Article

Surnames in Adoption: (Re)creating Identities of Belonging

Jane Pilcher [1,*]**, Jan Flaherty** [1]**, Hannah Deakin-Smith** [1]**, Amanda Coffey** [2] **and Eve Makis** [3]

[1] Department of Social and Political Sciences, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG1 5LT, UK; jan.flaherty@ntu.ac.uk (J.F.); hannah.deakin-smith@ntu.ac.uk (H.D.-S.)

[2] Vice Chancellor's Office, University of West of England, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK; amanda.coffey@uwe.ac.uk

[3] School of Arts and Humanities, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham NG1 5LT, UK; eve.makis@ntu.ac.uk

[*] Correspondence: jane.pilcher@ntu.ac.uk

Abstract: Names are increasingly recognised in sociology as important routes for understanding family relationships, as well as familial and individual identities. In this article, we use qualitative 'name story' data to examine the meanings of surnames for adults who were adopted as a child and for adults who have adopted a child. Our findings suggest that adult adoptees and adopters can feel differently about surnames and how these connect them—or otherwise—to familial identities of belonging and to their own individual identities. Especially for adopters, shared surnames are understood as important for 'family-making' through the way they cement and display familial belonging. Adult adoptees' feelings about belonging, birth surnames and adoptive surnames appeared more complicated and often changed over time. For some, adoption enabled a flexibility in the choice and use of different surnames. Cultures of patronymic and patrilineal surnaming meant that women adoptees and women adopters also faced an additional layer of complexity that shaped decisions made about surnames and family belonging. Through examining experiences of and feelings about family names in adoption, our article highlights the complexities of surname praxis in identity construction, adoptive family life and lineages.

Keywords: surnames; adoption; name stories; family belonging; identities

1. Introduction

Names are increasingly seen as an important 'lens' through which family relationships and people's family-linked identities can be examined and understood (Finch 2008, p. 713; e.g., Carter and Duncan 2018; Davies 2011). In this article, we bring together the fields of family sociology, socio-onomastics and adoption studies to examine surnames and surnaming in families formed through adoption. This type of family is of sociological and genealogical interest not least because of what happens to an adopted child's family name: when parental responsibility for a child is legally transferred to adoptive parent(s), the surname of a child is invariably changed to align with that of their new adoptive parent(s).

Our article begins with a review of sociological research literature about surnames and families, a body of evidence which we argue has yet to examine substantively the significance and meaning of surnames in experiences of adoption. We outline the theoretical framework on identities and on names that has shaped the wider study of names in adoption we draw upon in this article. Our account of the design of our study describes the creative life-writing methods and qualitative life-story interviewing we used to capture 'name stories' through which adults in England and Wales recounted and made sense of their adoption-related naming and identity experiences. In the main part of our article, we extend knowledge and deepen understandings about the significance of names in adoption through presenting and analysing new data about experiences of family surnames in adoptive family life. Our findings suggest that adopters and adult adoptees can feel quite differently about surnames and how these link them—or otherwise—to familial identities

and to their own individual identities. Through examining experiences of, and feelings about, family names in adoption, our article highlights the complexities of surname praxis in identity construction, adoptive family life and lineages.

1.1. 'We' Identities and Surnames

Sociologically, surnames are conceptualised as denoting 'We' identities (Elias 1991) of belonging and embeddedness in relationships of family and kinship, including genealogical connections spanning across generations over time (Finch 2008). For Lawler (2014, pp. 45–46), for example, the growth internationally in popularity of services like Ancestry.com suggests that people's (re)constitution of identities as individuals is increasingly bound up with a sense of their genealogical belonging to family.

Surnames (as 'family' names) can be understood as important tools to signal collective familial identity, of belonging together (Hanks and Parkin 2016). However, patriarchal (i.e., patronymic and patrilineal) surnaming traditions in most European countries, in English-speaking countries, and in many other countries around the world, mean that it is men's surnames that tend to predominate as markers of the familial 'We'. In other words, in marriage to a man, the majority of women change their surname to his (Carter and Duncan 2018; Gooding and Kreider 2010; YouGov 2016; Valetas 2001). Moreover, there remain normative expectations that children of heterosexual couples, irrespective of the marital status or marital surnaming practice of their parents, are surnamed after their father (Goodall and Spark 2020; Johnson and Scheuble 2002; Nugent 2010). Evidence about surnames and the 'We' identities of couples who are gay is limited, but studies of gay men couples suggest that surname changing is not practiced (e.g., Clarke et al. 2008; Patterson and Farr 2017; Suter and Oswald 2003). Studies of gay women couples with children reveal variations in surnaming practices (e.g., Almack 2005; Dempsey and Lindsay 2017; Gartrell et al. 1999; Underwood and Robnett 2021).

Diversity of family types and fluidities in family relationships are now recognised to be characteristic of contemporary UK society, and elsewhere in the global north (e.g., Treas et al. 2014). In response, sociological theorisations of family have shifted from a concern with membership criteria based on, for example, marital and/or biological relationships, and towards understandings of 'family' as defined more by the 'doing' and 'display' of 'family-like' practices (Finch 2007; Morgan 1996, 2011). Diversity of family types, and the fluidity of family affiliations that change and are re-negotiated throughout life, can mean that links between surnames and the 'doing' and 'display' of family and kin-related identities of belonging are ambiguous and complex (Finch 2008; see, e.g., Davies 2011; Duncan et al. 2018; Simpson 1998). Surnames may be unpredictable and somewhat messy displayers of who counts as 'family' in the UK (and elsewhere), but, as we noted earlier, patriarchal surnaming practices remain the norm and are themselves an important source of complexity in the constructions of the familial 'We'. Moreover, evidence suggests that surnames do still matter as displayers of people's individual and familial identities—for example, in maintaining a professional identity (e.g., Laskowski 2010), for establishing a new identity as a couple (e.g., Kerns 2011), or for signalling that 'we are a proper family' especially when living in a complex arrangement (e.g., Duncan et al. 2018).

