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## **Children Forever: The Search for Origins among Chilean Adults Who Were Adopted**

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## **ABSTRACT**

There has been a global increase in the number of adults who were adopted<sup>1</sup> searching for their origins. This trend has promoted the interest of social sciences researchers, as well as carry out the obligations of states to provide specialized services. In this article we present some results from the first qualitative study that explores the experiences of some Chilean adults who were adopted and searched for their origins in Chile through the National Service of Minors's Search for Origins Program. The narratives of the participants show that, in spite of legislative changes, a series of barriers and contradictions continue to exist, that make it difficult to guarantee the right to know one's origins. The legal and technical frameworks and practices analyzed show how difficult it is to dismantle the "clean break" principle. They also highlight the persistence of the image of adoptees as "minors" who need the "protection" of their parents or professionals. We discuss the different challenges to be considered by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers involved in adoption policies and practices.

**KEY WORDS:** Adoption, Narratives, Searches of Origins, Chile.

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<sup>1</sup> To make the text more readable, we use the term "adult adoptee" rather than our preferred term "people who were adopted." We prefer the latter term because it does captures our understanding that adoption is a practice and a life experience, and not necessarily a permanent fixture of the identities of people who were adopted.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During recent decades, a new trend of openness in adoption has marked professions related to adoption (Grotevant, 2000; Jones, 2016; Neil, 2002; Sullivan & Lathrop 2004). In 1989, the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognized the importance of the rights of adoptees to know their birth origins and to seek them out. As a consequence, many countries have changed their legislation to allow adoptees access to their adoption records when they reach legal adulthood, and public registries have been established. In parallel, the demand for post-adoptive search-for-origins services has markedly increased on a global scale and some states and other organizations have implemented “family mediation” or reunion services that go between the different members of the adoption kinship network (Feast, 2010; Ledesma et al., 2012; SENAME, 2018a; Sorovsky et al., 1976; Sullivan & Lathrop, 2004). Such is the importance given to these processes that the International Social Service published a guidebook, which seeks to inform transnational adoptees about the possible challenges and risks that they might encounter when they decide to search for their origins, as well as the questions they should ask themselves and the administrative authorities or the adoption agency (ISS, 2018).

Researchers from different countries and disciplines have investigated adoptees’ searches for origins, contacts and reunions, especially in cases of transnational adoption (Carsten, 2000; Feast & Howe, 1997; March, 1997; Howell, 2009; Modell, 1997, 2002; Sullivan & Lathrop, 2004; Wegar, 1997; Yngvesson, 2003). There is clear evidence of the wide-ranging benefits that accessing information can have for adoptees and their families (Feast, 2010). Adoption research shows that people who were adopted—like anyone else—need to construct a coherent narrative about their origins and, specifically, about what explains or justifies being adopted, to create a cohesive sense of identity (Carsten, 2000; Modell, 1997). The searches, contacts and reunions -when possible- give adoptees information on their adoption and open up painful “erased” questions and “forgotten” relationships (Théry, 2009, p. 37).

In Latin America, adoption research about this topic is scarce, especially in the case of domestic adoptions, with some exceptions in Brazil (Fonseca, 2009, 2010) and Argentina (Gesteira, 2015). Moreover, there are few studies that analyze reunion services. This article is part of a broader research project, whose objective was to know the meanings and practices on communication and searches for origins between the members of the adoptive triad (birth and adoptive parents and the child) in Chilean domestic adoptions. Considering that it is key to document the impact of service user involvement on research in order to evaluate its value (Cossar & Neil, 2013), we present some results from a qualitative study still in progress on the Chilean case. In this paper, we explore and analyze how 35 domestically adopted adults who applied for the support of the Chilean State’s Search for Origins Program between 2012 and 2017 experienced the relevant legislation and technical protocols, as interpreted and operationalized by the professionals of these services.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1. Deconstructing the “clean break” principle**

In Chile, as in many other countries, adoption policies and practices are guided by a biogenetic model of kinship, based on consanguinity and exclusive filiation: each child “has only one mother and one father” and, therefore, cannot belong to two families simultaneously (Fonseca, 2002; Howell, 2009; Author, 2009; Oullette, 1998). Accordingly, adoption in Chile is constructed upon two pillars: 1) full and closed adoption (Fonseca, 2009), which became common in most Western countries during the 1970s and 1980s, and which was reinforced by 2) the “clean break” principle, which referred to a full rupture with the birth relatives (Duncan, 1993).

