

What makes adoptive family life work?

References

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Authors

This briefing was written by Dr Chris Jones of University of Edinburgh, Professor Simon Hackett and Ms. Helen Charnley, of Durham University and Margaret Bell of DFW adoption.

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The study

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Contact
SASS

32 Old Elvet, Durham, DH1 3HN sass.enquiries@dur.ac.uk

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Adoption has changed significantly over the course of the 20th century. Adoption today increasingly involves the placement from local authority care of older children with difficult family histories. The range of people who are considered suitable to adopt has also widened to include single adopters, gay and lesbian adopters, unmarried couples and adopters with birth children. In addition, there has been a significant shift in Adoption practice away from a model of total substitution of one family with another towards a model of openness in adoption. These changes in policy and practice have brought new opportunities for vulnerable children but at the same time have placed new demands on adoptees, adoptive parents and birth relatives as well as the professionals involved. This briefing outlines a study of adoptive parents' experiences of adoption over a twenty-five year period between 1976 and 2001.

Key points

Within adoption theory and practice the model of adoption in the UK as 'the total substitution of one family with another' has been replaced with a model of 'openness' and dual connection between the child and both adoptive and birth relatives.

In an era of openness, adoptive parents are faced with the dual task of establishing a meaningful family relationship with their adopted child and retaining the significance of the child's connection to their biological family.

This dual task is, however, challenging in two key respects. Firstly, the model of adoption as 'the substitution of one family with another' persists within the public imagination creating an expectation that children must choose to belong to 'this family *or* that' not 'this family *and* that'. Secondly, the belief in the primacy of biological connectedness over social kinship is strong within Western culture.

Adopters must, therefore, not only establish and maintain relationships between themselves and the adopted child and birth relatives and the adopted child but also manage the ambiguity surrounding their legitimacy as kin.

Adopters and adoptees forge family relationships by taking part in shared family activities. The task of moulding adoptive family relationships is relevant not only in the early days of adoptive family life but is instead, because of the ambiguous social status of adoptive relations, a lifelong task. Adoptive families create a sense of social legitimacy through the maintenance of these relationships over time and through developing a shared family history.

The interventions of adoption professionals can reinforce the legitimacy of adoptive and birth family relationships but can also undermine this. Adoptive parents accounts of interventions relating to post-adoption contact between adoptees and birth relatives contrast the formal and deliberated nature of 'professional practices of openness' and the spontaneous and taken for granted nature of 'family practices of openness'.

Together these findings raise questions about the role that adoption agencies can and should play in the preparation and longer term support of adoptive families.

What makes adoptive family life work?

Background

Following a Prime Ministerial review in 2000, there has been much legislative activity concerning the issue of child adoption within the UK. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) was closely followed by the Children and Adoption Act (2006) in England and Wales and in Scotland the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act (2007) was introduced. Alongside this new legislation, a raft of regulations has been introduced concerning adoption support services, disclosure of adoption information and intermediary services as well as national minimum standards for adoption agencies.

The Adoption and Children Act (2002) was fully implemented in 2005 and represented the first major overhaul of adoption legislation in England and Wales since 1976. In the period between these two Acts, adoption has changed significantly. Within adoption theory and practice the model of adoption in the UK as 'the total substitution of one family with another' has been replaced with a model of 'openness' and dual connection between the child and both adoptive and birth relatives. The implications of these changes in adoption theory, policy and practice for adoptive family life are still emerging.

The study

This study involved an analysis of records of adoptions between 1976 and 2001 held by an adoption agency in North East England and a series of in-depth biographical interviews with a sample of adoptive parents with whom children were placed by the agency in the same period.

The research questions addressed in the study were:

1. In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic adoption changed

2. What personal and social challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?

3. How do adoptive parents manage the challenges of adoptive family life across the lifecourse?

4. What implications do the findings of the research have for contemporary adoptive parenting and adoption theory, policy and practice?

This briefing reports findings from the analysis of interviews with adopters. Twenty-two qualitative interviews were undertaken with 11 adoptive mothers and 11 adoptive fathers. The analysis drew on previous sociological research which has studied the process through which kinship is constituted through 'family practices' (Morgan 1996) and 'displaying family' (Finch 2007).

Findings

In an era of openness, adoptive parents are faced with the dual task of establishing a meaningful family relationship with their adopted child and retaining the significance of the child's connection to their biological family. However, despite significant changes in adoption theory, policy and professional practice over the last thirty years, the model of adoption as 'the substitution of one family with another' persists within the public imagination and the Western belief in the primacy of biological connectedness over (fictive) adoptive kinship remains strong. Adopters gave several examples of encounters with those outside of the adoptive family that reflected the view that :

- adopted children must choose 'this family or that' rather than belonging to multiple families,;
- biological kinship is strong and enduring; and
- fictive kinship as fragile and impermanent.

What makes adoptive family life work?

Adopters must negotiate family relationships and day to day family life within the context of the contradictions presented by an expectation within adoption theory, policy and practice of openness and dual connection yet the broader public expectation of fidelity to one family, preferably the birth family.

As a result, adopters face the additional task of not only creating a new version of kinship that includes both adoptive relatives and birth relatives but also establishing and maintaining the legitimacy of these family relationships. There is ambiguity surrounding the legitimacy of family relationships between adoptees and both adoptive relatives and birth relatives. While adoptive families have clear legal legitimacy, there is some ambiguity about their social legitimacy. While birth relatives have lost their legal status as 'family' following adoption, the social significance of these biological relationships remains strong.

Adopters and adoptees forge family relationships by taking part in shared family activities. These activities include mundane family practices such as caring practices, shared meals and play or leisure activities. They also include 'special' family occasions such as celebrations of religious festivals, holidays, weddings and funerals. The task of maintaining adoptive family relationships is relevant not only in the early days of adoptive family life but is instead, a lifelong task. Adoptive families create a sense of social legitimacy through cumulative practices, that is, the maintenance of these practices over time and the development of a shared family history.

Adopters also undertake active work to retain the significance of birth relatives as family members. There is an expectation that this significance is retained more effectively where there is more contact and is lost where there is no contact.

Adopters' accounts suggest that birth relatives can be given a symbolic presence within adoptive family (even where physically absent) through adoption stories, dialogue and the sharing of family objects or artefacts. However, adopters' narratives also suggested that while in/direct contact *can* have a role in retaining the significance of biological connection, this is not inevitable. Contact can also increase awareness of lost family practices and relationships.

Adoption support professionals must give consideration to *how* contact is conducted. The interventions of adoption professionals can reinforce the legitimacy of adoptive and birth family relationships but can also undermine these. Adoptive parents accounts of such interventions contrast the formal and deliberated nature of professional practices of openness and the spontaneous and taken for granted nature of family practices of openness.

Implications for policy and practice

The study has uncovered a number of potential roles that adopters' must accomplish including the role of family builder, social pioneer, storyteller, curator of artefacts. Questions remain, however, about the degree to which adopters are prepared for or supported in such roles and how this can best be achieved. Further research is needed to determine this.

The importance of 'attachment' for adopted children, is now very well recognised. There does, however, need to be more attention paid by adoption professionals to the lifelong challenge facing adopters and adoptees of adjusting family relationships over time as biographies unfold.

Adoption support professionals need to ensure that 'professional practices of openness' and 'family practices of openness' are complementary in nature.