The complexity of adoption experiences is nowadays well recognised – how adoptees can find themselves in a dynamic of loss and recovery that can sometimes be intensely painful and at other times radically life-enhancing. In this remarkable book, Elizabeth Hughes takes up a neglected issue in the adoption literature – adopted women’s search for their biological fathers – and uses it to cast new light on some of the central issues around adoption. These include gender relations, the idea of a “primal wound”, the debateability of the notion of “reunion”, and – perhaps most compellingly of all – the powerful draw of memory and fantasy in the adopted life. Adopted Women and Biological Fathers is a major and novel contribution to the adoption literature.’

– Professor Stephen Frosh, Birkbeck, University of London, UK

Adopted Women and Biological Fathers offers a critical and deconstructive challenge to the dominant notions of adoptive identity. The author explores adoptive women’s experiences of meeting their biological fathers and reflects on personal narratives to give an authoritative overview of both the field of adoption and the specific history of adoption reunion. This book takes as its focus the narratives of 14 adopted women, as well as the partly fictionalised story of the author and examines their experiences of birth father reunion in an attempt to dissect the ways in which we understand adoptive female subjectivity through a psychosocial lens.

Opening a space for thinking about the role of the discursively neglected biological father, this book exposes the enigmatic dimensions of this figure and how telling the relational story of ‘reconciliation’ might be used to complicate wider categories of subjective completeness, belonging, and truth. This book attempts to subvert the culturally normative unifying system of the mother-child bond, and prompts the reader to think about what the biological father might represent and how his role in relation to adoptive female subjects may be understood.

This book will be essential reading for those in critical psychology, gender studies, narrative work, sociology and psychosocial studies, as well as appealing to anyone interested in adoption issues and female subjectivity.

Elizabeth Hughes was awarded the Symonds Prize 2015 for her essay ‘There’s No Such Thing As A Whole Story: The Psychosocial Implications of Adopted Women’s Experiences of Finding Their Biological Fathers in Adulthood’, published as a lead article in the journal Studies in Gender and Sexuality. She is Associate Research Fellow in the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, UK.
‘Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood.’

(George Orwell, 1950, p. 252)

Our lives and truths are shaped by the stories we tell. But truth is multi-layered, and storytelling is complicated. Drawing from the narratives of interviews I conducted with 14 adoptive female subjects, my personal immersion in the project raises a particular challenge in relation to the ways in which I unpack and rethink the meanings articulated around this experience. The texts remain open, and the discursive constructions emphasised here are neither essentialised, nor are they transparent or fixed. Recalling Roland Barthes’ contention that ‘to interpret is to treat as dead, perhaps even to kill,’ Johnson suggests that in the construction of the text, biographers are forced to confront their own desires (Johnson, 1996, p. 120). By centring on the figure of the biological father, I want to bring into question the discourse that fixes adoptive female subjects in terms of a primal wound caused by maternal separation. I ask instead how individual narratives of this experience might be dissected, reimagined and reinterpreted to account for inherent disparities and complexities.

Broadly speaking, I argue that the multiplicity of readings makes trouble for the dominant metanarrative of the primal wound by undermining the notion of a foundational link between adoption, trauma and maternal authority. Whilst some of the narratives seem to underline the power of that discourse, others radically disrupt it, and the nuances and subtleties of these accounts make apparent many disparate ways of understanding them. We are left with an array of possibilities and constitutions, often in conflict with each other. By exposing and destabilising the categories which structure our understanding of the adoptive subject’s psychic and social worlds, this further unsettles essentialist notions of kinship and biological
In their own words

identity. In this chapter, the adoptee’s search for a father is framed as a search for truth and personal meaning. Already this raises questions about how truths are contingent on the stories being told and are limited by social circumstances and, following Brockmeier (2015), reductive notions of narrative and autobiographical identities which are grounded in language and memory. As Kaye purports, ‘we know that searchers overcome powerful fears of their own as well as strong external resistance to their efforts . . . the courage to confront the fears of some of their parents, the norms and constraints of society, and the Pandora’s box their search may unlock’ (Kaye, 1990, p. 142). Search narratives often adhere to quest plots and, as Homans (2006, p. 5) says, ‘never arrive where the searcher wants: the past is another country and you cannot go there.’ The tendency in Western cultures to associate biological origins with identity, however, fixes the search for roots as a quest for truth.

