On hope, loss, anger and the spaces in between: Reflections on living with/in adoption and the role of the social worker

Abstract

This article explores the findings of a study on the role of the social worker in adoption with a focus on ethics, concentrating on the perspectives of adopted people, birth parents and adoptive parents. Their reflections challenge policy attempts that are framed around 'new beginnings' for children. The focus on hope in such policy projects fails to understand that hope inevitably co-exists with anger and loss. The concept of ethical trespass, with its recognition of the inevitability of harm, is explored in terms of its possibilities for recognising the lived realities for multiple stakeholders. The mitigation of ethical trespass requires social work practices that are characterised by humility, honesty and reflexivity.

Keywords: adoption, child protection, social work, ethics

Introduction

Adoption has been promoted across the political spectrum in the UK for many decades. Indeed, under New Labour (1997-2010), there was a very clear emphasis on increasing adoption rates. This emphasis was accompanied by substantial investments in family support and reducing rates of child poverty (Anonymous, 2014). When a newly elected coalition government in 2010 sought to increase adoption numbers, this was within a very different policy context (Gove, 2012). Austerity policies resulted in a reduction in family support services and changes in welfare entitlements. Legislative changes were introduced aimed at speeding up court processes (Cameron, 2016).

Challenges to the focus on adoption in this context emerged with the then most senior family court judge stressing that adoption should be a 'last resort' (*Re B-S (Children)* [2013] EWCA Civ. 813), and, the Council of Europe (2015)

expressed concern about the non-consensual nature of many adoptions. Research studies with adoptive children and families also highlighted the complex nature of adoption of children from care and challenges many living in/with adoption face (Selwyn *et al.*, 2014; Ottaway *et al.*, 2014; Broadhurst *et al.*, 2015; McSherry *et al.*, 2016).

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) framed the range of concerns emerging as ethical and human rights issues and in 2016 commissioned an Enquiry into '*The role of the social worker in adoption – ethics and human rights: An enquiry*' (hereafter referred to as 'the Enquiry'). The Enquiry heard from a wide range of stakeholders but in this article, we concentrate on the perspectives of adopted people, birth parents and adoptive parents and, because of word constraints, the implications in relation to ethics rather than human rights.

Their reflections challenge attempts from influential policymakers to construct adoption in terms of 'new beginnings' for children in a project apparently premised upon denying their pasts (see, for example, Narey (2012), who was then a senior government advisor on adoption). It is a project based upon hope. Exploring the reflections of adopted people, adoptive parents and birth families highlights that hope is indeed vital. However, their reflections also attest to the importance of the observation by Maria Popova: 'Critical thinking without hope is cynicism, but hope without critical thinking is naivety,' (quoted in Solnit, 2016: xi/ii). Moreover, it is clear that hope almost inevitably co-exists with anger and loss (with its attendant feelings of grief) and that the past is always *in* the present for all living in/with adoption. Whilst some academics, practitioners and those living in/with adoption have recognised this for decades (see for example Triseliotis, 1991; Howe and Feast, 2000) this was not reflected in the rhetoric of politicians and policy makers, such as Martin Narey, in the period preceding the Enquiry.

The Enquiry gathered evidence in 2016-2017 in a period when there was already beginning to be a drop in the numbers of children placed for adoption from the peak of 5,360 in 2015 (DfE, 2018a). However the reflections captured by the Enquiry often referred to developments in the preceding period and it is not clear whether a compatible exercise today would elicit the same accounts. They caution against 'happy ever after' stories about adoption when told by powerful story tellers and reinforce Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) warning against hearing only **a single story** about another person, issue or country.

Reflections on the role of the social worker highlighted what practices could hinder and help in living in/with adoption over the years. Hindering practices included constructing oneself as 'the social worker for the child', viewing requests for help through the prism of risk, and not providing support for all post-adoption. Thus, feelings of loss and anger were often not allowed adequate space for expression in a project focused on hope for the child. Paradoxically such practices with their failure to recognise loss and anger may imperil the very project they seek to promote.

Respondents described social work practices that were helpful. We use the concept of ethical trespass to explore its usefulness in promoting more of these practices. With its recognition of the inevitability of harm in areas of social work practice, such as adoption, it may be best placed to recognise the lived realities for multiple stakeholders of living with hope, anger and grief. It may thus support the construction of adoption stories that are attuned to multiplicity and complexity, and practice possibilities for mitigating the harm done.

