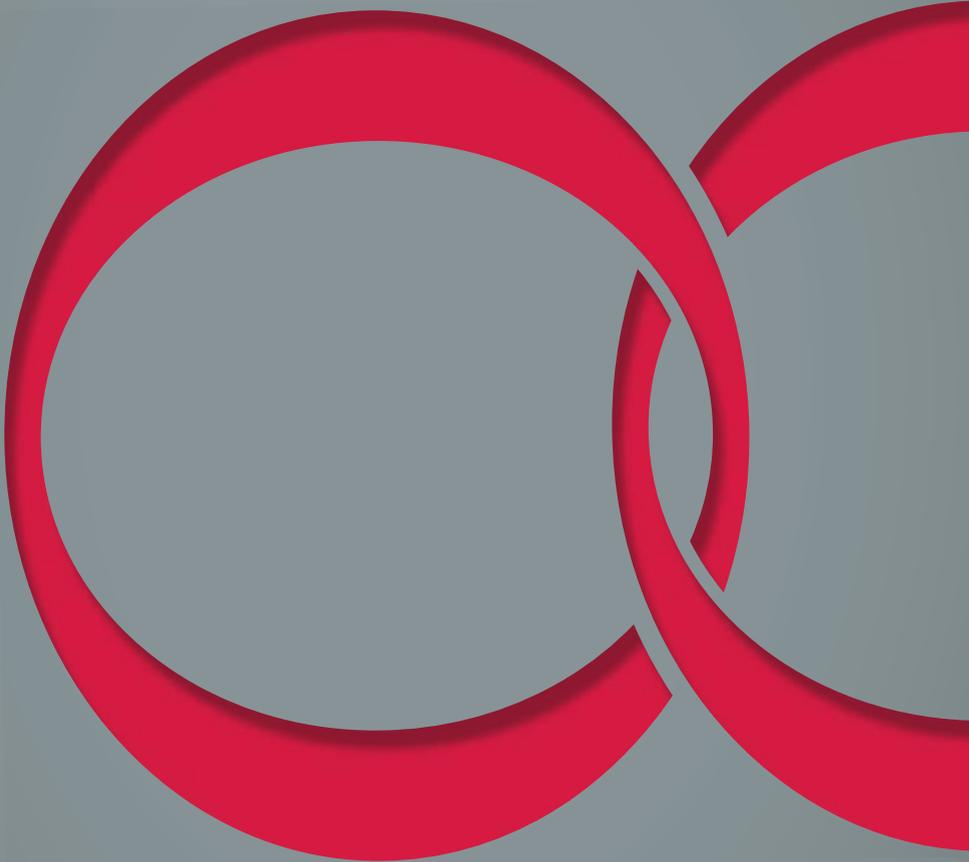
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