Families formed through adoption are exemplars of complex arrangements of family relationships. Adoption is a set of legal processes through which parental responsibility for a child is legally transferred from, most often, birth parent(s) to adoptive parent(s), resulting in a 'new' family. Current adoption law and social policy in England and Wales clearly portrays the changing of children's surnames, post-adoption, as a normative and routine practice that marks children's legal transfer from one set of parents to another (Pilcher and Coffey 2022). Especially since the post-1970s shift from 'closed', secretive adoptions to a culture of 'openness' (Kornitzer 1968; O'Halloran 2015), adoptions are a 'version of kinship that includes both adoptive relatives and birth relatives' (Jones and Hackett 2011, p. 45), and, we add, adoptive *names* and birth *names*. The complex medley of children's birth-given first names and surnames, and/or adoptive-given first names

or surnames, is an important example of how names have a heightened importance in experiences of adoption, for both adoptees and adopters (Pilcher et al. 2020). Research shows that first names matter for experiences linked to adoptees' birth heritage, culture and identity (Jacobson 2008; Ostler 2013; Reynolds et al. 2017; Scherman and Harré 2004; Suter 2012). Evidence on surnames in adoption suggests that, in belonging to a family form that is already complex and 'other', sharing (at least part of) a surname with their child(ren) may be especially meaningful for adoptive parents, regardless of whether those parents are heterosexual or gay (Patterson and Farr 2017). In studies of adoption, whose primary focus lays elsewhere, having the same surname as their foster parents and/or adopters is shown to be significant for some children (Beek and Schofield 2002; Sinclair et al. 2001). The actual, or possible, knowledge that adopted children may have about birth family surnames is noted in other adoption studies to be potentially troubling for adoptive family making (McDonald and McSherry 2011; Meakings et al. 2017; Watson et al. 2015). With the exception of these few studies, though, the significance of surnames for experiences of adoption remains underexplored. In this article, drawing on our qualitative study of names in adoptive family life, we advance knowledge and understanding by exploring the meanings surnames have for the individual identities and familial identities of adoptive parents and adult adoptees.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

Our argument in this article, like the wider study of which it is a part, draws on 'identities as social processes', with roots in Mead's (1934) work on the social self and Goffman's (1956, 1968) theorisation of the social (re)production of identities. From such perspectives, identities are understood to be simultaneously both individual and collective reflexive experiences of sameness and difference, produced in and through social relationships, and conditioned by systems of power and inequalities (Lawler 2014). This framework leads us to theorise people's names as core to practices by which people come to identify, categorise and locate both themselves and others. From this perspective, names are 'power-full', producing and reproducing identities, relationships and inequalities through the ideas, values and meanings they contain and convey (Pilcher 2016).

A framework of identities as social processes focuses acute attention on family relationships because it is within this locale that names are first 'given' and then interactively experienced as identificatory tools, and through which individuals gain a sense of identities as rooted in shared, collective identities. In families, parents choose first names for their child to signal individual and socio-cultural identities (Pilcher 2016) and make surname choices for their child to constitute and display family identities (Finch 2008). We argue that adoption magnifies and complicates these seemingly taken-for-granted practices of naming because it entails a meshing of birth family alongside adoptive family, and so the re-imagining of family and identity. Consequently, we regard 'name stories' told by adoptees and adopters as tools in their creative working through which to make sense of their self, socio-cultural and familial identities.

1.3. Research Project, Methods and Data

We explored the complexities of names, identities and belongings in experiences of adoption in a two-year qualitative study which began in September 2022. Focusing on domestic non-kinship adoption in England and Wales, our study examines the naming and identity experiences of adults who were adopted when they were a child, and of adoptive parents. These two groups of participants were separate; that is, they were not related to each other in any way. Several of our participants were adult adoptees who had also adopted a child or children themselves. None of the members of the study's research team had been adopted as a child, but one team member (Coffey) is an adopter. Another team member (Pilcher) experienced a surname change as a child, but this was not as a consequence of adoption. All members of the research team are parents and have experience of naming a child.

In this study, we used interdisciplinary and creative 'life story' research tools to capture the rich complexities of participants' accounts of their experiences and understandings of names, naming, identities and belonging in adoption. Participants were invited to share their stories via a purposefully designed life-writing booklet, containing prompts and suggestions. A pre-recorded online workshop was available to support participants to creatively write in the booklets about their name and identity experiences. As a research tool, creative writing can liberate participants from anxiously focusing on producing a 'true' account and may allow people to focus more clearly on the meaning of their experiences (Barone and Eisner 2012). Follow-up one-to-one video-call life-story interviews engaged with our participants' creative life-writing and aimed to further capture and explore adoption name stories. Our participants were therefore provided with complementary tools to help them (re)assemble their socially embedded autobiographical narratives of memories, experiences, characters, actions, artefacts and events (Lawler 2008; Plummer 1995) around names and identities in adoption, and via which they could creatively work through and re-tell their self, familial and socio-cultural identities.