In many countries access to adoption records is prohibited due to policies of full and closed adoption, which reinforces the “secret” that has surrounded adoption for decades (Modell, 2002; Walton, 2012) under the argument of “protecting” the members of the adoption triad from the social stigma of illegitimacy and infertility (Jones, 2016; March, 1997; Author, 2009). Many individuals and adoption organizations support the sealing of records, arguing that opening them would harm the institution of adoption and constitute a violation of the confidentiality promised to adoptive and birth parents. Moreover, the disclosure of adoptions that had been secret could also negatively affect adoptees, considering that adoptees are usually considered illegitimate and different from, or sometimes inferior to, children raised by their birth relatives (Modell, 1997, 2002; Wegar, 1997). In this sense, documents are not simply instruments of information, but, rather, are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, affections, practices, subjectivities, objects, and even the organizations themselves (Hull, 2014; Posocco, 2011).

The debate about sealed records has raged on for years in the U.S., where, for example, the right of adult adoptees to access adoption records without a court order or parental consent has been discussed (Carp, 1988; Howell, 2006; Modell, 1997, 2002; Sachdev, 1991; Sorovsky et al., 1976; Wegar, 1997). The question of information ownership (Whose information is it?) is key to professionals’ decision about whether to disclose information or not (Feast, 2010). Wegar (1997) asked “Why should adoptees’ ‘compelling needs’ be determined by others? The choice to search or not to search must ultimately reside with the adult adoptee” (pp. 134-135).

Currently, there is full consensus that adult adoptees have the right to know and/or search for their origins. However, it remains difficult to balance the various rights of all members of the adoptive triad. In many cases, preserving the legal rights and interests of parents requires making ambiguous interpretations and applications of the principle of the best interest of the child (Author, 2012). In domestic adoptions, the “clean break” principle has been particularly influential, and origins searches are especially vexed. For Fonseca (2009), in domestic searches, adoptees seek their origins “in the backyard itself” (p.4), and the geographic proximity to birth families hinders rather than facilitates searches, by revealing inequitable social dynamics.

### **2.2. From orphans and abandoned children to adult adoptees**

Since the second half of the 20th century, adoption—often associated with social conflicts, wars, emergencies, and/or poverty—was justified as an action that “rescued” orphan or “abandoned” children. According to the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, children must be declared legally “abandoned” in order to become “adoptable” (Author et al, 2009; Briggs, 2012). In spite of this, most “adoptable” children are currently neither orphaned nor abandoned (Author, 2012).

Various factors have contributed to the “myth of abandonment” (Fonseca, 2002; San Román, 2013) as being the origin of all adoptions. Until well into the 1990s, some authors characterized adoptees as being “children of sin” and inheritors of the mental and moral weaknesses of their mothers—generally, single mothers—and, likewise, as being the fruit of redemption from that sin (Solinger, 1992). Relatedly, some authors have argued that many adoptees suffer from “the adopted child syndrome” (Kirschner, 1990), thus reinforcing the idea of the “eternal child” (San Román, 2013). Seeing the adopted person as being primarily in need of protection obscures the fact that he or she is an agentive subject that possesses rights (Author, 2012). Recognizing adoptees as subjects of rights depends on a negotiation between actors of unequal status who interact on a changing field of struggle (Fonseca, 2010).