Women’s stories

The next section of this book draws from the narratives of 14 women who were adopted as infants and met their biological fathers in adulthood. I came into contact with most of them via online forums or through post-adoption resources. It was important that the women I interviewed had grown up with an awareness of their adoptive status and that they had not maintained contact with their biological parents throughout childhood. I would expect that those who had only learnt that they were adopted later in life might tell different stories in relation to issues of secrecy, truth and betrayal. I imagined that those who had grown up without an awareness of their adoptive status were likely to express concerns about why they had not been told sooner and what this knowledge meant in terms of their ‘new’ identities, if anything. Although this was in part only speculation, my decision to focus on subjects who were adopted under a ‘closed’ system also related to my own involvement as a subject of this research. People who were adopted post-infancy would have different memories and responses about their families of origin than those with no conscious memories at all of ‘belonging’ elsewhere. Those adopted within an ‘open’ adoption arrangement tend to be shaped by other discourses, and they often have an on-going connection with at least one of their biological parents, rendering a reunion unnecessary.

This was therefore a very particular sample, comprising of women who were willing to share their reunion stories, and in most cases were already used to doing so in a virtual space committed to adoption support. There are inevitable implications relating to the fact that the sample was mostly recruited from sites focusing on adoption and reunion issues. I went to places where people had already identified adoption as a central issue in their lives, and this would clearly have differentiated them from those who were not willing or interested in talking about the impact of meeting their biological fathers. The differences within and between these groups can only be speculated upon, but it is worth mentioning here that by necessity the book centres on those for whom the topic is important. In terms of the effects this has had on the overall study, it is perhaps fair to say that they were likely to be more
troubled or affected by their experiences and therefore more thoughtful, committed and interested in the research process and outcomes than those who chose not to talk about it. Whilst this may give an ‘unrepresentative’ impression, it does have the advantage of ensuring rich data in that the people involved were invested in the topic being studied. The experiences described in these women’s accounts are important and interesting in themselves. Biographical details of the participants can be found in the table in the appendix. It is worth noting that the sample differs in terms of nation, social class, ethnicity and upbringing. They do not, however, constitute a representative sample. The reason for this is largely due to my recruitment methods, which centred on adoption support websites and groups mostly populated by UK- and US-based citizens.

**Anne**

Anne had only met her biological father one year previous, and therefore the experience was still very new and ‘raw’ for her. Her biological father had expressed ambivalence, initially engaging willingly in the encounter and then withdrawing. Having faced resistance from his wife and ‘other’ family, Anne told a story of alienation and despair as she struggled to unpack the meaning of her biological father’s position in her life.

**Lilith**

Lilith had met her biological father over twenty years prior to our interview and had reached a feeling of ‘acceptance’ in the telling of her story. Having decided not to engage with her biological father any longer, describing him as the ‘village idiot’, she had sketched out other ways in which their encounter had shaped her lived experience. For instance she cited their reunion as an important factor in her decision to use the same sperm donor in the conception of both of her children so that they would both come from the same biological father and would later have the opportunity to trace him. Meeting her biological father motivated her to rethink the importance of fatherhood, even though she had never shared a close relationship with either her adoptive or biological fathers.

**Anna**

Anna was 42 at the time of our interview and had met both of her biological parents when she was 21. Although she had initially formed a relationship with her biological mother, this had since fallen apart. She attributed this to crime and drug addiction issues which constituted her biological mother’s family, which had brought a lot of shame, causing her mother to shut down. Stressing the fluidity of these relations, Anna emailed me about a year after our interview to say that her biological mother had broken thirteen years of silence and they were now in touch and building a relationship. But in contrast to the silence that defined her relationship with her biological mother, Anna shared a strong bond with her biological father, saying that their reunion ‘went as well as one could expect’. Since their initial
encounter, they continued to get to know each other, attending family holidays together with her children and maintaining regular contact.