Our participants were recruited through a multi-faceted strategy including via social media and multiple grassroots organisations working in adoption support, and through snowballing. Our target sample of adult adoptees and adoptive parents aimed to reflect the socio-economic profiles (social class, gender and ethnicity) of people impacted by adoption. Of our participants who were adult adoptees, 20 were women and 8 were men. The ages of our adult adoptee participants varied. Four were young (aged 18–39) and three were aged 65 years or above. The single largest age group of adoptees were those between 51 and 60 years (14 out of 28 participants). Of the participants who had adopted a child, 16 were women and 6 were men. The majority of our twenty-two adopter participants were aged 35–50 years, but one was aged under 35 and four were aged 51–70. The information voluntarily shared with us in their creative writing and/or interviews suggests that most of our adopter participants were in a heterosexual partnership. Three adopters were in gay partnerships or were solo adopters who were gay, and several of our adoptee participants were also gay. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants described themselves as white British. Six participants said they had mixed or multiple ethnicities, three others described themselves as white Welsh, one identified as white Polish and one identified as belonging to the Traveller (or 'gypsy') community. Our participants were mostly educated to at least an undergraduate degree level (n = 36), and 32 participants reported annual household incomes above the national average for the UK.

Our focus on names and identities, and our awareness of the especial sensitivities around names for people affected by adoption, meant that we gave our participants guidance about the choice and use of pseudonyms to anonymise their data. We offered participants the chance to use their current first name or a first-name pseudonym of their own choice (albeit subject to certain conditions, e.g., that it had not already been used by another participant). All other names of participants, and all names of people they mentioned, were pseudonymised to reflect gender, ethnicity and age, or in some cases, were redacted. All other potentially identifying information in participant data was also redacted.

The data we present in this article were managed through the use of qualitative data software (NVivo) and analysed using thematic analyses (Braun and Clarke 2006). Our thematic approach drew on a coding frame developed from our research questions, participants' written materials and their interviews, and in dialogue with existing work on names, identities and/or adoption. Data from the life-story interviews were read and analysed, alongside and in relation to participants' creative life-writing, to assist the development of layered and multi-faceted understandings. In the remainder of our article, we present and analyse these data to examine, first, how surnames feature in adoptees' accounts of familial belonging, followed by how adopters reflected on surnames in their family making.

2. Surnames and Identities of Belonging for Adults Who Were Adopted as a Child

Without exception, and irrespective of the era when their adoption took place, the birth surnames of all adoptees in our study had been changed to match the surname of one or more of their adopters. This is not an unexpected finding: as we evidenced earlier, the normative family practice of surname sharing remains common in most types of families with children. Moreover, the taken-for-grantedness about surname change for children, so as to align with the surname of adoptive parents, predominates in adoption legislation, guidance and procedures (Pilcher and Coffey 2022). Our discussion of how, given this context, surnames feature in adoptees' accounts of familial belonging is organised around two recurrent and related themes that emerged from our data analysis: (i) 'family-making and unmaking', where surname change due to adoption is recognised as important for the 'We' identities of families formed through adoption and/or as having detrimental consequences for birth family belongings; and (ii) 'flexibility of choices and uses', where the multiplicity of surnames experienced by adoptees in their lives can empower some to make situational or permanent adjustments in how surnames display their meaningful family belongings.

2.1. Meanings of Surname Change for Adoptees: Family Making and Unmaking

Surname change and surname alignment in the context of adoption was certainly viewed positively by some adoptees in our study, with specific benefits for identities of belonging within families formed through adoption:

> I love having my [adoptive] surname, I do. . .and you know, I can see why I got it and you know it means I feel connected to my adoptive family, you know, it's a good thing.

Tiegan Watson, adoptee: interview

> I think it sums it up with family. I think it's important to have the same surname especially. because I just think it could be . . . it's difficult . . . er you would feel more of an out[sider]. . . well I don't know, I think I felt a bit of an outsider, a bit different because of being adopted, being mixed race. I think if my surname was different as well, I think that would have just been another cherry on the top. Something else for a child to cope with.

Rachel Morgan, adoptee: interview

> . . . Obviously I would have . . . when I was adopted by Mum and Dad and then they adopted my brother as well, we've all got the same surname, Tomlinson. So . . . I think if I had a different name to them, it would always feel like you're not really properly adopted, really, into that family. I mean if they . . . if they were James and Trudy Tomlinson and I was Natasha Hatton and my brother was William Thomas, it would just . . . it's not kind of . . . wouldn't really seem . . . final I think, or like, I don't know.

Jane Tomlinson, adoptee: interview

For Jane, then, it is 'obvious' that all members of her adoptive family—parents and children—should have the same surname: it was the 'final' step to becoming and being a 'properly' constituted family. The sharing of a single family surname was meaningful for Jane, Tiegan and Rachel because this displayed (Finch 2007) their belonging and connection to their adoptive family, rather than, as Jane suggested, an otherwise random collection of individuals with disparate surnames, or as Rachel suggested, a group of people with different ethnicities. Another adoptee also talked about children's surname change being a routine feature of adoption, with 'practical' benefits:

> I think you know if you . . . I think if you're adopted into a family, then I think it's fair enough to carry that family surname. It's practical and it's true. Other people that come into the family change their surnames. So, I don't really see that being too much of a problem.

Eddie Catton, adoptee: interview

Eddie normalised surname change as a consequence of adoption by likening it to the fact that 'other people' change their surnames when they join a family: he went on to cite the example of his wife who had changed her surname to his when they got married. For Eddie, then, surname change linked to adoption is as unproblematic a family practice and a way of displaying who belongs in a family as is surname change (for heterosexual women) linked to marriage. (As we discuss later, though, women adoptees—and women adopters—may experience a complex mix of feelings about changing their surnames at marriage to signal belonging, and, for some, it is far from a straightforward choice).