One criticism that has frequently been aimed at the 1993 Hague Convention is that it posits a universal definition of the “best interests of the child” that seems based on Western middle-class ideals of identity, childhood and family (Fonseca, 2002; Howell, 2006; Modell, 1997; Lind & Johansson, 2009). According to Walton (2012), “best interest” does not refer to what is best for people after being adopted, and, even less so, to what is best for them during their adult life. At the same time, some adoption laws—or the interpretation that professionals in the field make of them—do not recognize that states’ “protective” role is only temporary and comes to an end when the adoptees reach adulthood. At the moment that an adoptee ceases to be a minor, the state’s role in deciding his or her “best interests” should also stop in theory.

### **2.3. Searching origins in Chile**

After 17 years of military dictatorship, in 1990, Chile recovered its democracy and ratified the UNCRC. In August 1999, Adoption Law No. 19,620 was passed, and only a few weeks later the Protection of Private Life Law (Law 19,628) also went into effect. The same year, Chile ratified the 1993 Hague Convention. The 1999 Adoption Law set up the Global Adoption Program, which was run through SENAME, and established the right for adults (over 18 years of age) to access adoption records. SENAME’s Search for Origins Program began in 1995, as the result of a petition by the Swedish Adoption Center, to serve youth with Chilean origins adopted by Swedish families (Author, 2019). The program and was formalized by law No. 19,620 (1999).

Between 2003—the first year that the Search for Origins Program published statistics—and 2017, the data shows a systematic increase in searches for origins. During these years, the program served 2,693 people, usually over 27 years of age, two thirds of whom were adopted domestically and one third of whom were adopted transnationally (SENAME, 2018a y 2018b). As in other countries, this is not the only way to search for origins. Many adoptees conduct their searches alone, through virtual social networks or the media.

In May 2018, President Sebastián Piñera introduced a new bill to Congress, the Law to Overhaul the Adoption System in Chile (Bulletin No. 9.119-18). If the bill is passed any person over 14 years of age, alone or represented by an accredited adoption agency, will be able to ask the civil registry whether his or her parentage is the result of an adoption or not. At the time of writing, the bill has been processed by the Chamber of Deputies and will soon be taken up in the Senate.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This paper’s findings are taken from a qualitative, narrative study (Riessman, 2008) done with 35 people (26 women and 9 men) who were adopted domestically in Chile between the years 1965 and 1996. Most of them were born and raised before Chile ratified the UNCRC and the 1993 Hague Convention and before it had passed laws concerning the conservation of and access to adoption records. When interviewed, our subjects were between 21 and 53 years old, but they had undertaken their search for origins when they were between 18 and 45 years old. Thirty-three subjects had been adopted as babies and two had been adopted at age three. All of our study subjects had a university education and were middle- or upper-middle class. This characteristic is not a result of skewing in the sample, but rather a reflection of the fact that in Chile for decades the socio-economic status of adoption applicants was one of the main criteria for declaring their suitability.

Fieldwork was done in Santiago (Chile's capital and largest urban area) and the area of Viña del Mar and Valparaíso (Chile's second largest urban area). Contact with participants was made by SENAME's Search for Origins Program. Searchers whose cases had been closed received a letter signed by the research team inviting them to participate in the study.

A narrative interview format was chosen (Josselson, Lieblich & McAdams, 2003), and we used a flexible interview guide with topics and sub-topics addressing the research objectives. The flexibility of the guide allowed interviewees to develop a narrative, composed of stories, examples, episodes and/or memories of various dimensions of their origin-seeking process. We explored in depth the participants's perspective about judicial and professional practices. Although SENAME's Origins Search Program conducts an annual user satisfaction survey, it has a low response rate and therefore there is very little information about users' experiences in the program.

A minimum of one and a maximum of three interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews, lasting approximately three hours each, were audio taped and transcribed. We analyzed the data using a narrative method to conduct a systematic analysis of meanings and stories that took into account the influence of the larger subjects' environments. Paying attention to the contexts of production, we used a comparative approach to identify similarities and differences among stories, illustrating how each subject's narratives reflected, stressed or contradicted dominant narratives (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). When we applied this approach, a range of narratives about obstacles in the process of searching for origins emerged from the data. We focused our analysis on those that were repeated most often across the sample.

