

# Families, Relationships and Societies

## Re-ordering Family Practices in an Unequal and Disorderly World: Contemporary adoption and contact in the UK

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Article Title

Re-ordering family practices in an unequal and disorderly world: contemporary adoption and contact in the UK

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Abstract

Using findings from '*The Role of the Social Worker in Adoption – Ethics and Human Rights: An Enquiry*', commissioned by The British Association of Social Workers, the following article presents a number of emerging themes around post-adoption contact and support in the UK. 300 individuals and 13 organisations across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland contributed to the Enquiry and data was analysed thematically. Within this article we will address some of the challenges around post-adoption contact and locate these within broader, often unexamined, concerns around poverty and inequalities. Drawing upon sociological literature on 'family practices' and 'displaying family', we will consider both the status of adoption and the realities of carrying out post-adoption contact in an age of ever-increasing complexities in relationships. In doing so, we will explore how those involved in adoption carry out such practices, as well as the implications for professionals tasked with facilitating contact.

Key Words

Adoption, Contact, Social Work, Inequalities, Family

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## Introduction

While adoption has been promoted across the political spectrum historically and has often been attended by controversy, renewed concerns about aspects of the policy context, especially in England, became evident from 2010 onwards. The push to increase adoption numbers by policymakers in the context of austerity, the use of reduced court times scales, and the numbers of adoptions that dispense with parental consent became the focus of attention from a range of national and international commentators (Featherstone and Gupta, 2020). Such concerns became framed by The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) as ethical and human rights issues and, as a result, in 2016 it commissioned '*The Role of the Social Worker in Adoption – Ethics and Human Rights: An Enquiry*'.

A key theme that emerged from the Enquiry was concern that there is little direct face-to-face contact between birth families and adoptive families once the adoption is finalised legally in England, Scotland, and Wales, although the situation in Northern Ireland differs, as we will explore. Letterbox contact, where letters are exchanged once or twice a year, is often the only option available in England, Scotland, and Wales. The Enquiry found a level of consensus, especially among adopted people, that this model of contact, premised upon such a degree of severance, was unrealistic in a digital age and ill attuned to the emotional realities of all (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018).

The Enquiry has contributed to a re-vitalisation of policy and practice conversations about the reform of adoption, particularly in relation to direct contact. We welcome such conversations but will argue that they need to be more securely anchored in understandings around the role of poverty and inequality in families' lives, as well as the possible implications for how contact is both done and understood between birth and adoptive families. Discussions about poverty and inequalities have not been routine in social work policy and practice in recent decades, thus raising concerns about practices both pre- and post-adoption (Morris *et al.*, 2018).

Moreover, we are concerned that the issues attached to reforming contact have the potential to crowd out much needed conversations about the status and meaning of adoption. Adoption is a curiously modernist reframing of family through what could be understood as a postmodern process. 'Old' ties of kin and birth are severed (through the archival and replacement of original birth certificates, for example) and the child becomes legally part of a socially constructed 'new and forever' family. In this context, underpinning the Enquiry was a seldom articulated question about whether adoption in its present form should be continued.

While adopted people certainly asked profoundly destabilising questions, this has become more common since the report was published and is evident in the increasingly available narratives of adopted people (*for example, Adoptee Rights Australia, 2021*).

Paradoxically, as we shall see, accounts from adoptive parents themselves are also challenging the current model, particularly with their claims that their children should receive support in a manner similar to that received by children who are looked after. Furthermore, increasing fluidity in terms of family relationships and wider changes to family forms more generally leads us to reconsider how we think about adoption. In a world where the use of adoption has changed over the decades, in terms of why it is used and who it is for, researchers are asking whether the current model of adoption is itself too narrow and rigid (Featherstone and Gupta, 2020). Moreover, what are the ethical issues to be considered when addressing the potential inequalities or social divisions found within this approach.