**Orpha**

Orpha described a similar connection with her biological father, with whom she has gone on holidays and visited as often as she could at his home in America. Having originally met him almost 30 years prior to our interview, she lost contact with him for twenty years due to his alcoholism and the fact that her adoptive father was still alive. Orpha was of mixed race heritage and was raised by a white family in South East England. She had grown up believing her biological mother to be black, but when she met her father and discovered he was black, she identified with him on a level she had not experienced and found difficult to put into words. But her identification was not immediate since she had felt strong loyalty toward her adoptive father and wanted to protect his feelings. Following his death however, she reinstated contact with her biological father, who was no longer drinking. Describing obsessive feelings toward him and a longing to always be near him, she said their reunion had almost caused a breakdown in her marriage as well as in his relations with significant others, but during our two interviews she still shared frequent contact with him, involving him first in our interview via a three-way Skype link and then again during the second interview, which was conducted when she was staying with him in America.

**Esther**

Esther also described an enduring bond with her biological father. Having met him eleven years prior to our interview, they met up on a regular basis and shared many common interests. By contrast, she described her biological mother as intrusive; somebody around whom she had always felt ‘this sort of stranger-danger’. Esther’s reunion had taken place after her biological mother had traced her.

**Grace**

Grace told a similar story of having been found by her biological mother, whom she described as ‘creepy’ and ‘crazy’. She had been in contact with her biological father for over ten years at the time of our interview and construed their relationship as ‘easy’ due to the fact that there was no ‘big drama’. Constructing herself as a ‘daddy’s girl’, Grace said she was ‘happy to call [her biological father] “dad”’.

**Mary**

Mary had known her biological father for over fifteen years prior to our interview. Her adoptive father had been killed in a car accident when she was 5 years old, causing a ‘huge impact’ on her life. As a result, she said she had never really
considered finding her biological father, but after finding her biological mother she became intrigued by a negative of a photograph of him, which her biological mother had passed on, describing him as ‘the love of her life’. In meeting him, she was confronted with a nomadic figure who had eschewed commitment. She spoke about him with a level of resigned acceptance that the course of their relationship is dependent on his self-governance, since he ‘operates on his own level’.

**Hannah**

Hannah told a different story of resignation as she described her encounter with her biological father as unsatisfying, but something she had personally learnt from nonetheless. Having met both of her biological parents nine years prior to the interview, she had not had anything more to do with them and was concerned that this would make her interview uninteresting. Claiming that she did not have ‘a very happy reunion story’, the act of telling it still enabled her to ‘see things differently’.

**Eve**

Building on the theme of resignation, Eve described her withdrawal from her biological father, who had located her almost ten years prior to our interview, preceding a reunion with her biological mother. I interviewed Eve three times, and during our first interview she described her biological father’s erratic behaviour with resignation and disappointment. But when I interviewed her again, she expressed deep anger towards him as he had written her an abusive email which had signified ‘the end’ of their relationship.

**Naomi**

This ambivalent process of connection and withdrawal was also laid out in Naomi’s account. Having met her biological father twenty years prior to our interview, he had completely shut down communication after their initial encounters, leaving her to wonder whether he was even still alive. As a result, she did not have a lot to say about their reunion relationship, but reported that her belief in ‘angels’ helped her live with the inconclusiveness.

**Rebecca**

Again recapitulating the theme of discontinuity and disjunction, Rebecca gave an account of having met her biological father over ten years prior to our interview and then losing contact with him for seven years. Their connection was resumed when she herself became a parent, and although she shared a much closer bond with her biological mother, she said she had inherited a lot of her father’s genetic traits, and their bond was juxtaposed with the alienation she experienced within her adoptive family.
Sarah

The notion of alienated subjectivity also emerged from Sarah’s narrative. Describing her adoptive parents as very emotionally ‘closed off’, she said that ‘their coldness led [her] to feel insignificant in the world’. But when she met her biological father, ‘he was warm, caring and happy to meet [her]. He was honest about everything and said that he wanted to continue to get to know [her]’. They had since continued to ‘build a father-daughter relationship’, which was meeting her needs.