Firstly, we explore the Enquiry aims, methods and participants before identifying themes and discussing their implications.

The Adoption Enquiry

BASW commissioned the Enquiry in 2016 with the aim of gathering evidence from social workers, managers, adopted people, adoptive parents, birth parents, siblings, lawyers and academics on the role of the social worker in adoption with a particular focus on how ethical and human rights issues are understood and inform practice. The majority of adoptions concern children who are in care as a result of child protection proceedings. Therefore, the Enquiry explored the role of the social worker from initial child protection processes to post-adoption support.

It encompassed the four countries of the United Kingdom. Whilst there are similarities, there are also differences in policies, practices and legal frameworks and where relevant these are highlighted.

Methods

The Enquiry employed a variety of research methods: a questionnaire on the BASW website; telephone or face-to face interviews; a focus group was held with adopted young people and with CAFCASS children's guardians in England; and face-to-face interviews were held with members of the judiciary. In addition to using the above well-established research methods, the Enquiry also included seminars where a wide range of the key stakeholders in adoption were offered opportunities to come together to have dialogue about issues in a careful and supportive way. Ethical approval for the Enquiry was obtained from University X.

In total 300 individuals and 13 organisations contributed. Social workers or managers with a social work background were the largest group (105), followed by birth family members (56), adoptive parents (44), adopted people (32), academics (24) and related professionals (24). Categories overlapped with

some of those participating holding multiple identities (e.g. as social workers, adoptive parents or adopted people). The majority of participants (165) were from England, 57 from Scotland, 43 from Northern Ireland and 29 from Wales.

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted (for further details see Anonymous *et al.*, 2018a).

We focus our analysis here on the responses of people who experienced social work services, namely adopted people, birth families and adoptive parents and explore responses in relation to two interrelated areas: living with/in adoption and the role of the social worker in adoption. Most of the respondents were self-selected, although participants to the seminars were invited because of their specific expertise. A limitation of the self-selection aspect of the study is that those who respond may be more likely to hold negative views about adoption.

Living with/in adoption

The happy ever after narrative – the repression of loss and anger

Respondents questioned the tendency towards a reductive 'happy ever after' narrative; a narrative considered to have been promoted by politicians and evident in marketing campaigns and a particular feature of the English context. Portrayals of adoption that emphasised the wholly positive aspects for children and those who could offer them a 'loving home' were resented by both birth parents and adopted people.

Advertisements for adoption have become a feature of many public spaces in England such as cinemas, buses and supermarkets. Pictures of smiling children 'looking for a family' can be very painful in such public contexts. For birth families the aftermath of adoption has been called disenfranchised grief (Doka, 2002), as they suffer in silence within what is often a very blaming societal

context.

Adopted people recounted trying to manage emotions of grief and loss whilst the adults around them constructed the adoption as a 'happy' event. Seen as being 'lucky' and 'so blessed' made it difficult for children to express contrary feelings:

'If my family had died in a car crash, my grief would be recognised, and everyone would wonder how I'd cope with losing my entire family; but as a foster care adoptee – and an older one at that – I was supposed to be excited and grateful that anyone even wanted me'.

Loss was an inevitable feature of adopted people's lives even when placed as a very young child. No matter how well the adoption had turned out, deep seated feelings of loss and fear of rejection remain. As one adopted person put it, '*the adoption feeling*' is an ongoing feature of one's life. This can encompass feelings of loss, rejection and something being missing as well as anger.

Fear of rejection and abandonment led one adopted person to not talk at all for a few years as a child in case she was '*not good enough*' and would be handed back. Living, what one respondent described as an '*adaptive life*' can complicate relationships with adoptive parents and others, with feelings of loss and fear of abandonment enduring into adulthood.

Finally, a 'happy ever after' narrative in relation to adoption can leave adoptive families silenced and adrift in the face of the reality of adoption's multiple and competing meanings. It can suggest there is a 'right' way to do adoption and, moreover, that it is different and better than other care disposals for children. However, over time and especially when children encounter difficulties in school, adoptive parents' recognition of the similarity of their needs to those of other looked after children, and their demands that they are entitled to the same level of services destabilise this narrative.