In this article we will outline the Enquiry process and draw upon the literature on family practices, poverty, and inequalities to identify how we might develop further discussions in relation to policy and practice. Morgan's (1996, 2011, 2013) concept of 'family practices' has been highly influential when considering how intimacies, parenting, and family life are performed on a day-to-day basis, within a context of considerable demographic and technological change. The move from structures to practices has reflected and supported the changes wrought by the democratisation of divorce since the 1970s, as well as the possibilities posed by technological developments in IVF, or the cultural and legal situations of gay and lesbian families (Giddens, 1992). Such changes mean that where relationships and activities take place may be dispersed across households and actors. Finch (2007) develops the idea of family practices further by contending that family is not only performed but needs to be 'displayed'. She suggests that the acts involved in 'displaying' family demonstrate to audiences (including other family members) the meanings of relationships and consolidate a sense that they are, in fact, familial.

Family practices and in particular display work can include any number of material or discursive acts; for instance, gift giving, sharing photographs, letter writing, assigning names and the use of language when making statements about family life (Finch, 2007, 2008). These areas are highly relevant to both adoption and post-adoption contact and have been explored within wider work (Jones and Hackett, 2011; MacDonald, 2017; Wood, 2018). Yet, the meanings of these acts are both constructed and dependent upon the dynamics, context, or histories of those involved (Finch, 2007, 2008; Jones and Hackett, 2012; Morgan 2013; MacDonald, 2017). Understanding how social structures, such as class for example, are

internalised and reproduced within family practices is important (Bourdieu, 1989; Houston, 2002; Charles *et al.* 2008). However, discussions around the impact of socio-economic status are often limited when exploring the lived realities of doing family life post-adoption. This paper will explore how individuals experience post-adoption contact and how such practices are negotiated within ever increasing family forms. We will use the concept of family practices to examine how those involved with adoption manage the complexities of these interactions, but also how they intersect with issues related to poverty and inequalities. Before doing so, we offer a brief outline of the legal and policy context for the current use of adoption in the UK.

### **The context**

Adoption, as it is set out in UK legal contexts, breaks the legal relationship between the child and her birth parents, and she becomes the child of the adopters for legal purposes, with a new birth certificate issued. This applies irrespective of whether she is a newly born infant, four years old or in her teens. Adoptive parents are able, if they so wish, to change a child's name, religion, and move to another country. Furthermore, it is extremely rare to revoke an adoption order.

While there has been little change to the model of adoption in terms of the legal framework, there has been a clear shift in its use over the last century. Considerable social, cultural, and economic changes, such as the availability of the contraceptive pill from the early 1970s, shifting attitudes to children born outside of marriage, or the stigma attached to lone motherhood, led to many fewer babies available for adoption than in the earlier part of the century (Neil *et al.* 2014). Adoption became part of the wider child protection system, capable of catering for children who had also been abused or neglected and in public care. The demographic profile of those involved with adoption, therefore, began to shift (Thoburn, 2005). Clapton and Clifton (2016), for example, highlight that in past decades birth fathers were more likely to be younger, middle class, with higher educational attainments. This is in comparison to those in more recent years who are more likely to be older, have poorer educational attainments, and a history of involvement in the child protection system. Consequently, the children being adopted now are far removed from the infants of yesterday. They are more likely to be older, with histories of living within their families (including siblings who may or may not be adopted with them) or have experiences of traumatic and/or abusive behaviours.

There is no official data gathered in any part of the UK, by the governments concerned, on the economic and social circumstances of the families of those children who become looked after and subsequently eligible for adoption. However, the research by Bywaters *et al.* (2018) did identify that within all four nations of the UK there was a statistically significant link between deprivation and a child's chances of living in out of home care. For example, in England a child in the most deprived decile was more than ten times more likely to be in out of home care than a child in the least (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018). This was a snapshot in time and there appears to be no plans by official sources to develop robust longitudinal research in this area. Furthermore, there is no demographic data collected on those who adopt.