Jane and Eddie are examples of adoptees who, to use Eddie's word's, did not see surname change in adoption as 'too much of a problem'. This was not the case for other adoptees like Carol or Paul, however, who were angry that their birth surnames had been replaced by adoptive surnames. Carol wrote that the birth family surnames of adoptees should not be 'stolen, taken, removed or altered' and that 'my original surname is my birth right' (Carol Withers, adoptee: creative writing booklet). For Carol, then, her birth surname, shared with her birth mother, was integral to her feelings about birth family belonging and inheritance. Similarly, Paul wrote about surname change as damaging the identity of adoptees, causing a disconnect with 'your clan, your place, your forebears':

> Names that tie you to your identity. . .Hugely important to many people, their inherent BEING [original emphasis], their mirroring of facial features down the generations, traits in behaviour and emotion, "You're a real (insert surname here)".

Paul Harlowe, adoptee: creative writing booklet

In Paul's understanding, then, unlike (as he described them) 'new shiny' adoptive surnames, birth surnames are richly meaningful in terms of identities of belonging: they signal genealogical links and help affirm a familial belonging based on genetic inheritance. But, as another adoptee's name story shows, adoptive surnames can also be meaningful for adoptees in the making of identities of belonging for their own families and genealogical lines of descent. Andrew wrote that he was about 10 years old when he was told that his names had been changed. Gradually, his initial feelings of shock and hurt faded: 'I've become more comfortable with the name change, after all I am who I am'. Becoming a father himself, though, was an especially significant event that had transformed Andrew's feelings about his adoptive surname:

> Having had my own child I love the fact that she has my surname. The only genetic mirror I have in my life has given real meaningful context to my [sur]name.

Andrew Campbell, adoptee: creative writing booklet

Here, Andrew's pleasure in sharing his surname with his child derives from his use of it in the making of his own family's identity of belonging and the passing on of his surname to his own bloodline. For him, it mattered that his surname was able to display a biological relationship of belonging together, or as he said, a 'genetic' link. Such a link was, of course, absent in his relationship with his adoptive parents.

2.2. Surnames and Adoptees: Flexibility of Choices and Uses

As was the case for Andrew Campbell, quoted above, other adoptees in our study wrote or spoke about how their feelings about surnames had shifted over time because of a change of one type or another in their family relationships. For Chris, a breakdown in his relationship with his adoptive parents, and a dislike of his adoptive surname, had led to him to change his surname back to his birth surname ('Salisbury') in his later adult

life. He said doing so had marked a 'fresh start' for his identity and reflected his deeper 'attachment' to his birth surname:

> I would say that erm, I feel more attached to erm the surname Salisbury, I feel that you know, I'm more . . . for example I'm more interested in the historical roots of that name. I've looked into the erm . . . into the history of that. Whereas Hickenbottom was just . . . well it was just a [sur]name I was given wasn't it you know, I was just erm tagged with that name. Erm and I've not . . . I don't think really I've had much of an association with it, erm because of erm, it was just kind of . . . erm, how can I put it? Erm . . . . . . just something that I'd been labelled with I suppose.

Chris Salisbury, adoptee: interview

Chris implied that the depth of feeling he has about his birth surname of 'Salisbury' derives from the way it links him to his genealogical 'historical roots' and connects him to his birth family ancestors. In contrast, his adoptive surname 'Hickenbottom' lacked that meaningfulness in terms of a deep sense of belonging: it was merely a 'tag' and a 'label', applied when he was adopted.

Chris' rejection of his adoptive surname was bound up with the breakdown of his relationship with his adoptive parents. For another adoptee, Courtney-Grace Short, the breakdown of her relationship with her adoptive father also seemed to be linked to a change in her feelings about her adoptive surname. In her interview, Courtney-Grace explained that she used 'Short', her legal surname (and that of her adoptive father), especially in the context of her activism ('I like doing stuff with his surname that he legally gave me, that he's not going to agree with at all'). She said she also used other surnames, linked to her life history as an adoptee, that she felt a connection with. Like her adoptive surname, these surnames were situationally deployed according to context and her purposes. The array of surnames Courtney-Grace used in addition to her birth surname included 'Cook' (the surname of Courtney-Grace's adoptive mother, to whom she had a strong emotional attachment) and 'Abakumov', her birth father's surname that her birth mother had written on her birth certificate. For Courtney-Grace, her birth surname was meaningful because it signalled her Eastern European genealogy and underpinned her (reclaimed) ethnic identity as 'British mixed'. In her interview, Courtney-Grace reflected on her use of multiple surnames, saying that 'I just figured other adoptees do that but it's . . . it occurs to me now that they might not (laughs)'. She went on to explain that the authenticity of her claims to various surnames stemmed from the multiplicity of her different types of parents: 'Yeah, well they're all . . . all of them were a productive parent at one point in their life to me'.

Courtney-Grace was not, in fact, the only adoptee in our sample who used different surnames in various contexts—including for passwords, in email addresses and as pen-names—to signal their feelings of multiple familial belongings and attachments to parents of various sorts. For Evelyn, her situational use of different surnames began when relationships changed due to a bereavement in her adoptive family:

> After my adoptive dad died around ten years ago, after asking my adoptive mum if it was OK with her, I began using Stephanie Ahmadi, my full birth name, for poetry and writing and still do sometimes.

Evelyn Harrison, adoptee: creative writing booklet

Tiegan was another adoptee who had strong attachments to multiple surnames, including the surname of her 'amazing' former foster family with whom she remained close. Her main attachments, though, were to her adoptive surname, 'Watson', and to her birth surname 'Young'. We quoted Tiegan earlier (in the previous section) where she explained in her interview why she 'loves' her adoptive surname. Tiegan also wrote about how her adoptive surname, 'Watson', 'means a lot, I was given it and that connection' (creative writing booklet). But Tiegan's birth surname was very important to her, too, especially since she had re-established contact with her birth family. She wrote about how her now stronger identification with her birth surname seemed, at times, to burst out:

I am known sometimes, when asked for my surname, to say 'Young' [birth surname] instead of 'Watson' [adoptive surname] and then have to apologise as [that is] not my legal surname. Even though it's not my legal [surname], I try [to] recognise I haven't lost it, as [there's] nothing stopping me identifying with it and seeing it as mine still.

