

Doctor of Health and Social Care

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The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study comparing aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process with those of Social Workers and social work managers

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Abstract

The adoption of children in care who are legally referred to as “looked after”, (Children Act 1989, s22, HMSO, 1989) usually by local authorities is a key national Government objective (DfE, 2016a) where rehabilitation with the birth family is not viable. The desire to place more “looked after” children for adoption with greater speed is not new. It became increasingly apparent after the election of the New Labour Government in 1997 due to concerns about drift and delay in planning for children in care (DoH, 2000a) leading to poorer outcomes. This led to a series of measures aimed at increasing the use and speed of adoption. Eventually this resulted in the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (HMSO, 2002) that also for the first time in English law recognised that the welfare of the child is of paramount concern when considering adoption.

There is an abundance of published literature that considers the topic of adoption. However, there is a dearth of studies that have comprehensively considered the journey that adopters undertake to become parents. This practice based study was conducted by a researcher who is a senior academic manager and an active social work practitioner with extensive professional experience of adoption.

A unique aspect of the study is the longitudinal mixed methods approach used to gather data in real time from a sample of adopters. The three part study tracks the journeys of the sample of adopters from when their application to adopt had been accepted by an adoption agency until after children were placed. The study was supported by five adoption agencies based in England. The data was collected over a period of two years from the adopters who described their experiences and perceptions of their journeys in real time. The information from the adopters is triangulated with data from adoption professionals from the agencies that supported the study. The professionals discussed their approaches to the adoption process, as well as their own experiences of working with adopters. The longitudinal nature of the study enables an analysis of how and why adopters’ experiences and perceptions changed over time. The research considered the changing power dynamics between adopters and professionals during the different stages of the journey to adopt. Furthermore, the long-term impact of professional interactions with adopters during the adoption process are discussed.

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List of abbreviations

ADM:	Agency Decision Maker.
BAME:	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities.
BAAF:	British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering.
CAFCASS:	Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service.
CPR:	Child permanence report.
DfE:	Department for Education.
DoH:	Department of Health.
HCPC:	Health and Care Professions Council.
IRM:	Independent review mechanism.
IRO:	Independent review officer.
LAC:	Looked after children.
PAR:	Prospective adopters report.
SGO:	Special Guardianship Orders.
UoD:	University of Derby.
USA:	United States of America.

Glossary of Terms

Adoption: A legal procedure in which all the parental responsibility is transferred to the adopters. Once an adoption order has been granted it can't be reversed except in extremely rare circumstances. An adopted child loses all legal ties with their first mother and father (the "birth parents") and becomes a full member of the new family, usually taking the family's name (BAAF, 2011).

Adoption “disruption”: When an adoptive placement fails to offer permanence (see permanence) and results in the child returning to the care of a local authority before the child reaches adulthood either before or after the Adoption Order is made (see Adoption Order).

Adoption Order: An order made by a court giving full parental responsibility (see parental responsibility) for the child to the adopters. An Adoption Order extinguishes parental responsibility that any other person had before the making of the order. (Adoption and Children Act, 2002, s46, HMSO, 2002). Once an Adoption Order is made the child's birth certificate is replaced with an adoption certificate. Adopters can only legally adopt the child after the child has been lived with them for at least ten weeks (Adoption and Children Act, 2002, s42(2), HMSO, 2002) (see placed for adoption).

Adoption panel: A multi-disciplinary body that is independent of the adoption agency. Panels are intended to play a quality assurance role for the agency and should provide objectivity. Adoption panels can challenge practice that is not in the interests of children or falls short of the Adoption Agency Regulations or the National Minimum Standards for adoption. Currently panels make a recommendation to the agency as to whether prospective adopters are suitable to adopt a child and whether approval should be withdrawn. Panels also consider cases where an agency wants to match a child to adopters and make a recommendation to the agency whether the match should be made. The decision in both instances lies with the Agency decision maker.

Agency decision maker (ADM): A senior person within the adoption agency who does not have direct line management responsibility for the Adoption panel. The ADM has the authority on behalf of the agency to decide whether:

- A child should be placed for adoption.
- A prospective adopter is suitable to adopt, or whether the adopter's approval to adopt should be terminated following a review.
- A child should be placed for adoption with specific prospective adopters.