### **3.1. Ethical considerations and permissions**

All participants signed an informed consent form, approved with other research protocols by the Universidad Alberto Hurtado Ethics Committee. This form explained the study objectives and informed participants that their participation was confidential and voluntary. To preserve participants' confidentiality, we have given them pseudonyms and eliminated identifying details of their stories, such as dates and places.

## **4. FINDINGS**

Many participants talked about living in families in which the adoption was a carefully guarded secret. In some cases, their parents hid information about their origins and the adoption itself. Other parents informed their children about the adoption from an early age. However, these parents often resisted their children's efforts to search for their origins. Many of these searches were characterized by a conflict emerging from the link between secrecy and family loyalty. For this reason, most participants conducted "secret searches," without their family's knowledge. We first describe the obstacles that our participants encountered when they began to search for their origins. Next, we show that when they found their adoption records, information was often withheld from them or mediated for them.

### **4.1. Obstacles to the search**

#### **4.1.1. Age requirement**

Nearly half of the participants identified the criterion of minimum age as an obstacle to their searches. According to current legislation, searches can only be performed by adults over age 18, or between 16 and 18 with the authorization of their adoptive parents or legal guardians. Many interviewees mentioned that if they had known earlier that they were adopted or that they had the right to information about their origins, they would have begun their searches earlier. Especially, the youngest participants, who generally grew up knowing their adoptive origins, questioned this requirement:

[They should] have the option of meeting their birth parents before and not waiting until they are 18, because I think that's ridiculous. There are people that can be 18 and be immature and people that can be mature enough at 15 to deal with this (Karina, 23 years old).

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Verónica initiated her search when she was 18. She had always known she had been adopted and had the support of her adoptive mother to talk about and search for her origins. On her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday she went to SENAME's office:

The wait was the worst, because I did everything before I was 18 since I had the first name of my birth mother and my last name. I remember one night I said to myself: "I am going to look up her name on the cemetery's web page," because I always felt that she was dead. The day of my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, at 12 a.m., I filled out the online form. At 6 a.m. I got up and at 8 a.m. I was at SENAME. It really makes me mad, I hate the adoption law. What does age define? [...] Being an "adult" doesn't guarantee anything. There could be other requirements, like going through therapy [...]. Waiting until 18 to satisfy a desire that is so basic! [...]. I understand that part of the argument is to protect you, but if a person under 18 years of age is prepared and wants to, it is much more problematic to make them wait until that age (Verónica, 21 years old).

When Verónica finally did gain access to her adoption records, she learned that her birth mother had died only a few years earlier. Given the timing of Verónica's search and her birth mother's death, if she hadn't been forced to wait until age 18, she may have been able to meet her birth mother. This case shows that not having timely access to information can have irreparable consequences.

#### **4.1.2. Lack of knowledge**

Although the Chilean law guarantees the right to knowledge about one's parentage at no cost, SENAME's Search for Origins Program has had a limited budget and little public dissemination. Almost all participants noted that they didn't know about their right to seek their origins or how to exercise it, and they found the SENAME's Search for Origins Program by chance:

A lot of people who were adopted in Chile don't know about this service. There is no clear information given, where they explain to you that you can search for your origins and that professionals will help you free of charge [...]. I didn't know how to search (Alejandra, 24 years old).

Another obstacle related to a lack of knowledge was the fact that many adoptive parents hid the adoption from their children. This was the case of over two thirds of our participants. Or, if the adoption itself wasn't a secret, adoptive parents refused to help their children look for information. Tamara accidentally discovered that she was adopted at age 24 when she found some biographical writings of her father, in which he described her adoption. After confronting him, she "disappeared from the face of the Earth," abandoning all of her activities and isolating herself from others. After five days, she decided to look for her origins to meet her birth mother:

I asked myself, "How do I find her? How do I find her?" And I went to SENAME. I googled it and found that SENAME took care of adoptions. I researched the entire page and came to this program. And because the webpage didn't work (laughs), I couldn't fill out the [online] form (Tamara, 26 years old).