In terms of contact in England, Wales, and Scotland, current legislation neither promotes nor discourages face-to-face contact between adoptive and birth families. Section 51A of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (which applies to England and Wales) specifically allows for individuals to make applications for post-adoption contact if they are related to the children. In Scotland, the legislation provides for the possibility that there may be ongoing contact arrangements, particularly for indirect ones like letterbox contact, but they are usually by agreement with the adopters. It is possible to have a contact condition attached to an adoption order, but this is not common (Plumtree, 2014). In Northern Ireland, there is no duty in law to promote contact between a child freed for adoption or an adopted child with her birth parents (Long, 2014).

Jones (2016) observes that despite a narrative that there has been progress towards increased openness in adoption, with indirect contact through letterbox being the most common, there is a high degree of variation in the estimates of the numbers of children having the opportunity for face-to-face contact. They range from between one in five to one in three and this is more likely to be for older children who are the minority of children adopted. Paradoxically, while there is no assumption of contact in law in Northern Ireland and contact orders are rarely made, judges have been much more inclined than in other parts of the UK to make a direction for contact. Such directions are rarely disregarded and therefore there can be high levels of direct contact (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2020).

The fixed picture in relation to adoption in most of the UK contrasts rather dramatically with what has been happening to families more generally, as an array of demographic, technological and cultural developments have led to substantial diversity and fluidity. An extensive scholarship has emerged seeking to document and understand such changes, as we will discuss further below.

## **The Enquiry: background and methodology**

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) took the step in 2016 of commissioning an Enquiry into '*The Role of the Social Worker in Adoption – Ethics and Human Rights*'. In commissioning the Enquiry, BASW noted the strong focus on adoption in children's policy in England in the last period and the interest in expanding the role of adoption in ensuring permanency and stability for children across the UK. Given the centrality of social workers to the implementation of adoption policy it seemed very important that the professional body opened-up discussions about this policy direction. This was especially important given that there had been little dialogue about the role of the social worker in adoption in relation to ethics and human rights, although, like all areas of social work practice, adoption does highlight such issues.

The Enquiry employed a variety of research methods, including a questionnaire on the BASW website; telephone or face-to face interviews; a focus group held with adopted young people and with CAFCASS children's guardians in England; and face-to-face interviews with members of the judiciary. In addition to using the above well-established research methods, the Enquiry also included seminars. In these seminars 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. In total, seven seminars took place: two in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, and one in Wales. Ethical approval for the Enquiry was obtained from University of Huddersfield.

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). The majority of participants (165) were from England, 57 were from Scotland, 43 from Northern Ireland, and 29 from Wales. Sixteen respondents did not specify their country.

Two members of the research team separately conducted a thematic analysis of the data gathered and these have been reported upon in detail elsewhere (Featherstone *et al.*, 2018; Featherstone and Gupta, 2020; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020). Whilst the concept of family practices (Morgan, 1996, 2011, 2013; Finch, 2007, 2008) was not used within the initial coding process or shaped the analysis, it has since been drawn upon to inform this paper. Here we concentrate on the implications of the findings on contact for little discussed issues

around poverty and inequality. In doing so, we hope to highlight the potential for a more fundamental re-thinking of adoption in the light of the scholarship on family practices.

**Contact: who, what and how post-order?**

The subject of contact was discussed many times throughout the Enquiry. The meanings of these arrangements were explored by participants, and many articulated the significance of such interactions in relation to their identities. This was emphasised by one adopted person, who commented on its implicit links to their history and sense of self:

*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).*

As seen elsewhere (Iyer, 2020), wider relationships and their subsequent meanings, were often important to adoptees. Adopted people highlighted the value of contact, particularly with siblings, but also the loss of contact with other significant people in their lives, such as foster carers:

*When I was in my mid-twenties, I met up with my foster family again. This was like going home (Adopted Person).*

Another commented on the enduring nature of relationships with those involved in their care:

*I am friends with the birth child of my foster parents all these years later (Adopted Person).*