Tiegan Watson, adoptee: creative writing booklet

For Tiegan, then, her birth surname was authentically (if not legally) hers to 'possess' ('it's mine still') and to use, as a way of showing to herself and others that she 'still' belonged to her birth family as well as to her adoptive family. The name stories of Chris, Courtney-Grace, Evelyn and Tiegan suggest how experience of surname change enables some adoptees to identify, whether simultaneously or serially, with multiple familial groups and empowers in them a flexibility about the choice and use of surnames in line with their (often complex and fluid) feelings of belonging signalled by their various surname-based affiliations.

The choice and use of surnames by women adoptees in our sample who were married (or who had been) were framed, not only by their adoption but also by the wider cultural context of patriarchal surnaming (Pilcher 2017) we noted earlier. Being someone who had already had a surname change due to adoption added an additional layer of complexity in decisions about whether or not to change their surnames at marriage:

When I got married I decided not to change my name. This was partly driven by a feminist belief in not changing my name to my husband's...Perhaps the real reason was a feeling that others had already made decisions that had changed my name a number of times previously and I didn't want to do it again.

Philippa Bacca, adoptee: creative writing booklet

Clearly, Philippa's decision not to change her surname at marriage, although informed by feminist principles, also reflected her experience as an adoptee where the decisions made by 'others' had resulted in a history of fractured name-based identities. Similarly, Eleanor wrote how, when she got married, she had at first 'struggled' with the idea of changing her surname 'again':

After some thought, I decided to take my husband's surname. I was going to combine our surnames to make a double-barrelled name, as I felt reluctant to give up the surname I had carried since I was a baby, but I also wanted to take my husband's name in the traditional way. I wanted our future children to have the same name as both of us, and this was very important to me.

Eleanor Brown, adoptee: creative writing booklet

Eleanor's dilemma over her marital surname change was very much about the tensions between her attachment to her adoptive surname, the power of 'tradition', and her strength of feeling that, when forming her own family, a single, shared surname was an important sign of their belonging together. For other women adoptees, choosing to change surnames at marriage was accompanied by very strong identifications with their married surname—again, because of a prior history of surname changing.

When I got married my [sur]name changed and I was SO [original emphasis] happy... It is the most significant moment in my life in terms of my identity. For [over 20] years I had other names that I didn't feel connected to and then once I got married I felt like I belonged and I was who I was always meant to be.//My surname is shared by my husband and I and we gave it to our daughter. I am in a tribe of 3 and that name means I belong and I am loved and I am part of something exclusive and special. My surname means more to me than my first name.

Louise Hall, adoptee: creative writing booklet

Louise's name story is a good example of how gendered marital surnaming conventions can advantage women adoptees, culturally enabling them to make their own positive, consensual choice either to retain or to change how their surname displays their meaningful family belonging. This is also evident in Jackie's name story:

> My name...is Jackie Peaks. Peaks is my married name—my husband's name and my children's name. It is who I am now.//—the mother and the wife. It is the person I became and the person who introduced herself to her birth family.//I was Jackie Sniper. That was my adopted name given to me by my adopted parents. I am not sure that it has ever truly felt like I know who that is or who she should be but it was who I was for most of my life.

Jackie Peaks, adoptee: creative writing booklet

Being a 'Peaks' mattered for Jackie because it signalled her familial identities as a wife and a mother and displayed her belonging to this family. Neither her adoptive surname nor her birth surname had ever felt as meaningful to her.

Our findings show that adult adoptees' experiences of and attachments to surnames as signals of familial belonging were varied and complex, were often linked to relationship changes of one type or another, and relatedly, shifted over time. Next, we examine the ways surnames feature as identities of belonging in the name stories of adults who had adopted a child.

3. Surnames and Identities of Belonging for Adopters

Most children leaving the care system in England and Wales for adoption are aged 1–4 years (71%) or 5–9 years (21%) (Department for Education 2017). The adopters in our study were mostly parents whose children were still aged under ten. Our adopter participants therefore tended to be people who were in the relatively early stages of their adoptive family life, and in the context of the contemporary culture of openness in adoption we noted earlier (Jones 2016). Irrespective of how recently adoption had taken place, all of our adopter participants had changed the surnames of their child(ren) to align with either their own and/or their partner's. Again, this is not a surprising finding, given the strength of patriarchal surnaming practices along with the assumption of the normalcy of surname changing and alignment evident in adoption legislation, guidance and procedures. Against this background, we identify two themes in our data on how surnames as identities of belonging featured in adopters' name stories. Of particular prominence in adopters' accounts was 'family-making'. Here, alignment of surnames between parent(s) and child(ren) is seen as a foundational family practice, fundamentally important both for cementing and displaying adoptive family togetherness. The second, and related, theme was 'gender dynamics', where women adopters spoke about how the accepted benefits of a unitary, shared surname in their adoptive family unit nonetheless required some navigation and/or negotiation in the face of patriarchal surnaming conventions.

3.1. Meanings of Surname Change for Adopters: Family Making

Amongst our adopter participants, there was a strong assumption that changing their child's original birth surname to their own surname and/or that of their partner, was, as we previously noted it to be, a completely normal and expected practice. The normalcy of surname change was expressed through participants' use of words such as 'obviously', 'automatic' and 'of course':

> Obviously post-adoption, Evey would have our surname.

