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NEWSLETTER

RACINE project (ISS France), feedback on the support groups and reflections on their benefits.

We first introduced you to the RACINE project in the November 2021 newsletter (2021-256), in an interview with Jimmy Messineo, Coordinator of ISS France. The RACINE project was launched by ISS France in September 2021 with funding from the Intercountry Adoption Mission (MAI). In this article, Dr Fanny Cohen Herlem, registered child psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and counselling psychiatrist with the ISS/IRC, and Jimmy Messineo, who ran the support groups for the project, take a critical look back and share their thoughts on how the groups contributed to the project.

What motivated you to set up support groups as part of the RACINE¹ project?

Even at the design stage of the project, we identified setting up peer support groups for adopted people seeking to trace their birth family as an essential to providing quality support.

French ISS member Droit d'Enfance has been running support groups for several years for parents whose children have run away or been abducted by the other parent. Droit d'Enfance also manages the [116,000 Missing Children's](#) line in France, an emergency phone line set up to listen to and support parents of missing children. The organisation's groups have become a key component of its support. They provide a space for reflection and peer support facilitated by professionals, they allow participants to discuss subjects that are hard to broach during one-to-one support, they reinforce the legitimacy of participants' feelings and they help to manage often unrealistic expectations.

Mindful that a person's search for their birth family is a long and complex process that takes time, ISS France

was convinced that support groups would also be a valuable tool in this context. This hypothesis was quickly confirmed. Moreover, because they are open to people not already supported by ISS France, they could also serve to promote opportunities for one-to-one support.

Who can participate in the RACINE support groups and how do they work?

The support groups are open to anyone adopted from a country covered by the RACINE project,² whether or not ISS is helping them with their search. Aiming to reach as many adopted people as possible, each two-hour sessions is run as a video call.

To date, 24 people have attended at least one support group session; 10 were adopted from Sri Lanka, 9 from Haiti and 5 from Ethiopia. It should be noted that most of the participants were women, with only three men participating in at least one session. This gender gap has raised some questions.

¹ RACINE means "root" in French and is an acronym for "Tracing the birth family, Support, Cooperation, Identification of partners, Narration and Listening".

² Currently Ethiopia, Haiti, Madagascar and Sri Lanka.

Given that the topics covered are universal, we decided to create a single group from the outset, rather than specific groups for each country. Experience has confirmed that the problems discussed are not specific to any one country of origin, but are experienced and raised by all or almost all participants.

The support group sessions are open, with each aiming to foster discussion on a specific topic, all linked by a common thread. The decision to make the groups open was based more on the need to publicise the initiative than on clinical necessity. Participants and facilitators agree that, ideally, closed groups should eventually be organised to enable new topics to be discussed.

The topics were seen as stages of a “journey” and the adoptees’ tangible progression through the four topics enabled them to progress along on the path of tracing their birth family:

- *My search, my story*: At this stage, the adoptees are encouraged to open up about their own past experiences and why they decided to trace their birth family.
- *If I knew, if I had known...*: The idea here is to get the adoptees to think about what they want to know and why they want to know it.
- *Between expectations, false hope and lost hope*: The idea is to discuss the emotional turmoil into which adoptees tracing their birth family are thrown, and to address the pitfalls, risks and illicit practices they might encounter.
- *From searching to meeting*: Adoptees often both idealise and fear meeting their birth family. This event should be discussed and participants should think about what happens next.

At the end of the first run (2021), the group requested an additional session on the issue of tracing their birth family and parenting. The participants engaged so actively and raised so many questions on the topic that, at the end of the two-hour session, it was decided to hold a second.

Why are the support groups facilitated by two professionals and what are their roles?

This support group differs from those organised by adoptee associations, which are certainly essential, in the introduction of a third party to the peer-support system whose role is to provide guidance. In the interest of building a multidisciplinary team that participants could identify with, we opted to recruit two professionals, a man and a woman, one a lawyer and the other a psychiatrist, both specialising in child protection and adoption.

