What makes adoptive family life work?

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, unmarried couples, gay and lesbian adopters and adopters with birth children. In addition, there has been a significant shift in adoption practice away from a model involving 'the total substitution of one family with another' towards a model of 'openness' and 'dual connection' between the child and both adoptive and birth relatives. 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 in adoption. 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'.

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. This creates some uncertainty around the legitimacy of adoptive family relations despite the legal sanctioning of such relationships.

Adopters must also become skilled, therefore, in managing the ambiguity surrounding the social legitimacy of adoptive family relationships.

Adopters and adoptees forge family relationships through sharing family time, family places and family activities. Together, they create a sense of social legitimacy through the long-term maintenance of these relationships and through the development of a shared family history.

A number of practices of openness contribute to the retention of relationships between birth relatives and adopted children including ongoing direct or indirect contact and communication about adoption within the adoptive family.

Adoptive parents' accounts of post-adoption contact between adoptees and birth relatives contrasted the formal and deliberate nature of practices that have been developed by adoption professionals in order to retain dual connection and the spontaneous and taken-for-granted nature of family practices that are part of the fabric of day-to-day family life. Their accounts suggest that formal professional practices of openness can reinforce the legitimacy of adoptive and birth family relationships and a feeling of connectedness but are also capable of undermining these.

Together these findings raise many questions about the appropriate role of adoption professionals in the support of family relationships following adoption. The distinctions between 'social legitimacy' and 'legal legitimacy' and 'professional practices of openness' and 'family practices of openness' may be helpful concepts for future research in this area.

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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 practice and the concepts guiding professional practice have changed significantly.

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 between 1976 and 2001?

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 processes 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.

Twenty-two qualitative interviews were undertaken with 11 adoptive mothers and 11 adoptive fathers.

Adopters described the process through which they forge family relationships with their adopted children by sharing family spaces and 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, family holidays, weddings and funerals.

Adopters also undertake active work to retain the significance of birth relatives as family members. They described the role of a number of practices of openness such as adoption conversations within the adoptive family and direct and indirect contact between adoptees and birth relatives in retaining these family connections. They also described the role of family objects and artefacts in maintaining connections between adoptees and birth relatives even where birth relatives are physically absent.

Adopters' accounts, however, indicated that the task of establishing meaningful family relationships between themselves and their adopted child **and** retaining the significance of the child's connection to their biological family through practices of openness is complex (Jones and Hackett 2008). It requires adoptive families to engage with contradictory public attitudes, beliefs and norms relating to families and adoption. For example, it appears that 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:

- biological kinship is strong and enduring while adoptive kinship is fragile and impermanent.

- adopted children must choose 'this family or that' rather than belonging to multiple families.

Adopters must, therefore, negotiate family relationships and day to day family life within the context of the contradictions created by, on the one hand an expectation of 'openness' and 'dual connection' yet, on the other, a broader public expectation of fidelity to one family, preferably the birth family.

Adopters' narratives suggested that these contradictions create ambiguity around 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 (Jones and Hackett 2010).

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 over time. The data revealed that the task of maintaining adoptive family relationships and the legitimacy of these relationships is relevant not only in the early days of adoptive family life but is instead, a lifelong task. Adoptive families appear to create a sense of social legitimacy through cumulative joint practices, that is,

the maintenance of family practices over time and, as a result, the development of a shared family history.

Adopters' narratives also suggested that while direct and indirect contact can have a role in retaining the significance of biological connection, this is not inevitable. Instead, contact can, in some cases, increase awareness of lost family practices and relationships. For example, an annual face-to-face contact between separated siblings may act as a welcome acknowledgement of their connection to one another but can also raise awareness of their changed relationship and lost day-to-day intimacy. Adoptive parents accounts of contact contrasted the formal and deliberated nature of professional practices and the spontaneous and taken for granted nature of family practices.

Implications for policy and practice

The study has uncovered the complexity of the task of family building that faces adoptive parents. Many questions remain however, about the appropriate role of adoption professionals in the support of families with the demands of 'openness' and 'dual connection' after adoption. Further research is needed to determine this.

The distinctions between 'social legitimacy' and 'legal legitimacy' and 'professional practices of openness' and 'family practices of openness' may be helpful concepts for future research in this area. The study also suggests that greater attention is needed from both researchers and practitioners to the lifelong challenge facing adopters, adoptees and birth relatives of adjusting family relationships over time as biographies unfold.

Adopters described the process through which they forge family relationships with their adopted children by sharing family spaces and taking part in shared family activities.

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