Joanna

This positive account of reunion was further mirrored by Joanna, who had met both of her biological parents six years prior to our interview, following the death of her adoptive parents. Reaffirming her faith in God, she had built a rewarding relationship with her biological father, saying ‘My reunion was one of those gifts – none of us “needed” anything, but we all freely gave ourselves and formed this relationship circle that exists just underneath of all the relationships that we each already had.’

Frida

And finally, building on the theme of emotionally nourishing father-daughter relationships, Frida, who was 45 and had only known her biological father for a year at the time of our interview, accredited her biological father with the ability to say exactly what she needed in order to ‘make [her] feel okay’ and thus ‘speak [her] love language’. Her eroticised account of their deep connection was set against her narrative of alienation with regards to other family members, particularly the son she had put up for adoption, her biological mother and her own adoptive parents.

The interviews

The personal narratives illuminated the multiple perspectives and possibilities of the subject positions and revealed tensions between personal constructions of meaning and identities, and the fixed subject positions of the dominant discourse of the primal wound.

The participants’ accounts unfolded through a process of semi-structured interviewing informed by a multiplicity of discourse analyses, counselling techniques and reflexive methods. Before each interview, I disclosed the fact that I was also adopted in an endeavour to surmount disparities in power relations from developing and potentially facilitate trust. The effect of this disclosure varied between participants. Some asked me questions about my own reunion experiences, creating a more interactive dialogue, while others did not ask any questions of me. Some commented that they felt more at ease discussing these issues with me because I had experienced something similar, and one sought frequent validation about whether, or how far, her account reflected my own and others in the sample.
The surface aim of the interviews was to open up a space for participants to tell their stories in order to generate empirical data for analysis. In practice, the interviews often became conversational and interactive, shaped by the personal ideas and history I brought as well as by the direction the participants took them. Gubrium and Holstein emphasise the tension between the matrix of issues connecting researchers and the participants, arguing against the traditional representation of the interview ‘as a conduit for transporting experiential knowledge from the respondent, on the one side, to the interviewer and sponsoring agents, on the other’ (Holstein et al., 2003, p. 3). And they point instead to the idea that the interview conversation has ‘diverse purposes, with a communicative format constructed as much within the interview as it stems from predesignated research interests’ (Holstein et al., 2003). In this sense, the roles of researcher and the ‘researched’ are obscured. The rationale is less focused on obtaining accuracy and truth but rather on the co-construction of meaning and stories through communication. The method is described further in the appendix.

**Secrecy and truth**

All of the participants involved in this research grew up with the knowledge that they were adopted, but the details of their origins had largely remained secret. In fact, all of the interviewees were adopted during what Clapton calls the ‘secret’ phase of adoption, between the 1950s and 1970s, when the father usually occupied an ‘empty space’ on birth certificates, an ‘unknown, in all senses’ (Coles, 2010, p. 34). The unnamed figure of the father bears upon the notion of unknown roots and the negation of the subject. Many of the participants spoke about the secrets and constraints surrounding their heritage and the ways in which their search disrupted the kinship system in which they were located, reshaping their personal identities and relationship to truth.

As a point of departure, I will situate this theme of secrecy in relation to a few of the participants’ narratives, before moving on to notions of the adoptees’ ‘otherness’ and their quests for truth.

Anne was 41 at the time we met for interview and had met her father only a year previous. Having grown up with her biological mother, she identified herself as an adoptee, since she had been adopted by her mother’s husband when she was young. Unsettling the grand narrative that centres on maternal attachment, she said her stepfather ‘was the one who showed me who I am’ and she ‘couldn’t have asked for a better father’. He was also the one who helped her trace her biological father. After making contact with him she had initially wanted to keep their relationship quiet for fear of hurting other family members, but when they found out, ‘they were concerned that something was really wrong with [her]’, as she had started uncovering long hidden secrets. Expressing a sense of impotence around not knowing about her origins, she said:

I was very angry about my adoption for a long time . . . you know, you keep it to yourself . . . you don’t talk about the things that upset you . . . umm,
you keep it in, I mean I never talked about this stuff with my parents . . . we didn’t talk about it . . . There was . . . a lot of secrecy . . . it was just a terrible thing. . . . [But since finding my biological father], I’ve learned a lot about myself and . . . meeting him allowed me to break away from a lot of the barriers I’d built I think to protect myself and, uhh, ahh, I just don’t think I feel like I have anything to hide anymore. . . . I mean my mom in her situation; I mean she buried all that . . . buried it. So here I am, digging around.