The prerequisites for the facilitators were:

- Solid theoretical knowledge
- Practical knowledge and experience: legal, social, psychological/clinical
- Knowledge of the countries of origin concerned
- Knowledge of group dynamics
- No personal involvement in the issues addressed

The different topics are explored harnessing the experience and the professional and empathetic ear of the facilitators. The facilitators set boundaries and manage what can happen during a session, especially in terms of its emotional effects.

They ensure that the support group discussions stick to the overarching theme, from the first to the last session, and make connections between each session. They serve as the group’s memory. This enables group participants to connect with one another during their journey, allowing them to identify with each other’s experiences and unpick them as the sessions, stories and experiences of each participant unfold.

This framework offers peer-to-peer support guided by a third party.

What are the benefits of this support group for adopted people?

The support group helps adoptees get their thoughts in order as they embark on the journey of tracing their birth family.

The group encourages storytelling and its therapeutic method involves paying close attention to participants’ stories. Through their personal stories, participants identify with those of others to describe their lived experiences, recognising that they are completely personal and that they make each person unique and distinct from any other.

The group also helps to manage expectations. It invites adoptees to step outside themselves and put themselves in the shoes of their biological parents, and their adoptive parents and siblings. This has the benefit of shifting their understanding of the question of their origins, especially in the symbolic sense of the term.

Finally, the group provides those who have not found their parents and may never find them with answers to the questions they did not dare to ask (themselves). “When should we stop?” is one such example, thrown like a cat among the pigeons by one participant.

The group helps prepare participants for all stages of tracing their birth family, including meeting them. One young woman in the group, for example, whose mother had been found by ISS, decided she did not

want to contact her. But hearing the experiences of other people who had already found or met their parents and putting her fears into words enabled her to go ahead with meeting her birth mother.

Testimony of a support groups participant:

"I had the opportunity to participate in three support groups organised by ISS France as part of the RACINE project. The different support group sessions allowed me the freedom to express my feelings and tell my story, and most importantly, to meet other adopted people who have a similar story to my own. They all allowed me to put my experiences into words, my fears, my doubts, about many things, because I am the mother of a 13-month-old little boy now and it is true that being adopted made me doubt my ability to be a mother and these support groups helped me to realize that my story would not necessarily repeat and that, actually, I have this strength in me. And I've seen that a lot of adopted people have that strength in them too, to change things, to be a mother and to do many things. So these support groups have helped me enormously."

The group also helps to dismantle participants' feelings of isolation: **"We are alone, very alone. But alone together"**, stressed one participant.

Participants should, at some point, be able to leave the group; it should become obsolete as they each take ownership of their story as a unique, personal reality.

How do the support groups benefit the facilitators?

The perspectives and stories of the adoptees provide insight that professionals do not always have access to in a one-to-one setting. The group is a forum for sharing stories about and different perspectives on the same event.

Once anonymised, the participants' experiences can be used as case studies to help prepare candidate families

for adoption or to expand the range of topics discussed by professionals at conferences, addressed with adoptive families and future adoptive families, and broached during one-to-one support for adoptees hoping to trace their birth family.

These case studies can be a major asset when training other professionals and they can act as a springboard for theoretical clinical research on adoptees tracing their birth family.

Some key topics were discussed that deserve the attention of professionals and other stakeholders:

- Firstly, that tracing your birth family is a "rite of passage", a "long journey that is just as important, if not more so, than the destination", "a search for well-being more than for a parent" and "a search for a cure". Several people said that they did not necessarily want to stay in contact with their parents once they had found them and noted that they found "resilience" and "recovery" in the (sometimes endless) search. Behind their stated goal of finding their parents, the adoptees also expressed a need for identity, to heal the wound left by their abandonment, to cure their narcissistic injury... and their search is sometimes just a symptom of these needs. All this confirms the need for tailored professional guidance.
- Secondly, the scale of illegal practices and the media coverage of them, and the impact on adoptees' mental health further demonstrate the need for professional support and care.
- The importance that adoptees place on finding brothers and sisters, as well as their parents.
- The burden of racism and that parents underestimate this issue before they adopt a child.

Taking part in the support group is a valuable experience both for adoptees and professionals and is expected to continue with other participants from September 2023.



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