Where do adoptive families go when the image of the 'happy ever after' breaks down and how do professionals respond?

When in crisis, adopters can be overwrought and angry. Social workers can become very defensive when faced with a situation of someone in need of help but can't deal with it. Often social workers and adopters are set in opposition against each other...... Adopters can become angry and distressed when living with violence. (adoptive parent).

When they do seek help, they often experience the same blaming responses birth families experience so that they end up in child protection procedures (see also Selwyn *et al.* (2014) and respondents to the PAC-UK (2018) survey of adoptive parents).

Identity: loss and hope

The Enquiry heard from young people still living in adoptive families and from adopted adults. Engaging with identity issues was a central aspect of their lives as they wrestled with questions such as: who am I? Where do I come from? Who do I belong to? *'It is vital that we talk about identity'* (adopted person). This was a sentiment shared by all with recognition that identity development is a very complex and life-long process.

Curiosity and a more deep-seated need to know their history leads many adopted people to want to find their birth family as adults. It was felt by many that there are not enough resources available for tracing family from 18 plus, as it is not viewed as a priority for resources. There was also a view expressed that 18 is often too late to allow searching. It should be based on a child's maturity, not an arbitrary age. Reunification was considered to be widespread but can be very problematic. Overall, it was considered that therapeutic services to support adopted people need to reflect the life-long process and be available throughout the lifespan.

Questions of (un)belonging were raised that often came to the fore in young adulthood, and this was identified particularly in relation to trans-racial/cultural placements:

I'm half Irish but didn't grow up in that culture, I'm half Pakistani and I didn't grow up in that culture. I'm not white, so I don't feel I fit in with a white culture. I don't have a sense of where I've come from culturally.

I lost my family like other adopted children, but also lost my culture / identity – I am Nigerian but not Nigerian.

It was noted that identity is not just about ethnicity and race, but also influenced by class, religion, language and past care experiences. Whilst it was felt unrealistic to expect precise matches, adoptive parents needed to be helped to understand the implications of difference and associated power relationships:

I experienced an enormous culture shock when I moved from care to very wealthy, educated middle-class adopters. There were differences in culture, class, language and religion. My new parents had a different vocabulary, different accents, and different manners. I don't believe that the social workers even realised that we were from a different culture….. Whilst being adopted did wonders for my vocabulary, sometimes I didn't understand what I was being asked to do and either felt stupid or got into trouble.

A number spoke about the importance of children being able to have honest and open discussions with adoptive parents about their birth family. They, and adopters, confirmed the importance of communicative openness; this allows children to talk with their adoptive parents and other supportive adults about their emotions (see Neil *et al.* 2013, 2015).

Some adopted people spoke of the need to live with multiple identities and the importance of this being recognised rather than suppressed:

'An adopted child is a 'shared child'– searching for birth family does not mean losing the adoptive family'.

Developing an understanding of their life story was considered an on-going process. Two key messages for social workers from young adopted people were: think about ways in which life story work can be accessible through different developmental stages of childhood; and prepare adoptive parents for the reality that many young people will want to find their birth families and to support them with this journey.

The past in the present and the troubled issue of 'contact'

In England, Scotland and Wales, letterbox contact is the usual model of contact with birth families, with direct contact rarely an option except in Northern Ireland. This usually consists of a letter once or twice a year exchanged between the parents. Even where birth relatives, such as grandparents, pose no risk, direct contact is not normally considered.

The current model, premised upon severance, appears ill attuned to the emotional realities of all, post adoption, and indeed it was felt by a range of respondents that it 'stored up trouble' with the lack of direct contact having considerable potential to fuel fantasy and fear among all.

There is rarely a 'clean break' or severance in real life; relationships endure in hearts and minds and the absence of physical presence may, indeed, mean they are more powerful. Adoptive parents recounted that adopted children prayed each night that their birth mother was ok. Mothers told of putting their lives, and that of non-adopted siblings on hold, waiting for their adopted children to reach eighteen.