Central to Anne’s text was the notion of uncovering, of ‘digging around’ and resisting the silence which subjugated her. A dichotomy became apparent as, whilst she was perturbed by the existing secrecy, she envisioned an opening in the discovery of her biological father which seemed to afford her a meaningful purpose: ‘I just don’t think I feel like I have anything to hide anymore’; ‘I want to find out more.’ The interrelated ideas of knowledge, secrecy and truth are strongly emphasised in the set of discourses surrounding the primal wound, but the key difference is that these focus specifically on the absent mother, to whom the adoptee is deemed to be linked by a kind of fantasy of oneness. Anne was raised by her biological mother and yet her story points to an experience of fragmented subjectivity and a longing for truth and reparation indicative of the trauma discourse generally, demonstrating the power of this framework. Following Anne’s construction of feeling angry about the lack of knowledge surrounding her adoption she expressed ambivalence about whom or what was responsible for this. She cited society, culture and her parents as all having contributed to the production of secrecy but also commented that she too engaged in that practice: ‘you keep it to yourself.’ Meeting her biological father could therefore be interpreted as an opportunity for overcoming secrecy and breaking protective barriers.

Rebecca was 35 at the time of interviewing and had met her biological father when she was 22, four years after meeting her mother. She described a difficult upbringing with her adoptive family, with whom she said she had ‘never fit in or belonged’. Like Anne, Rebecca’s account pointed to a similar pattern of challenging the secrecy surrounding her genetic history and arriving at new ways of understanding. Her construction of the loss she experienced as a result of not knowing her birth father gave rise to questions about her self:

Because you do feel like you’ve missed out on a lot . . . I definitely felt like there was something missing before . . . before we met . . . but meeting him I sort of got a better idea of who I was, where I was going.

After her reunion, she said, ‘suddenly I had answers.’ As with Anne’s account, Rebecca’s search for knowledge seemed to be tied to a larger enterprise of truth-seeking and within that framework, she produced her subjectivity. In a dialogue about this she suggested she was immersed in a struggle for self-discovery.

I wanted to find myself . . . Growing up . . . I was quite lost. I had ideas about how things should’ve been but because they weren’t that I didn’t know how
to make it happen, I didn’t know how to better myself or how to be the person I wanted to be . . . that was the real thing that sent me in search of my roots.

For Rebecca, the reunion with her biological father was characterised as a positive thing – an encounter which gave her the opportunity to unearth a picture of herself and her heritage which had previously bothered her. Lilith’s account of reunion was less positive, although it still relates to the discourse of secrecy and the exposure of forms of truth. Lilith was 47 at the time of interviewing and had met her birth father when she was 24. Although her father’s name was omitted from the original birth certificate, she located him through a search agency. She noted that her attention, however, had always been primarily focused on finding her biological mother to whom she ‘felt responsible’, and had ‘always thought about tracing’:

I’d always thought she’d be easier to find . . . but also because I think my relationship with my adoptive father wasn’t that great . . . there wasn’t much emotional connection.

The knowledge of her adoption presented her with a series of questions to which she wanted answers. She recounted having been told an imaginative story about her birth which was not enough.

I was kind of in the ‘chosen, you’re special’ mode. . . . I’d had the, you know, ‘we came onto the ward and . . . you were the one we picked’ . . . umm, and of course when you look back you know it wasn’t like that at all. . . . [As I got older], you’re allowed to get the information . . . and then it became much more a dilemma . . . and, umm, the word I always use is angsty, . . . I was full of angst about it.