#### **4.1.3. Parental consent**

Another major obstacle, reported by nearly two thirds of the participants, was the requirement for the consent of the adoptive parents. Current Chilean legislation seals all adoption records, throughout the legal and administrative processes, unless the adoptive parents authorize records to be kept open when signing the adoption papers (Author, 2019). If these papers weren't signed at the time of the adoption, adoptees must secure a judicial authorization in order to access their records, which requires adoptive parents and adoptees to appear before a judge to give consent. A study on the Chilean adoption system recommended reconsidering this requirement, particularly since in other countries opening adoption records is a primarily administrative—rather than judicial—procedure (Martínez de la Mora, 2009). However, according to SENAME's current

technical guidelines (SENAME, 2018a), incorporating the adoptive parents' addresses onto search paperwork is good practice for expediting the consent process. Participants reported that this obstacle was particularly unpleasant and problematic. Some of them gave up their searches and others faced unpleasant consequences:

They asked me, "Do you want to search for your origins?" "Yes," I said. "But, are my parents going to find out?" And they said to me, "I can't say for sure if they will find out, because it depends on the court where your case ends up. It's up to the judge's discretion to send a notification letter to your parents or not" (...) When they told me that, it seemed like a totally ridiculous way of doing things. I'm over 18. It seemed almost dangerous (Fernando, 33 years old).

Rodrigo accidentally found out at age 33 that he was adopted. Upon making this realization, he had only one conversation with his adoptive mother about this topic. She asked him not to bring it up anymore, especially with his adoptive father, as he was 87 years old, had very advanced dementia and had sworn that "he would take to the grave everything related to the adoption." Rodrigo agreed not to discuss the adoption further with his family, but, when he went to SENAME to request his adoption records, he was informed about the consent process:

They had to involve my parents because they had to legally notify them about my search. I told them that I didn't agree, that it was "my" search and my origins [...] But everything fell apart there, and I decided not to continue on with my search, because my dad was 87 and had Parkinson's. I was left feeling that it will only be when my parents pass that maybe I will be able to find some answers. I only wanted to know if I was really born on December 24th or not (Rodrigo, 37 years old).

In this case, this legal requirement and the family's dynamic of silence led Rodrigo to abandon his search, preventing him from accessing basic information about his history. In addition, other participants pointed out that when their cases went to court, they were forced to argue before the judge their motivation to open their adoption records, even when the judge should have known their legal right:

I wanted my file but not that way. I had never entered a court before, and then the judge starts talking, talking and talking, "Do you want to look for your parents? Why do you want to look for them?" I started crying, she was so cruel. I didn't even know her, and I had to give her explanations for something that is my right (Carolina, 36 years old).

One participant explained how she resisted the requirement for parental consent, with the support of her adoptive mother, before a judge:

In order to receive my case file, they had to notify my adoptive father. I hadn't spoken with him in 20 years, since he abandoned my mother [...] My mother and I had to go to a court hearing and the judge asked her, "Do you agree that your daughter should receive her adoption file?" And my mother responded, "Of course; don't worry. We are in agreement" (Nora, 33 years old).

The distinction between secrecy and privacy is crucial to understanding why birth parents and adult adoptees have been denied access to their adoption records (Carp, 1998). This theme is seen clearly in the narrative of Sonia, who insisted on the importance of being considered to be an adult, and being treated as such:

It is important to differentiate between secrets and privacy. I am an adult and this is my process. The parents of some people might not want for them to search for their origins and that puts us in a really difficult position (Sonia, 35 years old).

