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Introducing the Archive Study

The local authority archive is in the basement of the building; a dark and ill-lit room, with hardly any natural light and nowhere to sit. The room is vast, in a state of disrepair and unheated. The social worker showed me the adoption archive, housed at the back in a dark recess and comprising files alphabetically ordered under the child’s birth name. (Research diary July 2002)

The letterbox system is housed in the adoption team, in two drawers of a filing cabinet, whose designated purpose is post-adoption issues. It is organized under the child’s birth name and there was a dual system in place – ‘active files’ and ‘dormant files’. After five years of dormancy the papers should all be returned to the archive and joined up with the child’s adoption file. (research diary, July 2002)

I am beginning this account by evoking a contrast between two systems that were operating in the local authority in which my study was based. The first quotation describes a system of archiving, where adoption files, stored alphabetically in a basement, recorded the history of children’s adoptions. The second quotation describes a system for exchanging letters, where letterbox files, stored in the local authority office, record the history of mail exchanges between adopters and birth family. The former is a system for the storage of dead history, where events described are past and the latter is a system for the recording of living history, where events described have an ongoing life in the present. This distinction is clearly reflected in the geographical location of these two systems: the letterbox files are housed in the social work office, easily accessible and part of the contemporary life of adoption work, while the adoption files are at the back of a locked basement, difficult to access
and part of the past history of adoption work. These two systems clearly reflect two very different notions of what it means to be adopted and it was in order to interrogate the transition they signify that I undertook my local authority study. This chapter will introduce the study and the questions that I wished to address.

The working archive

In common with all adoption agencies, the local authority in which I conducted my research had an extensive archive of all adoptions made under their jurisdiction. The practice of preserving the adopted child’s prior history in an archive of adoption files emerged most systematically after the 1976 Adoption Act. As Chapters 5 and 6 elaborated, the opening up of birth records in the 1970s had transformed the adoption archive from a sealed depository to an open reference space. The truth of the child’s original history needed to be accommodated somewhere secure and unchanging to await that point when it would be resurrected for the adopted adult seeking his or her origins. This practice of archiving is clearly embedded in the idea of the origin as a source of truth and knowledge for the adopted subject, an idea that had gathered momentum throughout the 1960s with the practice of ‘telling’ (see Chapter 4) and throughout the 1970s and 1980s with the practices of later life letters and life story work (see Chapter 5). One of the foci of this study is whether the era of open adoption reworks this archiving impulse and Chapters 8 and 9 will consider this question through a close reading of the adoption archive files.

My study focus was adoption placements made in the period 1989–2000, a decade in which ‘open adoption’ was commonly understood to have emerged as a body of practices in the United Kingdom (see Chapter 6). The research was undertaken between 2002 and 2004.

Collecting the archive sample

My original idea when undertaking this research was to compare adoptions from two particular years within one local authority, 1990, before open adoption had really emerged and 2000 when open adoption practices had entered adoption work. My hope was that the local authority in which I would be working would be able to provide me with a list of adoption orders for these respective years and I would simply access the files in the archive. However, the authority had only very recently