The ‘angst’ Lilith describes disrupted the uncomplicated story of thinking about her subjectivity in terms of unique ‘specialness’ and she seemed to reject this construction in favour of ‘reality’ – connecting with her biological parents and finding a legitimate alternative to that narrative. She later commented:

I think I’ve probably looked within myself for some of the signs of him.

And in this way, the reunion was very much constituted as an opportunity for creating new forms of truth and subjectivity. It is interesting, I think, that Lilith said that she looked within herself for signs of her biological father, whilst for Rebecca the biological father was constructed as a mirror in which she could locate herself. The interrelationality between the biological father and the adoptee’s subjectivity, although sometimes represented as being disappointing, was a common theme throughout the texts, speaking to a broader discourse of self-discovery. This will be addressed below.
Truth-seeking, belonging and self-discovery

In the interviews with Rebecca and Anne, presentations of self-discovery feature as fundamental to the construction of the biological father encounter. Although the notion of self-discovery has already been addressed briefly in the preceding text, Lilith’s narrative focuses less overtly on her construction of subjectivity but more on the questions and dilemmas she faced and the often difficult answers she was given. As such, not all of the participants constituted their experiences positively, but all in various ways revealed connections to discourses of self-discovery, for better or worse. A comment should be made here about the level of overlap between the narratives and themes. It is important to note that however or wherever the extracts are presented and located, this is often inadequate and constraining. I want to argue that the stories characterised many contradictory or fragmentary discourses and to point to the need to offer an account that is subtle and non-reductionist, whilst at the same time not free-floating.

Reflecting back discourses of secrecy and the question of truth, Hannah – who was 34 at the time of interviewing, nine years after meeting her father – spoke about her struggle, both internal and external, to confront these issues. On the subject of growing up with her adoptive parents she said she had no real questions at that age . . . curiosity killed the cat . . . [I] couldn’t think too much about why I was adopted, who I came from, all that stuff.

Here she seemed to be referring to questions about the conditions of her adoption and not her subjectivity per se, but as she continued telling her story she revealed that her adoption reunion experience was linked to other discoveries about herself, beliefs and religious faith. Although her actual reunion was constructed negatively – she met her biological father only once following a distressing reunion with her biological mother – for the majority of the text she described her life story and her shifting constructions of herself and understanding of the world, in relation to discourses of self-recovery and transcendence:

I realise that it’s okay, that God is here and that I’m being looked after and that He’s looking out for all of us, including my birthfather, including my birthmother, you know all of us . . . and I’m glad I didn’t get what I could’ve had . . . you know . . . a life with them who didn’t want me . . . who weren’t able to care for me.

In Hannah’s sketch, the discourse of self-discovery she recounted was importantly related to discourses of belonging. She described a sense of belonging to her faith and her adoptive family, with whom she found a sense of acceptance and trust. Following a difficult reunion encounter, Hannah constituted her subjectivity on the basis of having finally found inner peace through discourses of recovery and belonging. Intersecting with this discourse is the notion of fantasy and the ways in which the participants present themselves as subjects. In Lilith’s narrative, a different
version of fantasy and self-identification was revealed, but one which still spoke to this discourse of belonging. In the example below, she described her experience of growing up:

I had all these fantasies... I think my main one, ... I’d got it into my head for ages that actually I wasn’t adopted, and that actually my adoptive parents were part of a big experiment... on how... what it was like to adopt, what it was like for someone to be adopted, but actually I wasn’t adopted at all.

What is striking about Lilith’s account here is the way in which it actively subverts the idea of the birth family romance, so popular in adoption discourse such as the primal wound (Rosenberg and Horner, 1991). Rather than idealising her other set of parents and fantasising that they might come and rescue her, Lilith presented a fantasy that her other set of parents did not exist and that she in fact belonged to the family within which she was already a part. She did not express the same yearnings for self-knowledge as other participants, despite acknowledging that she has ‘looked within’ herself ‘for some of the signs of’ her biological father. However, it is telling that she described the unfolding of her reunion in relation to an on-going quest which she did not explicitly define:

[I]t never stops, does it... you do say to yourself, ‘I’ll find them. Job done.’ Or, I’ll have a relationship with them of sorts but it will be this sort of relationship... and that is just so wrong isn’t it.