Chilean legislation also stipulates that birth parents—usually, birth mothers—can only be contacted if they have given consent. In addition, many professionals resist the idea that information should be disclosed more broadly, because such disclosures violate the privacy of the family of origin. Another key question is what long-term consequences the revelation may have. Following this line, some of our participants talked about the tension between their birth mothers' rights and their own rights. As adoptees they believe they should be able to know about their origins:

She [The professional] told me that while it's fine that I wanted to look for my birth mother, it also depended upon whether or not she would agree to talk to me [...]. I see it as a matter of ethics. If you abandon your child, or if they took custody of your child from you, or whatever, ethically you need to take the time to respond to that person [the adoptee]. Obviously that person [the birth parent] might be scared, but I think that your child deserves to know or to have some kind of answer. So, I thought, "How can this be? Could I really not have any answers to anything and then everything just ends here?" (Elena, 27 years old).

#### **4.2. Withheld and mediated information**

As we have previously mentioned, Chilean law establishes that the search for origins can only be initiated once the adoptee is legally an adult or with the consent of the adoptive parents or legal guardians if he or she is between the ages of 16 and 18. Law 19,628 protects the privacy of the birth parents, especially birth mothers. Adoptees who search for their origins receive a copy of their original adoption records, in which only the first names of their birth parents or other biological relatives are given. Any identifying information—which would allow the adoptee to locate his or her family of origin—is blacked out (SENAME, 2018a). The goal of blacking out personal information, in theory, is to avoid emotional conflicts and minimize the psychological impact of the search process:

The files are all redacted; the names and I.D. numbers are all blacked out. I ask myself whether SENAME wants us to see those names or not, because if you hold the files up to the light, you can still make them out. Do they black that information out expecting that we'll see it or that we won't? [...] It is very strong that feeling of wanting to know and being prohibited from seeing it. I come here wanting to know about this and you don't let me see it [...] And I held documents up to the light to read them (Andrea, 32 years old).

In Chile, as in other countries, some professionals, implicitly or explicitly, send negative or ambivalent messages when talking about making contact with birth families (Neil, 2002), following the dominant rules concerning kinship networks and the rules of contact considered appropriate for adoptees and their birth relatives. Chilean legislation and technical guidelines establish when and how an adoptee can know and/or search and what he or she must (not) know, read, say, ask or do. Nevertheless, Alejandra's narrative shows how working with a specialized professional who warned her about the "risks" of her search, in fact, created more difficulties for her instead of helping her:

She said to me, "Are you sure that you want to do this?" "Yes," I said. "But it might be someone who might not be how you want, what you wish for." I told her that it didn't matter to me if she was poor, if she was at risk, or "if her son was a delinquent" [...] I still wanted to know her [...] she was still the one who had given me life (Alejandra, 33 years old).

Some interviewees also stated that professionals read out loud to them fragments from their case histories, before they, themselves, could do so:

The psychologist started talking to me before opening my file and she said, "Well, in the case of your biological mother, what happened was that her parental custody was removed." She had my file in her hands and she said to me, "This is one of the biggest files I have ever seen" and then she said to me, "Your mother looked for you." [...] After reading my documents, I saw a report that said that she looked for me twice, but, to me, that's not looking. Looking is much more than asking about her daughter two times. She [the

professional] imposed an interpretation of the facts that didn't have anything to do with my perception [of what happened] (Tamara, 28 years old).

While trying to understand the meaning of this professional intervention that violated her right to interpret her own life story, Tamara considered the possibility that perhaps the professional's intention was to make more bearable the story of how she had become adoptable. The institution where she was now seeking information about her origins was the same institution that had declared her birth mother unfit and had transformed her into an "adoptable" child.

The participants' narratives reveal how the legal incorporation and the public offer of a specialized service does not undermine, per se, the traditional adoption policies and practices shrouded in secrecy. The same interviewee illuminated how adult adoptees are confined to spaces of orphanhood, abandonment and fragility, as eternal children that must be protected by a paternalistic and adult-centric state:

I decided to just go to the office, on Orphans Street (*Huérfanos* in the Spanish original). It was so strange that it was located on a street called "Orphans"! [...] How can the same institution that has children in orphanages and gives them up for adoption be located on Orphans Street?! (Adriana, 26 years old).

This lucid observation about the name of the street where SENAME's Search for Origins Program is located is a particularly poignant example of the way that adopted children continue to be imagined solely as "orphans" or children rather than as agentic subjects.