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS): The role of CAFCASS is to ensure children's voices are heard and decisions taken are in the best interest of children. CAFCASS officers are directly appointed by courts. They are usually qualified Social Workers. The main three areas they are involved in are divorce and separation, care proceedings and adoption.

Child permanence report (CPR): A CPR is written when a local authority is considering adoption for a child. The report must be prepared by a Social Worker who knows the child. The CPR must include information about the child, the child's family and a summary by the agency's medical advisor about the child's health including any relevant information about hereditary conditions.

Contact: Contact can take place between the child and any significant person in the child's life before the child was placed for adoption if it is deemed to be in the best interests of the child. Contact can include direct face to face meetings if appropriate or can be indirect contact in the form of letter exchange that can include photographs. In the context of adoption contact is considered important to support the child's identity needs. Adoption agencies usually provide a letter box system that enables all parties to send information to a central location. All information is copied and checked by the adoption agency to ensure it is relevant and appropriate before being forwarded to intended destination. Copies are kept on the child's file.

Foster carers: For the purposes of this study foster carers only include carers approved to look after children in care on behalf of a local authority. Parental responsibility for the child remains with the child's birth parent or guardian and or the local authority dependent on the legal status of the child. Foster carers who have made private arrangements with the child's family to care for the child are known as private foster carers are not considered in this study.

Independent review mechanism (IRM): The IRM gives prospective and approved adopters and foster carers the option to apply to an independent body to review their

case where an adoption of fostering agency has decided not to approve them or to withdraw their approval. Currently the IRM is operated by BAAF Coram on behalf of the Department for Education.

Independent review officer (IRO): A person responsible for chairing case reviews for looked after children and making sure local authorities discharge their responsibilities for care planning and review. IROs are employed and paid by local authorities, however, their role is to be independent and ensure that plans for children in care meet the children's needs. They have the power to refer cases to CAFCASS (also see Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service).

Interagency fee: A fee paid by a local authority for placing a child with adopters that have been assessed and approved by another statutory or voluntary adoption agency.

Looked after children (LAC): Children accommodated by a local authority in residential or foster placements, placed or authorised to be placed for adoption, and all children subject to a Care Order (Children Act 1989, s22, HMSO, 1989).

Parental responsibility: All the rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority which by law a parent of a child has in relation to the child and his or her property (Children Act 1989, s3(1), HMSO, 1989).

Permanence: The provision of stability, consistency, a sense of belonging for children in care.

Harnott and Humphreys (2004, p3) define permanence as:

A framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity.

Prospective adopters report (PAR): The PAR is the key report that is presented to the Adoption Panel and contains all the relevant information from the assessment of the adopters. The PAR informs the recommendation by the Panel and the decision by the ADM. The PAR is also used following approval to give information to adoption agencies considering placing a child with the adopters.

Placed for adoption: A child in care can be placed with approved adopters chosen by the child's adoption agency (normally a local authority) only if the agency is

satisfied that it is in the best interest of the child (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s18, HMSO, 2002). Furthermore, the child can only be placed either if each parent or guardian of the child has consented to the placement (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s19, HMSO, 2002) or a court has made a Placement Order authorising a local authority to place the child for adoption (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s21, HMSO, 2002). Until a child is legally adopted by the making of an Adoption Order (Adoption and Children Act, 2002, s46, HMSO, 2002) the child is still legally looked after by the agency.

Placement Order: An Order made by a court allowing a local authority to place a child for adoption with approved adopters chosen by the local authority. (Adoption and Children Act, 2002, s21, HMSO, 2002). Once placed with the adopters any person (other than the local authority or police) is guilty of an offence if they try to remove the child.