Here it could be argued that the movement surrounding her reunion relationships, however ambiguous, may be related to the constitutive unfolding of her subjectivity, a ‘work-in-progress’ similar to the line taken up by self-discovery discourses in contemporary culture. For other participants, the recognition of self-discovery discourses was more apparent. Sarah was 35 at the time of interviewing met her father two years previous. In her account, her reunion was presented as coming about as a response to the lack of ‘emotional connection’ she felt with her adoptive parents. She said, ‘I never felt like I really fit in,’ and she attributes a lot of her negative experiences of self-worth to the loss of her biological father

...because he’s such a strong, well for me it was such a strong rejection from him, in terms of my self-worth, and I’m wondering where that research is, you know.

Her experience of low self-worth, she said, originated in her childhood when she described trying to please others but ‘losing herself’ in the process. Her account of reunion was linked to a desire to find out who she was and a coming-to-terms with her self, as this extract demonstrates:

No, I never really felt that I had an identity, umm, growing up... like, I always hated my name, growing up... and but I think that that disintegrated when
I met them because then I now knew the name that my mother gave me, and I now knew my father’s name, so I now knew the name that I could’ve had . . . umm, and when you have your name in your head, it’s like you have in your head who you would’ve been, and that kind of throws things out because you wouldn’t be the person you are, like, because you become the person you think your family want you to be . . . like you kind of really become yourself, umm . . . and I’m kind of figuring that out right now . . . it’s kind of the place I’m at . . . is trying to figure out who I am, really.

This commitment to finding out whom one ‘is’ through meeting the biological father – a theme which is reflected in many of the participants’ stories – relates to the question of how meaning, experiences and subjectivities are manufactured through discourse. Here Sarah seemed to be grappling with a variety of discourses of self and other, as she attempted to reconcile what had been given to her – for instance, her name, her ‘self-worth’ in relation to her experience of a ‘strong rejection’ and the fantasy of who she could have been if she had been raised by her biological parents with the name they had given her. Having constructed a version of her self on the basis of her perception of others’ expectations, she noted that she was now involved in the production of a new form of subjectivity rooted in her own shifting concept of truth: ‘You kind of really become yourself, umm . . . and I’m kind of figuring that out right now.’

The production of subjectivity through a discourse of self-discovery can be found across each of the 14 interviews in multiple intricate ways. Turning finally to the example of a particular text which represents this discourse in a more solid form, Esther talked at length about her disparaging impressions of the discourses of adoptee trauma such as the primal wound and the ways in which she had drawn on her reunion experience to construct self-concepts of autonomy and agency. Esther was 43 at the time of interviewing, nine years after meeting her father. In the long extract which follows, Esther started by responding to my question about whether she had read any books about adoption or come across *The Primal Wound*. She was familiar with these texts and their related assumptions of ‘lifelong trauma’:

The whole trapped thing. . . . being trapped, I just feel like that’s a very fatalistic view. . . . just to say I’m trapped by this and I’ll never have functional relationships and all that is just, well that’s just sad, I mean why bother, what’s the point . . . no other person can make you a complete person. . . . It’s not like I was just an incomplete person and now he’s made me complete. . . .

I wouldn’t want to give anybody that much control over my life. . . . because all of the books my parents had read me and given me when I was a child which explained adoption. . . . you got the idea that it was your father who didn’t want you. . . . And so, finding out that he does love me does give me a little boost in my self-esteem but I wouldn’t say that, I wouldn’t say
I was walking round with this gaping hole in me before I met him – does that make any sense?

... There is this little piece of you that feels rejected ... but the challenges that would’ve been created had I been kept by him or, heaven forbid, my birth mother, would’ve been far greater. ... I think I would’ve had far more trauma.