Conversely, adopters had complicated or sometimes contradictory views. Some feared that birth parents would harm and/or upset their children or take unauthorised photographs of them which would then be posted on social media. However, others commented on the effects of these fears and explored how they could be navigated in response to a child's needs and identity:

*A third way is needed that involves birth families. Adopters are very vulnerable, and this affects their willingness to engage with birth families – they shut the door behind*



*them – ‘let’s play family’. But we need to look wider and pull in the strands of the child’s life – it is not about ownership of children (Adoptive Parent).*

A number of adopters developed their own practices of exercising discretion when deciding who should be in contact. One adoptive parent highlighted that her son finds it difficult being in contact with his birth mother, but has contact with his birth sibling who is not adopted:

*My two adoptive children should have been adopted but they should have been adopted earlier and it should have been a more open process – we went against advice and kept in contact with foster families (Adoptive Parent).*

Social workers identified a range of concerns about high levels of direct contact. These were related to any legal, emotional, or practical challenges for children, birth parents, or adoptive families. One social worker in Northern Ireland underlined the complexity of what is being attempted:

*Children are often not at an age and stage where they can belong to two families (Social Worker).*

In the main, social workers were cautious about open contact, with those from Northern Ireland particularly so. However, it is important to note that there was not unanimity in Northern Ireland, with at least one example offered of where a birth mother and adoptive mother meet up together and have a direct update on the children’s welfare. According to the social worker, such is the warmth of their relationship they hug on meeting.

### ***What can or cannot be talked about currently: love and money***

In parts of the UK, letterbox coordinators seem to be heavily involved in ordering the practices of birth families in relation to letter writing, with some areas continuing to insist that their letters do not contain familial terminology or carry expressions of love. If letters do contain such language, they are redacted and for some of the young people who contributed to the Enquiry this could be problematic. One adopted person for example did not want these feelings to be edited and would rather have read them as intended, as: *‘love shows the family cares and brings in the human side’*. The significance of this communication was also underlined by a birth grandparent, who commented on their experiences of shifting relationships and painful emotions:

*(The removal of ... grandson) 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. I am allowed to write but can't use the word 'Nan' or say, "I love you" (Birth Grandparent).*

The meanings of relationships could be seen as being 'displayed' (Finch, 2007) to others through letter writing and often formed an important part of an adopted person's history and identity:

*Don't adoptees deserve to know they are loved and missed? Is it ethical that people shouldn't be allowed to tell a child that they love them? (Adopted Person).*

Social workers also spoke of their mediating role in relation to the fraught issue of information sharing more generally post-order:

*The majority of adoptive parents do not want to share... the adoptive parent had a serious accident and birth parent was ringing the letter box co-ordinator begging for a letter, but we cannot share the information about the accident (Social Worker).*

Inequalities in resources between birth and adoptive families were little discussed overall, but did emerge in a profound way when examining how contact is experienced:

*It's very important to stress to the adopters not to talk about what they are buying the children in the letters, the fact that the adopters have money puts the women off, the difference in class between them can make them feel their children are better off without them and they can give up... We stress the importance of adopters telling the parents about how the child is doing at school, what food they like, what hobbies they have etc. (Support worker with birth parents).*

This was one of the rare explicit references to class-based differences by a participant. An adoptive parent also named her discomfort in terms of whether she should write about what gifts were bought for birthdays or holidays. However, this was swiftly responded to by other adopters within the discussion, who called for training and guidance on letter writing. The Enquiry raised wider questions about how adoption intersects with aspects of identity and experience. One social worker commenting more generally on the use of adoption noted its ethical implications:

*Adoption always raises ethical issues in relation to social engineering – the removal of a child from a poor family to a better off family (Social Worker).*

This was unusual and we detected a sense of unease amongst social workers when addressing socio-economic differences. But, for some adopted persons, it was imperative that this discomfort be acknowledged, with one suggesting underlying tensions in relation to the class markers of her identity:

*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 (Adopted Person).*

While direct contact, or a lack of it, was a theme throughout the Enquiry, the implications for families with very different backgrounds were alluded to but not addressed in any depth. It suggests potential conflict in the ways that family practices are permitted to be both managed and displayed through contact (Finch, 2007) and indicates underlying frictions relating to both poverty and shame (Sen, 1983); a concept we will return to in our discussions. But, as some respondents did highlight, they lived out those implications even without direct contact, through what was or was not expressed in letters. This is explored further below.

