The lost generation of mother and baby homes

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A huge number of Irish families have connections with adoption. Over 43,000 children have been adopted since legal adoption was introduced here in 1952 and prior to '52, many informal adoptions took place. That means, that many extended families have had the experience of children being adopted 'out of' or 'into' their families over the years. It can be assumed that adoption is not too far from any of our family stories. Similarly, emigration stories are another big part of Irish history that have a deep and significant impact on many of us. Stories about both adoption and emigration have connections in that there are usually losses and gains for the people involved in different sides of the stories.

Story telling about our history is something that Irish people are good at, but some stories get told more readily than others. In the wake of the Ryan and Murphy Reports, many previously untold and hidden stories have been articulated. The telling of these stories has brought great relief to many, but it has also presented difficulties. The telling of and listening to these sometimes horrific stories have been double edged. I think however there is a general sense of relief that the time has come for so many difficult stories to come out of the darkness of our past. Telling previously secret stories can be difficult for those involved, but can also allow people to move on. Holding secrets can give a breathing space, can make other things possible, but this holding can also come at a great individual cost.

The adoption of the children to USA was both 'known' and 'unknown' here in Ireland, but the extent of it remained something of an unknown until Mike Milottie's book 'Banished Babies' was published in 1997. He found that the exact numbers are unknown, but at least 2,088 children were adopted from early 1940s to early 1970s.

His book is an important starting point in telling this story, and as a researcher I think there are many other aspects of the stories that need to be documented. The people that were adopted are now aged between 40 and 70 plus, with most of them in their 50s and 60s. Many have been searching for their Irish families, and likewise many Irish families have been searching for the children who are now adults.

This project is about collecting the stories of the experiences of both children who were taken, and their new USA families as well as their birth mothers / Irish families stories. This would be an important task in itself, but it is also important as, due to the very small number of adoptions now taking place in Ireland, Irish families that wish to build their families through adoption now predominantly go overseas. Ireland is in a unique position in that few countries have the experience of being both a sending country and a receiving country in adoption.

As researchers, we are eager to explore what the impact of the experiences has been on the lives of the people involved, and to see what has happened when search and perhaps reunions have taken place. We are also interested in understanding the experience of people who have decided not to search, or where families here in Ireland have decided that they do not wish to get reconnected, even when contacts were made. Finally, we are interested in understanding more of how the adoptions were organised, and how the mothers and fathers who were left were dealt with here in Ireland.

Times have indeed changed here in Ireland. The stories of adoption were invariably linked with unplanned pregnancies and the few options open to women. An unplanned pregnancy can still be a major shock, but historically it was a great trauma as the options open to the single woman who became pregnant were stark. If pregnancy was not a possibility, or wanted, the woman's fate necessitated a solution that could deal with the banishment, shame and secrecy associated with her 'condition'. The fathers in such cases were kept largely invisible by a society which only saw a role for father if marriage was an option.

It was as a result of these circumstances that the 'Mother and Baby Homes', run by different female religious orders came into being. The 'Mother and Baby' homes were located around the country in such locations as Bessborough in Cork, Castlepollard in Westmeath, Stamullen in Meath, Dublin and Roscrea. Many Tipperary people already knew that Sean Ross Abbey was located in Roscrea. This institution was closed as a mother and baby home in the 1960s. It was one of the largest mother and baby homes, and over 400 children left from there for the USA over the years.

For many women, these homes offered a lifetime but for others their experiences were characterised by humiliation, terror and trauma. The pain of separation from their children was for many a long lived that they endured in isolation. The reality of the birth of their children was rarely acknowledged by family or community.

The need to document these stories now is crucial. While the stories will need to be seen as part of our own times, they nonetheless need to be gathered. To date, there has been little or no access to the records held by the religious institutions. The need for safeguarding information on these records is understandable, but ethical research includes handling information with great sensitivity.

In the meantime, the task of collecting the stories is important. Collecting stories will bring a different perspective, because we know that many of the stories told to the different parties at the time of the adoptions were not always as they appeared. Older children who left these institutions had been cared for by their own mothers into toddlerhood in many cases, and yet American adoptive families were not told that the child had been cared for in this way. The idea of the orphan fitted more easily with the need to find solutions for a problem that needed to be 'fixed'. Likewise, there were women who out of desperation agreed to let their children be adopted but were never told that their children were in fact in the USA. There were, no doubt, successful outcomes for individual children placed in the USA and these accounts need to be gathered and heard for a balanced perspective.

Many elements of society were involved in these adoptions, and as a society, we have shown our readiness to hear stories of the past and to acknowledge past hurts. We think the time has now come to open up the human side of the Irish American adoption stories. Our goal as a society should be to avoid creating more pain but in avoiding pain, we must also be assured by the possibilities that come from bringing former secrets out into the open. Sharing secrets may be possible if we are first curious as to why events happened, are careful about avoiding blame on different generation and make sure that the people directly involved are treated with respect and dignity in the telling. The parties involved will have different views of the events, but opening up the stories might give us all a greater understanding of the stories that connect us.