Residence Order: An Order made by a court that decides where a child should live and with whom. They give parental responsibility to the person granted the Order however, a Residence Order does not extinguish parental responsibility of anyone who held it before the Order was made. The Order can last up until the child is 16 or 18 and in exceptional cases the court can decide it can last longer. The Order prevents changing the child's name, removing the child from the UK for longer than one month and consenting to the child's adoption without the agreement of everyone with parental responsibility. After 22 April 2014 Residence Orders were replaced by Child Arrangement Orders (Children and Families Act 2014, s8, HMSO, 2014).

Special Guardianship Order (SGO): Introduced as an amendment to the Children Act 1989 (HMSO, 1989). SGO's provide more legal stability than Residence Orders. The special guardian has parental responsibility for the child and is entitled to exercise the parental responsibility to the exclusion of other people with parental responsibility for the child. However, unlike an Adoption Order, SGO's do not extinguish parental responsibility that any other person had before the making of the order. (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s115, HMSO, 2002). They are particularly suitable for older children who do not want their legal links with their birth families to be severed but need permanence and long term stability.

Statutory Adoption Agency: Adoption services maintained by local authorities as required under law (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s3, HMSO, 2002). In addition to responsibilities towards adopters statutory adoption agencies are also generally responsible for children in care including finding adoptive families for them. As such statutory adoption agency Adoption Panels are responsible for considering matches between adopters and children in the care of that agency (also see Voluntary Adoption Agency).

Voluntary Adoption Agency: A registered adoption society (Adoption and Children Act 2002, s3, HMSO, 2002) (also see Statutory adoption agency). These agencies recruit, assess, prepare, approve and support adopters. However, voluntary adoption agencies are usually not responsible for children in care. These agencies usually provide approved adopters to local authorities and charge an interagency fee.

Introduction

The concept of adopting children has existed for centuries (Keating, 2001), however, it was not legally recognised in the United Kingdom until 1926 (HMSO, 1926). It is legally defined as:

A procedure in which all the parental responsibility is transferred to the adopters. Once an adoption order has been granted it can't be reversed except in extremely rare circumstances. An adopted child loses all legal ties with their first mother and father (the "birth parents") and becomes a full member of the new family, usually taking the family's name (BAAF, 2011).

The purpose of this longitudinal mixed methods study was to consider the experiences and perceptions of prospective parents on their journey to adopt a child. It considered the views of a sample of adopters from the point of their application to adopt, being accepted by an adoption agency, (glossary) until after a child had been placed with some of them. The research was supported by five adoption agencies including statutory and voluntary adoption agencies (glossary). The study used a longitudinal mixed methods research design that was underpinned by a pragmatic philosophical approach in recognition that social reality can be objectively measured but is also socially constructed and subjective to the individual (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Data was collected over a period of two years and was carried out sequentially to describe and analyse adopters' experiences and perceptions of the adoption process. The quantitative first part of the study (chapter 3) used a semi structured questionnaire (appendix A & A1) to collect data from a sample of adopters whose application to adopt had been accepted by one of the five adoption agencies. This was followed by up to two face to face interviews with a subset of adopters who participated in the first part of the study (chapter 4). The first interview was conducted either just before or after the adopters had been approved. The second interview was conducted after a child had been matched or placed with the same set of adopters. The information from the adopters was triangulated with data from four focus groups of professionals working in the field of adoption and were employed by one of the five adoption agencies that supported the research. This approach generated a myriad of data that was analysed by the researcher.

It is evident that the adoption of children is an emotive topic (Treacher, 2000) that generates much discussion. From once being an informal arrangement and one that

was not considered to warrant a legal system until the 1920's (Keating, 2001), adoption has become a key part of current day social policy (DfE, 2016a). Indeed, since the election of the New Labour Government in 1997 there has been an increasing focus on placing more children from care with adoptive families (Biehal et al. 2010).

While the literature search (chapter 1) found an abundance of information on various aspects of adoption it highlighted that there is very little research on what motivates people to inquire about adoption and their experiences of applying to adopt. It is evident that the journey to adopt a child usually begins with the decision to start a family and parent a child, rather than thoughts about adoption (Crawshaw, 2010). Significantly, however, the literature search for this research (chapter 1) highlighted that previous studies that consider adopters' experiences of the of the adoption process before a child is placed with them in real time are scant (Adoption UK, 2011). Furthermore, there is an absence of comprehensive studies that document adopters' experiences and perceptions of their journeys from the point of applying to adopt up until a child is placed with them.