'Contact is not even about foster care and adoption. It is about something much deeper, something much more ancient than modern policies and procedures. It's about the connections you make with people as you live your life. It's about the right to love and be loved.' (adopted person)

The Enquiry heard letterbox contact is often poorly supported with resources. Moreover, writing letters emerged as an area where ethical issues about the possible disparity in resources between adoptive families and birth families were posed. Adoptive parents worried about writing of holidays and the presents they gave at Christmas. Some areas have a practice of redaction in that sections of the letters from birth families are covered over if they contain content that is considered 'inappropriate'. For example, a young person spoke of receiving letters from her birth family where it appeared expressions of love were redacted. This was considered unhelpful if not inhumane.

A lack of agency resources can mean that if either adoptive families or birth families stop letterbox contact unilaterally there is no follow up to ascertain why. It was considered that better resourcing for earlier periodic contact may be important to improve the benefit of the letterbox approach and to improve long term outcomes for all affected by adoption.

The picture in relation to direct contact is very different in Northern Ireland where judges may recommend such contact takes place, sometimes between four to six times a year; recommendations which are followed. Adoptive parents expressed concerns about the automatic assumption of facilitating direct contact at this frequency, particularly given the context of inadequate support services. A strong message was the need to be open-minded, flexible and not 'prescriptive' about relationships and contact. These findings resonate with those of Neil *et al.*'s (2013) study.

The role of the social worker

I am the social worker for the child

Social workers frequently described themselves as 'the social worker for the child'. Birth parents experienced this as highly problematic at a number of levels. It conveyed the message that birth parents (and when caught up in the child protection system, adoptive parents) were unimportant in their role in their children's lives and as human beings. Thus, it was regarded as making the development of respectful and trusting relationships with the whole family more difficult.

It was considered that it de-contextualised their and their children's lives as one birth mother explained: *'Children are part of families – a social worker cannot 'only be the child's social worker'*. Some respondents suggested that it could be used to justify a lack of attention to social circumstances and the provision of support for birth parents both prior to and following removal and adoption. For birth parents, living in poverty and struggling with domestic abuse and mental health issues, a lack of attention to their needs came across as unhelpful and short-sighted given that these impacted upon their capacity to parent well and safely. Addressing practical issues, such in relation to benefits and housing, was often not considered as within the remit of 'the child's social worker'. This echoes the findings from Anonymous *et al.*'s (2018d) study that tackling the impacts of poverty and inequality is often not seen as the 'core business' for child protection workers or policy makers.

Crucially 'being the social worker for the child' can promote practices that negate the significance of family history, relationships, and community. Yet, as noted above, engaging with identity issues is a central aspect of adopted people's lives. There is rarely a 'clean break' or severance in real life. Thus, such social work practices are highly problematic.

Seeking help in the shadow of risk

There were many examples provided by birth parents of feeling powerless in a climate that was seen as risk averse. Fear of an unsympathetic and punitive response was seen as inhibiting families from asking for help when it was needed. Parents with mental and physical health problems and learning difficulties all reported concerns about asking for help because of the emphasis on risk. They reported receiving an assessment rather than support and feeling they were being scrutinised rather than helped.

Being judged and stigmatised simply for having a history of care and/or abuse was an issue for birth parents. Care proceedings, involving new-born babies, were identified as being particularly traumatic, with a lack of attention, in particular, to the impact of having just given birth on the mother. Residential settings were described as being too often focused on monitoring risk rather than providing help or therapeutic support.

Birth mothers reported high levels of domestic abuse and suggested they were being punished for having a violent partner and/or having experienced domestic abuse in childhood. In such contexts the risk of future emotional harm was highlighted as being frequently used, and was seen as a particularly unjust basis for permanent separation.

Being able to tell a story of where you have come from and how you understand your present and future is crucial. However, birth mothers considered their stories of seeking to survive in very frightening circumstances were colonised by professionals and returned to them in a shape that was experienced as unjust and shameful. For example, the use of the term 'failing to protect' was considered as particularly cruel when women were living in fear and where indeed contradictory imperatives were imposed by public and private law, i.e contact being directed with abusive fathers in some private law proceedings.

The child protection and court processes were regarded as evidence gathering against families by parents, loaded towards making the case for adoption as the best option:

I knew that after jumping through the hoops that nothing I would do would ever be good enough. It is very, very scary. I felt that even though they were giving good reports about me that the social work team was still adamant on the kids being put up for adoption (birth parent).