### ***Post-adoption family practices: rigid practices in a leaky world?***

A further inter-related (if subordinated) theme spoke to discomfort around the use of adoption at all or, at the very least, attested to the difficulties involved in shoring up and managing the leakiness that accompanies the building of 'new' families and identities on the back of pre-existing and often powerful familial bonds. As stated previously, adoption breaks the legal relationship between a child and their birth parents and the significance of this raised a number of issues for a range of constituencies. For example, the re-authoring of their legal status was sometimes contested by adopted people, as was the fact that their views and consent had not been elicited:

*Serious thought has to be given into the role of consent in adoption – the role of adoptee consent. Should there, for example, be a mechanism by which adult adoptees can go back to being part of their birth family? Should there be a mechanism by which an adult adoptee and his or her sibling from whom they were separated can become related again? And if not, why not? (Adopted Person).*

This illustrates the complex nature of family relationships, identities, and practices and how they intersect with rigid legal boundaries or frameworks. Before the adoption order, social workers can attempt the regulation of a range of post-order adoptive family practices, but they have no way to enforce or follow up any recommendations. For example, changing children's names is frowned upon by most professionals, but as one social worker commented:

*We do really go onto them (adoptive parents) about identity, not changing names, but they do (Social Worker).*

The significance of this in relation to family practices can be seen in the relationship between power and how family can be 'done' in such contexts. In her work, Finch (2008) discusses the symbolic power of names to denote kinship connections with others as a part of display work. The power of social workers to direct birth family practices for example was often evident. We have already noted the prohibition of expressions of love in letters and indeed, the use of language generally proved an emotional minefield for all concerned. This highlights the complexity of a project that re-orders profound familial relationships and the challenges this brings. Language was critical and the words were not always available to express the connotations of different relationships or identities. For example, a birth mother considered it offensive to be described as a 'tummy mummy', a phrase often used by social workers and others to distinguish between the roles of the birth and adoptive mother. This participant felt that it diminished the role she had played in her child's life and care and, indeed, did not engage in letter box contact for many years partly because of her concerns around terminology:

*I did not write for many years - did not know how to - what should I call myself (Birth Parent).*

An adoptive parent also named the difficulties around either talking or not talking about adoption with children and the ambiguity attached to who could be considered family:

*By being open about them being adopted, we are constantly reminding them they are not our family and letters can be a trigger (Adoptive Parent).*

Adoptive parents commented that children often worried about their birth parents and, for example, would pray each night that they were ok:

*Did anyone support my mum? Was she ok? They worry irrespective of what age they are (Adoptive Parent).*

As we have noted elsewhere (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020), the past is always in the present for those living with(in) adoption. Notions of 'forever family' or 'new mummy and daddy' can cause tension or confusion in such contexts. The consequences were highlighted by one adopted person in Scotland, who again indicated that embodied social differences can be brought into acute focus through adoption:

*I stayed in touch with birth family but had two names and talked in different accents. Who am I?... No easy answers (Adopted Person).*

***But our children are just like other looked after children: destabilising the new secure family or shoring it up?***

Many adoptive parents who contributed to the Enquiry expressed considerable concerns about the lack of post-adoption support and calls for the strengthening of support have become increasingly common in the contemporary adoption landscape (Harlow, 2019). Requests for support signalled the embrace of what might be considered a hybrid identity as an 'adoptive parent'. This identity was usually invoked in response to the needs of their children, which were described as multifaceted or highly demanding, rather than as a proactive identity that they themselves claimed (in recognition of their own status, vis-à-vis birth parents). Interestingly, their experiences of services often mirrored those of birth parents, although this was not a parallel drawn by adopters. Services, when offered, were usually bewildering in their complexity and highly fragmented. This meant negotiating nebulous or 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, engagement with services could become an additional burden or a source of distress.