Helen Evans, adopter: creative writing booklet

> It was automatic, she would take my surname. And it was never even considered that there'd be anything else.

Katy Dubois, solo adopter: interview

But erm yeah, I just think it was a given that the birth certificates changed to reflect the adoption process and then your surname is the official name if you like.

Colin Armstrong, adopter: interview

Colin located the 'givenness' of surname change in the context of the formal requirements of adoption as a legal procedure. Other adopters also legitimised their practice of surname changing by referring to advice they had been given by, for example, social workers or other adoption advisers:

In all instances, it is encouraged . . . for the child to take the surname of the family adopting them.

Matty Meadows, adopter: creative writing booklet

Our social worker, she said for the child to have erm a different surname to either of its parents erm the child might find that quite difficult in terms of their belonging you know, where . . . where do they belong and who do they belong to and what family are they part of?

Sophie Wright, adopter: interview

Sophie's account of advice given by a social worker closely focuses on how shared surnames are seen to be important because of their signalling of familial belonging, particularly from the perspective of an adoptee. 'Belonging' was the most prominent theme in the adopters' accounts of surnames in their experiences of adoption. Sharing of surnames, in whole or in part, was seen as a fundamentally important practice of, and for, adoptive family making:

We originally fostered Addi and when we adopted, we all felt it was important to take our family name, Baker. This helped us and her to feel like we were actually going to be a family, which we had all been working towards/hoping for some time.

Annie Baker, adopter: creative writing booklet

For Annie, then, being able to finally share the 'family name, Baker' marked not just a legal step in their family formation but was also an important symbol of their 'being' a family. As she put it in her follow-up interview, 'actually be[ing] able to be, like, Team Baker and erm have the same surname felt quite important'. Other adopters also used the word 'team' in relation to surnames and their displaying of family belonging, a word choice that connotes 'being on the same side' and a combining together of individuals:

Interviewer: And that's something that was important to you, having the same surname?

Er yeah, that was really, really important to me that we all had the same surname. I don't know why erm just that you weren't different, it's unity, all together, you're all a team and . . . like, it sounds awful that, it is that belonging.

Iris Matthews, adopter: interview

The adopters also wrote or spoke about their perception that shared surnames were meaningful to their children in terms of feelings of family belonging they engendered in them. Robert said in his interview that, from his child's perspective, it would be 'strange' not to have a 'last name' in common with him and his partner:

And we appreciate her last name was changed to our [last] name, that's absolutely you know, fine and we would always embrace that and I think that's important for her erm identity as well. So, to grow up to feel that belonging to a, to a family and to see us as Mum and Dad really would be possibly strange to have a different surname.

Robert Fry, adopter: interview

Similarly, Margaret and Rachel each attributed what the meaning of a shared surname was for their respective children, arising from the way it helped to mask their adopted status to outsiders:

Whereas if you had a different [sur]name, then they would have had to explain that wouldn't they? Erm so it was up to them to tell people if they were adopted but not to have to tell them by saying, "Well why is your name Colback when your mum and dad are Barber?".

Margaret Barber, adopter: interview

It would be different . . . just mess up with your head a little bit if you were . . . you're already feeling a bit, you don't fit in and then to have a different surname than your mum and your dad but just . . . I think it's important just to be inclusive you know, in your own little unit.

Rachel Morgan, adopter: interview

Some adopters shared their own feelings about the significant point in their family-making journey when their child's surname had officially and legally changed. Colin Armstrong, for example, said in his interview, 'Erm . . . well I was very proud, she really became part of the family', whilst another solo adopter wrote effusively of her delight and of her surprise at her realisation of how much it mattered to her that, as parent and child, they 'get to be called' by the same surname:

Lastly the name Bragan. The same last name as me. I jumped for joy on the day you finally became a Bragan. I didn't think it mattered to me as much as it did but some days I pinch myself that you get to be called Bragan.

Cat Bragan, solo adopter: not-to-be-sent-letter, creative writing booklet

Some adopters' feelings at their child sharing their surname were tightly bound up with how this connected the child to a wider kin network and/or secured the continuation of the family name and lineage into a new generation. Sioned, a solo adopter, talked about how her surname 'Davies' tied herself and now her child to a wider, longer genealogy and also, importantly, to her family's Welsh ethnicity:

Our family names are very important. It's a step into er our identity if you like. Erm . . . who we are, where we've come from.//Erm so it's the feeling of belonging, being part of something more, erm being part of something that was long . . . here long before you arrived and something that will carry on er to the future.

Sioned Davies, solo adopter: interview

Future and past connections of belonging mentioned here by Sioned also featured in the surname stories of other adopters. Sam explained that, when they married, she and her wife Emma had each kept their surnames, and their child Arthur has only Emma's surname. One of their reasons for this choice was to link Arthur to Emma's grandfather, to whom Emma had a strong emotional attachment:

[Emma]'s grampy was like a father figure for her growing up. And so it was like a nice familiar link that Arthur doesn't even need to know about as such but it's something that he will kind of grow to learn and there's stories there that are histories, that are now his.

Sam Trent, adopter: interview

In her creative writing booklet, Sophie explained that, for various reasons, 'me and my dad are the only Wrights in the family now'. The decision made by Sophie and her partner (who had a different surname) that their adopted child should have the surname Wright was especially meaningful for that reason: 'So now there will be 3 Wrights in the family, and that's nice'. Similarly, Cat wrote in her booklet:

> My dad had daughters and so we thought the Bragan name would run out after us.
> But now I am raising a new Bragan and I think my dad is pretty chuffed about that.