Some of the adoptive parents' experiences echoed those of birth parents when requests for help were viewed through the prism of risk and they were constructed as 'the problem' by social workers.

The lack of support post-adoption

The painful, traumatic and long-lasting impacts of losing a child of the family to adoption were repeatedly stressed by birth families. Recognition by social workers of their emotional and practical needs post adoption was reported by most respondents to be lacking, further reinforcing their sense of being of little value, as two birth family members explain:

'*The removal of…. was three years ago – I have been so ill since then – I have had a mental breakdown and have never got over it. I worry that he thinks we do not love him and did not want him.*' (birth grandparent)

'*I never received any after adoption support. They took my son and left me in an emotional wreck. I ended up turning to someone toxic in nature and ended up in trouble with the law.*' (birth mother)

In a similar manner to the mothers separated from their children through the care system cited by Morriss (2018), birth parents spoke to the Enquiry about feeling stigmatised and treated as 'less than human', with the paucity of post-adoption support services reflecting their 'undeserving' status.

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Where support was offered, especially by peers, it made an enormous difference as being able to talk to others in similar situations was really affirming and important. Mothers valued group-based approaches when they had the opportunity to use these (it is of note that the Enquiry only heard from mothers in this regard).

Adoptive parents also highlighted the lack of support for them, especially when caring for children with complex needs and multiple problems: *'Once our adoption went through, we were forgotten about.'* (adoptive parent). Services, when offered, were often bewildering in their complexity and very fragmented. Children with a range of difficulties encountered multiple assessments and services. For example, a child and his/her family could be dealing with difficulties related to autism, dyspraxia and attachment disorders. This meant negotiating complex and confusing threshold criteria, referral systems and therapeutic requirements. Adoptive parents who spoke to the Enquiry recounted how hard they, and other adoptive parents they knew, worked to support their children. Moreover, the engagement with services can become an extra source of stress in itself.

In all four countries specialist therapeutic services for adopted children and families were limited and in some areas, such as rural parts of Scotland, non-existent. This was so even in England where there is a ring-fenced Adoption Support Fund (ASF). A recent study evaluating the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) in England (King *et al*, 2017) found improvements but also barriers and unmet need.

Adopted people highlighted the need for more specialist services to be available to them throughout their lives and reinforced messages from others about the bewildering nature of services.

What supports/hinders more hopeful and helpful social work practices?

Repeatedly, across the range of family members, the relationship with a social worker was stressed as being of crucial importance. Accounts of both poor and good relationships were provided. Birth parents related experiences of feeling deceived by social workers who they considered had not been honest with them; being unfairly judged; and generally treated in what they perceived were inhumane ways. For example, a parent with learning difficulties explained that she had been told to be honest with professionals but she did not feel she received an equivalent level of honesty from them. She requested help as she had post-natal depression and was offered respite for six weeks but it dragged on. She agreed to adoption reluctantly because she did not want to go through the court process. However, she did not consider she had given consent.

Adoptive parents and adopted young people also identified examples of problematic dynamics, including a lack of honest communication:

'We did not receive enough information about what our children had suffered and how this impacted upon them' (adoptive parent)

Adoption can be an emotionally fraught area of work and the potential for miscommunication is considerable. However, examples of good practice were also given by all with a high degree of consensus about what constituted such practice. Birth family members, adoptive parents and adopted people spoke about the importance of good communication, listening to people's views, being respectful and honest, recognising strengths, displaying acts of kindness, and treating people as individuals. Examples of workers who were seen to care enough to 'go the extra mile' were given. One young adopted person spoke positively about how her social worker had been told to separate her from her brother but fought to keep them together.

Young adopted people stressed the importance of social workers getting to know them and giving them choice. Their support needs should be addressed,

but they should not be pathologised because they are adopted. Rather, their strengths recognised and their resilience promoted.

It was considered that the nature of the relationship could influence what happened with the child. Examples were given of differing outcomes for children in the same family (i.e. adoption or remaining with parents) and these were at least in part attributed to the quality of the relationship with the social worker.

Discussion

As indicated the Enquiry explored the role of the social worker in adoption in relation to ethics and human rights (see Anonymous *et al.*, 2018a and 2019 about how ethics and human rights were discussed by social workers). The accounts from those who experienced social work processes explored in this article provided important opportunities to engage with a very helpful literature on ethics and, in particular, with less well known or discussed areas of ethics. Here we focus on one such area; that of ethical trespass.