Demands from adoptive parents that their families receive post-adoption support were often

framed within a project that their children should be treated in a similar way to other looked after children. This was motivated by the pragmatic recognition that claiming a status as a 'looked after' child opens the door to a range of extra supports; supports which may not always be available to adoptive children. However, the possible long-term implications that such demands might destabilise the 'special' status of adoption were not articulated.

## **Discussion**

### ***Family practices and post-adoption contact***

The narratives outlined above pose important and often neglected questions around the practicalities of managing contact, but they also challenge us to think about what these mean in relation to adoption and family practices. Morgan (1996, 2011, 2013) and Finch (2007) explore the many settings in which family practices are enacted or negotiated and, as noted elsewhere (Jones and Hackett, 2011; MacDonald, 2017; Wood, 2018), their conceptual frameworks are especially relevant to adoption. Adoption is an example of family practices that are navigated on an everyday basis, outside of conventional scripts ordered by biological relatedness. It also illustrates the development of kinship arrangements which consider any number of different individuals, many of whom are initially "strangers" to one another (Jones and Hackett, 2011: 46). These perspectives help us to recognise the range of settings in which family practices may be enacted, including virtual environments for instance, which is a key concern for contact in our current age (see the work of Greenhow et al. (2017) for example). As Morgan (2013) suggests, looking at *where* practices may be *done* decentres domestic locations (such as the home) as a primary or expected site. Adoption is a pertinent example and contact illustrates practices of 'doing' family beyond such settings or scripts. These perspectives have been explored before within the wider literature, including Jones and Hackett (2011) and MacDonald (2017) who suggest that displaying family in the context of adoption can be complex and may produce tensions when balancing adoptive and biological kinship.

Participants in the Enquiry negotiated everyday dilemmas around familial status (including legal definitions), language, histories, and emotions. What could be expressed within letters, or the use of familial terminology was particularly difficult, and some struggled to find the appropriate words or terms to reflect shifting relationships and identities. This is significant as the ways in which language or names are deployed may be a key part of displaying family and can be used to demonstrate specific meanings (Finch, 2007, 2008). However, as Silva and Smart (1999) suggest, the multifaceted nature of relationships within late modernity

means that there is not always the language available to represent these properly. Within adoption there are often several examples where familial language is insufficient or is adapted to cover the histories or range of roles associated with specific relationships (Cossar and Neil, 2013; MacDonald, 2017; Wood, 2018).

### ***Regulating family practices in the context of inequalities***

This work also invites questions about potential discrepancies between those involved in adoption, including differences in the situated expectations and values that shape family life and identities. Referring to the work of Widmer *et al.* (2008) and Widmer and Sapin (2008), Morgan (2013) acknowledges that families must be understood within their contexts and that we should recognise the constraints that shape familial practices. Similarly, drawing upon the ideas of Charles *et al.* (2008) and Smart (2007), Wilson *et al.* (2012: 125), argue that we must pay attention to “inequalities in social, cultural, spatial and generational ‘resources’ for constructing and reproducing relationships”. Such factors may include a lack of resources (material or otherwise) which have an impact on the ability to ‘do’ family in a desired way. In light of this, there may be disconnections between notions of ‘good’ parenting, or ‘the right kind’ of family life reproduced within dominant discourses (Morgan, 2013: 67).

The intersectional nature of identity includes many highly embodied experiences, such as those related to class or geography, which are enmeshed within daily life and other micro interactions. The work of Bourdieu (1989) is germane here when thinking about the concept of habitus for example. Habitus refers to the ways in which our lives are shaped by our milieu and the subsequent internalisation of social structures, such as class. Houston (2002: 157) summarises the concept as follows:

According to Bourdieu, fundamental life chances are determined by our habitus because it becomes embodied in the way we speak and in our preferred tastes, proclivities and deportment. Others react to us on the basis of these class markers to reinforce existing perceptions of our place in the social world.