Cat Bragan, solo adopter: creative writing booklet

For these adopters, then, sharing a surname connects their child to family belonging and lineage and are experienced as meaningful and as true, irrespective of biological or genetic inheritance. As Cat said, despite her own lack of brothers, her adoption of a child as a solo adopter assured the continuation of the Bragan family name for at least another generation. Cat was not the only adopter who referenced patriarchal surnaming traditions in their accounts of surnames, family belonging and lineage, as we show next.

3.2. Meanings of Surname Change for Adopters: Gender Dynamics

The adopters in our study were unanimous as to the family-making benefits of changing their child's birth surname to match their own/their partner's, whether from their own perspective, the assumed perspectives of their children or those of members of the wider family. However, some women adopters wrote or spoke about how these benefits for collective family identity had to be navigated or negotiated in relation to their own individual identity. Iris, for example, explained in her interview that her 'maiden' surname was really important to her identity, and that when she got married, it was 'really important to keep my name'. When it came to adopting a child as a couple, though, this was a new 'naming crisis point' ([Pilcher 2017](#)) because she felt it was important that 'we all had the same surname'. She discussed possible strategies with her husband to try and resolve her dilemma, including him changing his surname to hers or giving their child her surname as a middle name. However, for various reasons, these strategies were seen as unviable. Iris reluctantly conceded and, to 'keep it simple', the display and cementing of her family's identity of belonging together was achieved by everyone sharing her husband's surname:

> The absolute sole purpose was that. And I even cried, I didn't want to lose me surname. And I know people double-barrel and everything but again it was just keeping it simple.

Iris Matthews, adopter: interview

Unlike Iris, Sophie Wright—quoted in the previous section—came to an agreement with her husband to pass on only her surname to their adopted child, rather than his own. Sophie explained that the sharing of her birth family surname to create and to display adoptive family belonging came about due to a mix of factors, including her views on the gender politics of surnames, her professional identity and pragmatism about ease of use:

> When I married my husband we talked about me taking his name but it's quite hard to say and you have to spell it every time to you say it ... I also didn't like the idea of being a 'Mrs something' when I'd worked so hard to become Dr Wright, I didn't want to lose that so I kept Wright.

Sophie Wright, adopter: creative writing booklet

Like Sophie Wright, adopter Catia Rodriguez spoke in her interview about how she had retained her surname at marriage. This decision was revisited when she and her husband adopted a child, but, in the end, Catia decided to keep her surname. Their child was given a double-barrelled surname, thereby displaying a connection to both parents. Double-barrelling surname was a strategy used by another woman adopter, not only to retain her surname but also to create and to display family belonging:

> We're all Hall-Parish. So, I'm a Hall and [my husband's] a Parish and when we got married we joined our names together, so obviously both the boys have it as well, yeah.

Ellen Hall-Parish, adopter: interview

As with adoptees, patriarchal cultures of surnaming can be an additional layer in the complexity of meanings surnames have for adopters' practices of family making.

4. Discussion

The meanings of surnames for the individual, familial and/or genealogical identities and belongings of people with experiences of adoption are underexplored in research. Our examination of this topic, using new data from England and Wales, shows the value of doing so. First, our findings show that adoptees and adopters can feel differently about surnames and how these connect them—or otherwise—to familial identities of belonging and of genealogy, and so, to their own individual identities. For adopters, sharing surnames (partly or wholly) between themselves and their child(ren) is self-evidently and singularly important for 'family-making'. The adopters and adult adoptees in our study wrote and/or talked appreciatively about the benefits of surname sharing between parents and children in adoptive families. But the adoptees also directly addressed an issue that was an 'absent presence' in the adopters' accounts: how family making also entails 'family-unmaking' of birth family surnames, relationships and genealogies, and so, too, an unmaking of adoptees' individual identities. These differences in the surname stories of adoptees and adopters likely reflect, at least partially, their different stages in their adoption journeys. The adopter participants in our study tended to be in the relatively early period of a much desired and often long-awaited family life, and whose children, aged under ten, had, as yet, only a limited sense of their 'adoptive identity' (Grotevant 1997). Typically, in the changed contexts of adoption cultures post-1970s, the children of our adopter participants likely came to be placed for adoption having had difficult, or even traumatic, early life experiences with their birth family (O'Halloran 2015). For all these reasons, it is understandable that the adopters in our study were focused on securing bonds between themselves and their children, and this priority was clearly evident in the family-making emphasis of their surname stories. In contrast, the adoptee participants in our study were adults, with the majority being middle aged. Their adoption had mostly occurred in the pre-1970s era of 'closed' adoptions, which typically involved babies whose unmarried mother had been 'encouraged', in the sexual-moral culture of that time, to 'give them up' (O'Halloran 2015). These circumstances of their adoption and/or the development of their 'adoptive identity' over their lifetime meant that, for adult adoptees, surnames can be as meaningful for family *unmaking* and identity *unmaking* as they are for 'family-making'—whether in the formation of their own families and/or in their (sometimes fragile) attachments to and identifications with birth and/or adoptive families. Future research might further explore surnames and identities of belonging for those types of adoptees and adopters underrepresented in our study—specifically adoptees who are young adults, and adopters whose children are now adults.

A second, and related, way our study advances understandings of how surnames are meaningful in experiences of adoption lays in our findings about the complexity of adult adoptees' feelings about surnames. Changes and fluidity in family relationships may be inherent and signalled, albeit rather messily, by surnames (Finch 2008), but our findings suggest the distinctiveness of adult adoptees' experiences of the multifarious belonging functions of surnames. Over time, the adoptees' feelings about birth surnames, surname-change and adoptive surnames had, at key points, shifted—on discovering that their birth surname had been changed, on getting married and/or having their own children, after reconnecting with their birth family, or experiencing a bereavement in, or an estrangement from, their adoptive family. For some adoptees, the multiplicity of surnames they identified with and the familial attachments of belonging felt at different points of their lives permitted a flexibility in choices and contextual uses of an array of surnames.