This text outlines constructions of what Esther considered to be her self as well as constructions of what she deemed as not self, mapped through an iterative process of which discourses Esther presented as useful in relation to her own subjectivity and which ones she rejected. Her constitutive subjectivity resulted from her resisting the pathologising discourse of the primal wound – ‘I wouldn’t say I was walking round with this gaping hole in me before I met (my biological father)’ – as well as subverting their essentialist assumptions about the adoptee’s longing for and being grieved by the biological mother, and instead foregrounding the position of the biological father and presenting her relationship with him as evolving through a conscious mutual process of construction. In so doing, Esther’s story points to a link between discourse and agency and what the heterogeneous discursive constitutions can achieve within the text. It should be noted, though, that she introduced a lot of other ideas too, for instance the notion of being trapped, of rejection and the principle that ‘everyone has challenges’. The inconsistencies and contradictions within these texts complicate the discursive reproduction of fixed attitudes that adoptees are universally constituted by trauma. Rather, Esther defined herself by her self-sufficiency and a capacity to survive, saying in relation to meeting her biological father specifically that, ‘It’s not like I was just an incomplete person and now he’s made me complete.’ She drew instead on her discourses of self-reliance and laying claim to an independent subject position.

**Concluding comments**

Addressing the question of adopted women’s search for their biological fathers, competing and intersecting discourses on truth-seeking, belonging and otherness can be identified in these extracts, along with their counterparts formulated by secrecy, uncertainty and alienation. A significant feature of the overall organisation of adoptive subjectivity presented here concerns the quest for self-knowledge through connecting with one’s biological lineage. The reunion is constructed as an opportunity to find meaning in one’s existence, but the path is not straightforward and an amassment of other considerations can be accounted for. For instance, Anne said that she had built a lot of barriers during her upbringing, which had guarded her from the pain of experiencing her truth, but that meeting her biological father had allowed her to overcome certain blocks and live more authentically. However, having set this new truth in motion and bringing to the surface that which had previously been buried, she was then confronted with her biological father’s
ambivalence and subsequent withdrawal. Although on the one hand she expressed certainty around unearthing her own version of truth, on the other hand she had become vulnerable to the rejection of others. The discourse of truth then was presented as a discourse of negotiation. It was not quite within reach, rather something she was ‘digging around’ for.

According to Derek Hook (2001), ‘The strongest discourses are those which have attempted to ground themselves on the natural, the sincere, the scientific – in short, on the level of the various correlates of the ‘true and reasonable’ (Hook, 2001, p. 5). Tracing the various discourses within the presentation of the participants’ narratives, we find that although the authority and power of the naturalistic primal wound theory has to some extent been recreated and maintained, often disguised, other oppositional, overlapping or misaligned discourses have also come to light. Rebecca said that finding her biological father inscribed her with a more coherent self-identity and a clearer sense of where she was going in life. The emphasis, as with Anne, turned out to be on her own self-discovery rather than necessarily forming a connection with her biological father. But when probed, a more complicated picture emerged as she told a story of growing up and experiencing herself as ‘lost’. She did not elaborate on this description, but instead gave an essentialist account of self-transformation, which she located in the act of finding her biological father. A more dynamic account was presented by Lilith, whose search for truth was set against her desire to dispel myths which had not been able to serve her. Having been told a story of being ‘special’ and ‘chosen’, embedded within a mythological discourse of origins, the elusiveness of truth produced by this evasion made her ‘angsty’. Having traced her biological parents though, the truth she was left with did not necessarily align with any fixed discourse of belonging. Rather, the search for truth ‘never stops’. In an interesting shift away from the notion that reunion can provide the answers to the problem of the adoptee’s subjectivity, Lilith challenged this idea when she said, ‘You do say to yourself, “I’ll find them. Job done.”’ But finding them only raised more questions, thus complicating assumptions about the universal benefits of reunion and drawing our attention instead to various discourses of trauma culture, self-determination and self-help which extend beyond the normative structure of the adoption discursive field. The next chapter develops these ideas further by exploring the implications surrounding these constructions and asks how they function in terms of the associated meanings and knowledge forms they circulate; how they might reinforce dominant discourses and relevant social and cultural practices, as well as how they might deconstruct or resist.