The literature review (chapter 1) shows that the challenges that some adopters face when looking after their adopted children appear to be well documented. Such research studies including Quinton et al. (1998), Rushton and Dance, (2004) and Rushton and Monck (2009a) have made significant contributions to existing professional practice. However, the majority appear to have been conducted several years after the children had been placed with adopters.

The literature review for this study provides an overview of the changing nature of adoption in England and compares the sorts of children placed for adoption before and after the 1970's. The review analyses the concept of permanency (Harnott & Humpreys, 2004) that has been key in driving existing adoption policy and legislation. Furthermore, successive governments emphasis on the need to increase the speed of the adoption process for adopters and children is discussed. Alongside this professional concerns about the possibility of more adoptions breaking down (Argent & Coleman, 2006) because of the focus on speed, before the child reaches adulthood are examined.

The findings of this research detail adopters' reasons for choosing to adopt, their experiences and perceptions of finding out about adoption, applying to adopt, the assessment, preparation, approval and matching process as well as their views about adoption support. The investigation considers adopters' views about concepts such as disability, race, gender and the needs of children in care. These are contrasted with current adoption policy and legislation. Adopters' and professionals' perceptions and experiences are considered in relation to the volume and quality of information, the impact of time constraints, the necessity and effectiveness of pre-adoption training, risk, power, approaches to finding the right child, experiences of becoming parents are considered and support are considered.

An analysis (chapter 5) of the findings identified three interrelated topics that are categorized into nine themes:

Adoption including:

- Choosing adoption to start or extend a family
- The adopter and child synergy
- Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement

These relate directly to the desire to become parents and issues arising from caring for children.

Process including:

- Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption
- Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC

These relate to the process of that adopters' experience.

Management including:

- Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process
- Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters
- Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal
- Inflexibility and the competing demands on time

These impact on the adopters' experience throughout the process and are managed by adoption agencies and professionals.

The themes of the study have informed the recommendations from the study. Finally, the dissemination strategy is discussed (chapter 6).

Motivation for the study

After graduating as a Qualified Social Worker in 1992 I spent the next eight years of my career working for an inner city local authority children's services as a Social Worker. My job involved working with children in care, their families and carers including adoptive parents and foster carers. A significant aspect of this role was assessing, preparing and supporting adopters.

Up until the local authority gained unitary status in 1997 it had relied on the adoption services of the shire county council and continued to use these for some time after unitary status. However, the election of the New Labour Government in 1997 brought a significant emphasis on adoption. The review of adoption by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, (PIU, 2000) emphasised the importance of the need for robust adoption services to meet the new government agenda. Due to the increasing focus on adoption the local authority decided it needed its own adoption service. I was appointed as the Service Manager for the adoption service for the same local authority in 2000.

Throughout the period of my career from 1992 until 2006 I gained a deep understanding of adoption from a professional perspective. Like my peers, I read various research studies on adoption and tried to apply these to practice. However, I frequently questioned the accuracy and validity of studies that did not always triangulate data from adopters with data from professionals or visa-versa. Indeed, the criticism from some of the studies frequently did not tally with feedback from service users, carers and children.

In 2006 I left social work practice to take up a role as a social work academic at the University of Derby. However, I maintained my links with practice by working with a number of adoption agencies. This included becoming an adoption panel member and later the independent Chair of two adoption panels. This supported my continued insight into adoption. Furthermore, this independent position combined with the academic role also provided a unique opportunity to conduct practice based research (Dodd & Epstein, 2012) that could be disseminated to inform and enhance practice.

The completion of my Masters in Business Administration (MBA) in 2010, gave me the confidence and motivation to study at a higher level and led to a desire to develop a deeper understanding of the different philosophical approaches to research. Furthermore, the ongoing and frequent but superficial and negative stories in the media about adoption reinforced the need for a comprehensive and analytical study on adopters' wishes and desires about the type of child they wished to parent, as well as their experiences of the adoption process. The launch of University of Derby's Professional Doctorate in Health and Social Care (social work) presented an ideal opportunity to conduct such a study and be supported by experienced supervisors. I was confident that my own knowledge of adoption and links within the professional adoption community would enable access to adopter and professional participants who would be essential to gather data required for the study.