Weinberg (2016: 1-5), in her study of social work ethics in working with young mothers, positions social workers at the intersection of multiple paradoxes including that of two opposing responsibilities; namely to care for others but also to prevent others from harm. Furthermore, social workers engage in family situations where there are a number of people with possibly competing needs affected to whom there is a moral and legal responsibility.

She identifies the notion of ethical trespass as helpful in terms of understanding and dealing with these paradoxes. Trespass is inherent because there is a multiplicity of social actors all with conflicting wants and interests. In any decisions regarding those conflicts, some choices are opened up, while others are closed. She maintains that harm, potentially invisible or unknown, follows inevitably from those decisions. Some ways of being in the world are supported

while others are inhibited. The limits of any action cannot be transcended, nor can all effects be predicted. Like the proverbial ripples from a stone thrown in a pond, one can never completely anticipate the consequences of an action that go on and on (Weinberg, 2016: 18).

Social workers contribute to the dominant discourses of what is taken to be 'normal' or 'right', 'deserving' or 'undeserving', and make judgments that some actions lie outside the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Practitioners both contribute to and enact dominant discourses about social norms. Trespass occurs in the normalisation of some standards over others, leading to taken-for-granted ways of being, legitimising some behaviours and marginalising others.

Drawing on the work of Levinas, Weinberg and Campbell (2014:14) note:

> (I)f all of the world were just you and me, we could work things out; but in fact, there are always other people who are impacted by the decisions and agreements that we make between the two of us. So if I want to protect the singularity of a mother, that seems all well and good, but if she has a baby that is failing to thrive, and there is reason to suspect this problem is due to a lack of care being provided, my wish to honor the mother collides with the obligation to the third, namely, her baby. But if I focus on the baby and protecting his or her singularity, there are still the mother's needs and her humanity that I may violate. Either way, the social worker goes in her decision making, there is a third, and another third (such as the father or grandmother or other residents in a shelter for street-involved parents, and so forth).

Overall, the concept of 'ethical trespass' captures the reality that many practice situations are such that no correct response is clear and regardless of what action an individual practitioner takes, both good and harm will follow. The area of adoption illustrates this most starkly. Practitioners have to make

judgments about futures for children that are unknown and contested, and for each of these futures there are other possible roads that are not taken (Morriss, 2018). Adoption opens up and closes down possibilities for a cast of characters extending from siblings to grandparents and future generations.

The responses of those impacted by adoption in this Enquiry highlight the inevitability of harm being experienced in different ways but also direct us to ways of mitigating (at least some of) the harm. They reinforce messages from other studies involving family members. These stress honesty, kindness, compassion and strengths-based working within a framework that addresses the social and economic contexts of families (see Anonymous *et al*., 2016; Anonymous *et al., 2018c).

Weinberg explores further possibilities from her research for the mitigation of ethical trespass. She argues when the power in the helping relationship is acknowledged and seen as potentially problematic, opportunities are offered for more ethical thinking and behavior. The difficulties of having conversations that acknowledge power imbalances in an honest way should not be underestimated, and we would agree with Weinberg that developing organisational cultures and thoughtful supervision practices are vital to help support social workers hold such conversations.

Developing an ethical framework that stresses the unavoidable nature of trespass can reduce defensiveness and isolation particularly in blame cultures, as problems are not just framed in terms of individual worker inadequacy but in terms of issues that require dialogue and collective action.

The recognition of ethical trespass obliges engaging in a high degree of reflexivity within supportive organisational contexts. White (2009: 162) uses the concept of reflexivity to encompass the notion of 'bending back' which requires a socio-cultural analysis of the kinds of ideas in which practice is embedded.

So what counts as knowledge becomes a topic worthy of scrutiny in its own right. She notes that social workers often rely upon fashionable and powerful ideas when making decisions or taking actions but they may be unaware that they are invoking an idea and that this idea exists alongside many others which may have become obscured by a particular moral settlement.