While perceptions of class or socio-economic status had an impact on the ways that individuals understood both themselves and their relationships, such experiences were not always explicitly addressed. Yet what could be said/ not said (or as Finch (2007) would suggest ‘displayed’) as part of post-adoption contact highlighted a range of dilemmas around the meanings of family and identity. A sense of ambiguity or disconnection cut through participants’ narratives, especially when thinking about how to ‘do’ family practices or display work after adoption. As we have shown, letterbox contact, for example, was an emotive

activity and many highlighted difficulties when navigating these processes. Such challenges were sometimes implicitly shaped by class-based issues and feelings of grief, shame, or stigma meant that communicating via letter could be overwhelming.

Going forward we need to confront difficult questions about the nature of a society such as that in the UK, which has high levels of poverty and inequality. The literature names the ways in which feelings of shame, for example, are often internalised by those living in poverty, with specific implications for parents and their sense of efficacy or competence (Sen, 1983; Chase and Walker, 2014; Walker, 2014). Shame has been described as the “irreducible absolutist core in the idea of poverty” (Sen, 1983: 159). Furthermore, it forms an integral part of the “discursive ‘truths’” that directly shape how poverty is perceived and responded to in policy and practice (Chase and Walker, 2014: 256). Consequently, as well as its material effects, people living in poverty must live with the shaming attitudes of others towards them, including the highly stigmatising tone of various public debates (Walker, 2014). The literature on inequalities highlights how high levels of inequality can contribute to very divided social arrangements, which intensify the distance between individuals and communities, leading to mistrust and increased fears across and between different groups (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014).

As demonstrated within our findings, socio-economic or class-based differences had a veiled presence within participants’ discussions, and they elicited a deep sense of discomfort. Wider studies already reveal the feelings of shame or loss that birth parents experience as a result of having children taken into care (Neil, 2006; Schofield *et al.*, 2011). Equally, it may be noted that these concerns are also relevant to other arrangements, including direct contact within long-term fostering. The impact of stigma more generally can be seen in the work of Höjer (2009), for example, who found that this can prevent birth mothers from being more involved with their children when in long term foster care. Therefore, we must begin to ask how these neglected factors play out within contact arrangements and how they impact on practitioner perceptions.

If we move to a more open model of contact it may be asked whether the realities of our divided society will be played out in interactions that are highly complex. For instance, who will name the shame that may be attached to practices such as the giving (or not) of birthday presents, or the kinds of outings children will or will not be able to go on with their respective parents? Will children and young people become the mediators of unequal power relations and practices? Will birth parents be even more marginalised and humiliated by their lack of resources and how will that be manifested in their interactions with their children and



adoptive parents? These are important questions for all, but especially for those professionals involved in organising and supporting contact. In terms of social work, until recently, there has been relative silence on poverty and inequality. Indeed, paradoxically whilst families living in socially deprived circumstances are much more likely to come to the attention of child protection services (Bywaters *et al.*, 2018), there has been a degree of denial about poverty in the profession. As Morris *et al.* (2018: 368) comment, tackling poverty and inequality is often not seen as 'core business' for social workers. Instead, the assessment of risk and parenting capacity takes centre stage, with such assessments frequently lacking any engagement with the contribution that economic and social factors might have in families' difficulties. Moreover, the study by Morris *et al.* (2018) found that the notion of an underclass permeates many social workers' responses. The power of social workers to mediate and organise family practices within the context of adoption therefore warrants further examination. The potential for collusion between social workers and adoptive parents is high in such circumstances and must be the subject of discussion within the profession.