#### **STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

The value of this paper lies in the fact that it highlights, for the first time in Chile, the voices of the protagonists of the search process: the adoptees themselves. Other dimensions and actors involved in the process of searching for origins are being analyzed for future publications.

#### **4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Different countries' governments have implemented search-for-origins or reunion services, spurred by international conventions, the example of other countries and/or the demands of their users. However, these services often present contradictions and ambiguities on a legal and technical level, which make it difficult for adoptees to exercise the right to know about their origins. These rights are not derived from an automatically transferable legal precedent; rather, they are politically constructed and their implementation takes place within administrative "micro" spaces, in which various strategies of "political mediation" (Fonseca, 2010) and a wide range of possible negotiations occur. Nearly 20 years after Chile recognized the legal right of adoptees to access their adoption records, the experiences of adoptees who search for their origins reveal that some professional practices continue under the older paradigm of secrecy, and searches for origins continue to be very difficult. Many people who were adopted and who seek their origins must face multiple social, family, legal, institutional and professional barriers.

As in other studies (Sullivan & Lathrop, 2004), adult adoptees agreed that reunion services should be available to anyone who seeks them. While it is true that the majority of the interviewees valued and were grateful for this program, they were also quite critical of the way it works. The study participants stated that in the different stages of the process some practices were characterized by a tension and ambiguity between secrecy and openness. The findings show that the age requirement is adult-centric in that it takes for granted an adult point of view and fails to consider whether other factors than age might be relevant in considering the best interest of the adoptee. Participants also described being subjected to misinformation and excessive vigilance, in ways that felt paternalistic and invasive. For them, professional practices emphasize the construction of adoptees as fragile people or abandoned children, rather than as adults who have the right to know their own histories. In this sense, a contradictory process of infantilization took place, supporting the idea that the adoptee would be a child forever, eternally in need of protection beyond the age of

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adulthood. In spite of these challenges, the study participants resisted these practices and exercised their own agency by insisting that their rights be respected.

Although, as mentioned above, a new bill is under debate in Congress, the experiences of users of the SENAME's Search for Origins Program in Chile show how legislative and discursive transformations do not automatically modify adoption policies, narratives and practices, which challenges the dominant narrative in relation to openness in adoption (Jones, 2016). Many times, professionals' practices can continue to act as obstacles, producing and reproducing the ideologies, taboos, stigmas, and secrets traditionally linked to adoption. As access to adoption records continues to depend on the decisions of professionals working under cover of legal requirements and technical guidelines, professionals "can act as gatekeepers of knowledge partly because their expertise and authority have been reinforced by the state" (Howell, 2006, p. 86). Social scientists and professionals must recognize the complexity and the emotional demands of work in this area and offer professional support, supervision, and training (Neil, 2007).

## 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Given legal changes, the general trend toward openness, and the current demands of users, an evaluation process should be implemented to inform policy-makers, institutions and professionals about the effectiveness of the search program and to form the basis for improvements. As this research has the potential to play a role in the design of adoption policy and practices in Chile, the first author of this paper presented its results before the Chilean House of Representative's "Commission on the Family." These results have also been shared with the technical managers of SENAME's Search for Origins Program, serving as input for the development of a new set of technical guidelines (SENAME, 2018a).

Professionals are often expected to facilitate encounters between the members of the adoptive triad, without necessarily being trained to do so. This lack of training can contribute to the contradictions and difficulties that our participants experienced. For this reason, professionals should consider learning more about how to prepare adoptees for the possible outcomes of their search, and how to mediate conflicts and ethical dilemmas between the members of the adoptive triad. Such training would also help professionals to be more prepared for the challenges of new adoptions that involve some level of contact with birth relatives. Finally, it is essential that states offer publicly financed search-for-origins programs, advertise these services to the public, and offer sensitizing training to the judges, social workers and psychologists who mediate these processes. Taking these steps could help ensure that adoptees who search for their origins will find adequate support and have positive experiences.

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