Thesis structure

This thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter one presents a critical review of relevant literature. This literature review informed the development of the research method for this study and considers relevant literature until 2012 when the research for this investigation began. Chapter two considers the philosophical underpinning of the study and explains the research method. Chapter three presents the findings of the first part of the research and includes a discussion. Chapter four presents the findings of parts two and three. Chapter five is a discussion focusing on the findings of the whole study including the nine themes identified as well as new related literature published after this study commenced. Chapter six reflects on the aim and objectives of the study and key findings. The chapter also presents recommendations for practice, policy and further research as well as explaining the dissemination strategy.

Lists of figures, tables, graphs, abbreviations and appendices are presented at the beginning (p ix) to support navigation through the document. A glossary (p xi) is provided to support the understanding of technical terms. References are provided at the end of the thesis.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The adoption of children in care continues to be a key Government objective (DfE, 2016a) where rehabilitation with the birth family is not viable. This critical literature review contextualises the study by highlighting aspects of adoption that have been extensively researched and areas that require further investigation. The chapter discusses and analyses research studies, texts and grey literature that have informed and directed the process and practice of the adoption of children by unrelated adopters in England. The process of identifying relevant literature is described. Furthermore, a historical account of the development of the formal adoption system is presented to enable an understanding of the context of the current adoption system. In doing so the chapter considers the sorts of children that need to be placed for adoption now compared to those that were historically placed.

This chapter further explores key concepts including permanency and attachment that are part of the rationale used by successive governments to introduce policies and legislation aimed at speeding up the process of adoption. These have led to rising concerns about the possibility of an increase in adoption disruptions.

The latter part of the chapter moves on to discuss literature that considers adoption from the perspective of would be and approved adopters including their reasons for choosing to adopt, the assessment, preparation and approval process as well as finding the child to adopt and post adoption support.

1.2 Identification of literature

A search undertaken between 2011 and 2012 using the term; “adoption of children”, on the University of Derby’s library plus system identified 31,663 pieces of literature on the topic dated between 1926 when adoption was first recognised in UK law (HMSO, 1926) and 2012 when this project commenced. Relevant literature published after 2012 is considered later in the discussion (chapter 5).

Due to the extensive amount of literature available on adoption, inclusion and exclusion criteria have been applied.

1.3 Criteria for considering literature

Inclusion criteria

- Literature on adoption published in the United Kingdom
- Relevant literature published overseas
- Literature published in English
- Literature from 1997 to 2012
- Literature focusing on adoption and social work practice

Exclusion criteria

- Literature published outside of the United Kingdom
- Literature published overseas
- Literature not published in English
- Literature published before 1997
- Literature focusing purely on fostering

There are some exceptions to the inclusion and exclusion criteria listed above. Extensive changes began to be implemented to the English adoption system from 1997. However, on occasions, it is necessary to refer to literature that pre-dates 1997 to contextualise issues and concepts. Furthermore, literature published after 2012 is considered later (chapters 3,4,5 & 6). Given the study is aimed at supporting and developing social work practice, it is important that literature that has informed social work practice is considered. Usually literature and research from outside of the UK is excluded due to the cultural nuances between systems, approaches, attitudes and values. However, several international publications are considered, as adoption practice, policy and research in England is influenced by international developments and approaches especially from the United States of America (USA). Studies focusing exclusively on fostering are excluded from this literature review due to key differences between foster care and adoption. Unlike adoption, parental responsibility (Brammer, 2015) is not transferred to foster carers (Triseliotis, 2001). Furthermore, as foster care has increasingly professionalised the task of fostering and the motivation of foster carers can be significantly different to adoption (Wilson & Evetts, 2006). Moreover, this exclusion criteria recognises the importance of

fostering in its own right and removes the possibility of duplication with research that may have already been conducted on fostering.