Whilst the reform of adoption in the direction of direct contact holds many attractions, it is vital we recognise that it may open up even further opportunities for the display of practices riven by inequalities and accompanied by feelings of shame. We must find ways of talking about and addressing these issues, not least for the sake of the children and young people who will be directly involved. We also need to discuss the inter-related theme of whether such a stark approach to the re-ordering of children's relationships through adoption is necessary in a climate characterised by considerable fluidity in family forms and practices. This variability is noted elsewhere and, in particular, Iyer *et al.* (2020: 44) comment that:

...it is important to acknowledge the fluidity and complexity of family relationships, and to understand contact within a broad and flexible conceptualisation of family that encompasses both birth and placement families.

At present, adoption is discursively constructed in such a way that does not necessarily acknowledge the complicated nature of family life within late modernity. Through adoption the 'old' ties of kin and birth are seen to be severed and the child becomes part of a socially constructed 'new safe secure' family. However, findings from the Enquiry show the inherent tensions within this model, as the lived reality of 'doing adoption' destabilises the idea that it is the straightforward 'replacement' of one set of family members with another. Similarly, the embodied nature of class or socio-economic status arguably muddles this over-simplified narrative.

What is more, this approach does not account for a child's history or agency within such configurations. As identified within the findings of Iyer *et al.* (2020), children's rights and their participation should be considered when managing contact. This should be both balanced and flexible to meet the needs of children as they develop. Adopted persons within the Enquiry posed a number of difficult questions about adoption and their histories. Adoption was regarded as an ongoing task whereby adoptees negotiated multiple positions, relationships, and practices in respect of both individual and familial identities. Through drawing upon the concept of family practices we can see that adoptive discourses do not necessarily address the dynamic nature of relationships or view children as inherently "relational beings" (Featherstone *et al.*, 2014: 30). Therefore, the way in which adoption is positioned and understood within wider political and practice discourses at present arguably contributes to an individualised or even traditionally hetero-nuclear approach (Wood, 2018). This leads us to question the status of certain models of family life (and indeed permanence), that are dominant within social work practice and beyond.

Adoption is perhaps more challenging and permeable than ever before, with a marked difference in the needs of children and adopters or the kinds of support required. Findings from the Enquiry show the enduring emotional and identity work that is involved, particularly in relation to family practices and the meanings surrounding biological and legal kinship. Yet, adoption is also a lifelong process and one which encapsulates many other intersecting experiences, including class and socio-economic status. Critically, as issues around contact so vividly illustrate, this raises difficult questions about how adoption accounts for inequalities between families and how adoptees must make sense of this.

We recognise that unlike the issue of direct contact, there is little appetite for discussing the future of adoption *per se*, particularly within broader political discourses. Indeed, at a policy level in England, there appears to be renewed interest in promoting it. However, it seems unlikely if current trends in both adoption practice, (i.e., as a child protection disposal involving children who are not infants, with siblings who they may wish to see, and parents they have some memory of) and wider family arrangements involving diversity and fluidity continue, that its current status will remain uncontested.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we discuss some themes from the BASW commissioned Enquiry into the role of the social worker in adoption which have the potential to destabilise future developments in adoption practices. For example, we note that the findings from the Enquiry have re-

vitalised policy and practice conversations about the reform of adoption in relation to contact. While this is welcomed, we would argue that if these are not more securely anchored in understandings of the role of poverty and inequality in families' lives, then direct contact may intensify already existing challenges, particularly for birth parents and those who are adopted.

We are also concerned that the issues attached to reforming contact have the potential to crowd out much needed conversations about whether adoption, as currently constituted, is desirable or indeed necessary. The imposition of legal fictions upon profoundly personal truths (such as the issuing of new birth certificates) is already contested by some adopted people both in the Enquiry and since publication of the report. Such issues are likely to become an increasing concern, particularly in a context where adoptive parents are articulating claims for support that are also destabilising the current status of adoption. Furthermore, in a world where the use of adoption has changed dramatically over the decades, both in terms of why it is used and who it is for, and significant changes in family forms more generally, the current model of adoption is unlikely to remain unaffected.

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