Weinberg (2016) makes compatible points to White while using a different language drawn from Foucault, to highlight the importance of recognising discursive fields.. These consist of 'competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organising social institutions and processes' (Weedon, 1987: 34). A particular discursive field frames meaning and understanding in a specific way and the discursive fields about practice that a worker draws upon shapes what they do and why. Problematising these, exploring the underpinning values and assumptions, considering the impact on work with children and their families, and developing alternative paradigms within a social justice and human rights framework are ways practitioners can edge towards trespass reduction (Weinberg, 2016).

In the Enquiry, a number of discursive fields about practice became apparent that we would suggest need to be interrogated and discussed. These include assumptions that direct contact with birth families is not possible/desirable (in three of the countries), the lack of post-adoption support for all, and the concomitant failure to understand and engage with the paradoxical status of post adoption life as permeated by beginnings and endings. These are discussed further in a forthcoming paper. Here we focus on the framing by social workers of their role as 'the social worker for the child'.

To understand why this framing appears to be so dominant is beyond the scope of this article (see, however, Anonymous *et al.,* 2014 where there is an extended discussion of the various influences). Briefly it emerges from a child-focused orientation which as Gilbert *et al* (2011) note has emerged across a range of

countries. This incorporates ideas around children's rights and individualization. The potency of this framing is intensified in a risk averse context by findings from serious case reviews into child deaths that concluded a focus on parents led to social workers losing sight of the child. While such tragic cases carry enormous moral and emotional weight and the findings need to be taken seriously; we also need to be cautious about how far they can help us understand what is happening in the lives of, and practices with, the range of families involved in the child protection system.

The legislative framework of the Children Act 1989 requires that the child's welfare is the paramount concern of the court, however Part III of the Act states that local authorities have a duty to: '(a) safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and (b) so far as is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families, by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs'(section 17). Attending to a range of needs is often very necessary to support parents' capacities to care safely for their children and binary conceptualisations of parent versus child are extremely unhelpful in such circumstances. However, these can be hard to dislodge in contexts where understandings of the importance of economic and social circumstances within which families are seeking to care are not considered part of social workers' core business (Anonymous *et al.*, 2018d).

Additionally, children's rights are often counterpoised to parents' rights by social workers (see Anonymous *et al.*, 2018a) with children's rights discourses being primarily focussed on their right to protection. However, there are alternative conceptualisations that see children's rights as interwoven and inseparable from those of their parents and family, and community, with cultural connection essential (Melton, 2010). In White's (2009) terms, such formulations are not part of the current moral settlement in many contexts, underscoring the importance of encouraging reflexivity.

In busy risk-averse contexts, it is clear that the phrase 'I'm the social worker for the child' can serve multiple functions. It can support the performance of a moral identity in a confusing and frightening landscape where there are multiple vulnerabilities and risks. It can also serve as a heuristic, a short cut that simplifies decision-making processes, and enables practitioners to avoid taking responsibility for parents and other family members, negating the 'other' and constructing them as unworthy, thereby furthering trespass.

The social work task in child protection is complex and contested, with some level of trespass inevitable. However, we suggest that critical questioning of the discursive field of 'the child's social worker' has the potential to mitigate trespass and promote more ethical and human rights-based practice.

This questioning can alert us too to a paradox of our times. While social workers see themselves as 'there for the child', the stories of those adopted trouble this profoundly. Currently, many adopted adults across the world use social media to express their experiences of the complexity of adoption (see for example www.angelabarra.com and www.adopteeson.com). They attest to processes that have resulted in their silencing over time and their isolation when dealing with grief that struggles to be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned and socially supported. As we noted, adopted people in the Enquiry spoke about stories of hope, loss and anger and the need for a life-long perspective on being both part of birth and adoptive families.

Conclusion

Adoption is subject to strongly held views and emotions. It involves the permanent transfer of children from one set of parents and one family to another. This has profound and very complex implications for children and young people throughout the course of their lives, as well as for their birth and

adoptive families.

The Enquiry offered a unique opportunity for those impacted by, and working in, adoption to engage in dialogue together about this very important area of policy and practice. In this article we explore the responses of those directly impacted and highlight the importance of being able to engage with the complexity and multiplicity of perspectives. We identify the concept of ethical trespass as holding out hopeful possibilities for practice in this area of work. With its emphasis on the recognition of the inevitability of harm it signposts the importance of listening to all voices in particular those most often marginalized and of practices that are characterized by humility, honesty and reflexivity.

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