Thirdly, our study on surnames and belonging in adoption has produced new knowledge about how both adopters and adoptees use surnames in their creations and recreations of genealogical connections of belonging. The adopters in our study felt that giving their surname(s) to their child(ren) securely connected their child(ren) genealogically to past family history and/or extended the future of the family surname and lineage into another generation. Our findings here show how surname sharing is a tool adopters use in the creative making, imagining and display of familial lineages (Davies 2011; Finch 2007; Ma-

son 2008), independently of biological relationships or genetic inheritance. In contrast, such genealogies of 'fictive' kinship (Lawler 2014, p. 64), although valued, were often experienced by the adult adoptees in our study as weaker than those stronger connections of biological belonging to genealogies signalled by their birth surname. Our findings on the meaningfulness of surnames for these belongings extend previous understandings about the importance of genetic connections for people whose family lineages are 'troubled' (Lawler 2014, p. 53) by the 'kinship consequences' (Mason 2008) of adoption (Barn and Mansuri 2019; Carsten 2004; Patton-Imani 2018; Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000).

Fourthly, our study evidences similarities in the gender dynamics of surnaming choices and practices in adopters' and adoptees' experiences of the (un)making of individual identities and adoptive and/or birth family relationships of belonging. In a culture of patriarchal surnaming in which men's surnames are still privileged as signalling familial 'We' identities, many (heterosexual) women face a 'crisis point' (Pilcher 2017) as to which surname to choose and use for themselves and/or their children within their family unit (e.g., Carter and Duncan 2018; Nugent 2010; Patterson and Farr 2017). Our findings show that such decisions are even more complex for women who are adoptees and for women who are adopters. For women adoptees, who had already had a surname change due to their adoption, the prospect of undergoing a further surname change at marriage or to share a surname with their child was something they either rejected, reluctantly accepted or wholeheartedly welcomed—depending on the meaningfulness of whichever surname they did, or did not, feel a strong attachment to. Our findings show that women adopters (except the few who were solo adopters) similarly had to navigate and negotiate around the additional complexities within adoptive family life of the gendered dynamics of signalling of familial belonging through surnames. For women adopters, at least those in heterosexual partnerships, the important practice of adoptive family making through sharing surnames (in part or in whole) with husbands/partners/children often involved an unmaking of their own surname-based lineage and so also an unmaking or remaking of their own surnamed identities. Although, in our study, there were fewer men adopter and adoptee participants than women, through what they shared with us in their name stories, men adoptees and men adopters did not seem to have experienced (at least, not in relation to their *own* surname) the kinds of navigations and negotiations about surnames and identities of belonging faced by our women participants.

5. Conclusions

Adoptions, in any era, are complex because they are a 'version of kinship that includes both adoptive relatives and birth relatives' (Jones and Hackett 2011, p. 45), from which adopted individuals make sense of their 'adoptive identity' (Grotevant 1997) throughout their lives. Our argument in this article is that surnames are especially, and distinctively, meaningful for the multifarious family belongings and identities of adult adoptees and in the family-making practices of adopters. For both adoptees and adopters, these meanings are important in the here and now of their everyday lives and can also stretch backwards and forwards across time via often complex networks of genealogical identifications. As noted by Kramer (2011, p. 393) 'people take as much pleasure in *making* [original emphasis] themselves connected and rooted, as in being rooted and connected'.

Our analysis of the surname stories of adoptees and adopters supports the theoretical propositions we outlined earlier: of individual identities and identities of belongings being produced in and through social (and, here, acutely, familial) relationships, and of names (here, surnames) as being 'power-full', (re)creating identities, relationships and inequalities through the ideas, values and meanings they contain and convey—whether about birth heritage and genetic connections, created, experiential or imagined genealogies and/or the cultural privileging of men's family surnames. Arguably, 'authentic, connected' kinships of genealogical belonging are a fantasy for us all (Lawler 2014, p. 59). But, as we explored in this article, 'the common. . .experience of the arbitrariness of belonging' and of 'constructed'

individual and collective identities (Yngvesson and Mahoney 2000, p. 102) are especially evident in the surname stories of adoptees and adopters.

Limitations of Our Study: The findings of our study are limited by the characteristics of our sample of adopters and of adoptees. Despite our best efforts, adoptee participants aged 50 plus are over-represented and adoptees aged 18–40 are under-represented in our study. Given the changed practices and cultures of adoption in England and Wales before and since the 1970s, and the longer lives in which older adoptees have had time to reach an understanding of their adoptive identities, the unevenness in the age profile of our adoptees likely impacted our findings about meanings of surnames for family belongings and lineages. In the case of adopters, and again despite our best efforts, we mainly recruited participants with children under the age of ten and who were therefore in the first few years of adoptive family life. If our study had successfully recruited more adopters whose children are now teenagers or adults, the surname stories of adopters might have included a more varied set of experiences. Our study had more women than men participants. Consequently, gendered dynamics in family belongings through surnames might have emerged as a more significant theme than it might otherwise have. Participants in our study were mostly white and lived within English and Welsh family structures: we are aware that adoptees and adopters living in other cultures of collective family structures might have different surname stories. Lastly, our study was purposively designed to capture, through creative writing and life-history interviewing, and from the perspectives of (adult) adoptees and adopters, the richness and depth of experiences of names in adoptive families. Appropriate for a qualitative study, we do not make any claims as to the representativeness or generalisability of our findings.

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