The University of Derby's (UoD) library plus system enables an extensive search of nationally and internationally published materials including print copies and electronic resources that are available in the University's library; the British library and the internet. Government department websites including the Department of Health (DoH) and Department for Education (DfE) including searches of the archive data bases from these sites have been used to identify key documents. At the time of writing this literature review the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) was a leading organization that supported the development of national policy as well as publishing extensive literature on adoption. Subsequently BAAF has joined the Coram adoption society and has become BAAF Coram and continues to have significant influence nationally. Joining BAAF as a student member enabled access to updates on policies and legislative developments in a timely manner, professional networking opportunities and BAAF publications that were not all readily available through the UoD library service. Furthermore, membership of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) allowed access to publications including a professional journal published by BASW. Moreover, the use of references within identified literature resulted in a snowball effect. This has been supplemented by using the Google search engine.

An analysis of the existing literature highlights that it considers the challenges that adopters face in caring for their adopted children in depth. However, the studies such as Quinton, Rushton, Dance and Mayes, (1998), Rushton and Dance, (2004) and Rushton and Monck (2009a) generally utilize qualitative research methods and have been conducted several years after children have been placed. These studies have informed the development of adoption practice in relation to the recruitment, assessment, preparation and approval of adopters, as well as matching adopters and children. However, the literature review highlights research on the motivation to adopt and the experiences of adopters in the early stages of the process from deciding to apply to adopt up until a child is placed is very limited (Adoption UK, 2011; Crawshaw & Balen, 2010). Existing research does not consider the impact of these early experiences of adopters on their ability to care for the children or to work with professionals. This research will consider the reasons participants choose to

adopt, their experiences and perceptions of the application, assessment, preparation and approval process as well as their perceptions of adoption support.

1.4 The purpose of adoption

The adoption of children by unrelated adoptive families is emotive (Treacher, 2000), sensitive and bureaucratic (Lousada, 2000). For those personally touched by adoption, including children and adults who have been adopted, birth families, adoptive families and professionals, it can raise intense feelings based on personal experience (Schofield & Simmonds, 2009).

While adoption practice has become increasingly more regulated (Brammer, 2010) and some of the terminology has changed, the legal effect has not changed since it was recognised in law for the first time in England under the Adoption of Children Act 1926 (s5 (1)) that stated:

Upon an adoption order being made all rights, duties, obligations and liabilities of the parent or parents, guardian or guardians of the adopted child, in relation to the future custody, maintenance and education of the adopted child, including all rights to appoint a guardian or to consent or give notice of dissent to marriage shall be extinguished, and all such rights, duties obligations and liabilities shall vest in and be exercisable by and enforceable against the adopter as though the adopted child was born to the adopter (HMSO, 1926).

It took over seventy-six years before the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (HMSO, 2002) that brought adoption legislation in line with the Children Act 1989 (HMSO, 1989) and for the first time explicitly stated that the welfare of the child is of “paramount consideration” (s1:2).

The current definition of the adoption of children in England is defined in the glossary.

It is important to recognise that adoption does serve several purposes. Goody (1969, p57) stated that over time adoption has served three key functions in Western European societies that are not incompatible:

to provide homes for orphans, bastards, foundlings and children of impaired families; to provide childless couples with ‘social progeny’; and to provide an individual or couple with an heir to their property.

The terminology that Goody (1969) used is inappropriate in current society, though it is reflective of the era in which the article was written. Furthermore, since Goody's (1969) article British society has changed including a significant decline in the stigma associated with single motherhood (Kiernan et al. 1998) as well as the number of unplanned pregnancies falling significantly (Cook, 2004). Thus, fewer children are available for adoption. These issues are considered later in the next section of this chapter (1.5 p12). However, Goody's (1969) statement does recognise that adoption is not purely associated with the welfare of the children and that it can be used by governments as a convenient solution for children in need of homes and to meet the needs of those who wish to adopt, usually due to involuntary childlessness. Since the Prime Minister's Review of Adoption in 2000 (PIU, 2000) there has been a growing pressure to consider adoption for any child in care (PIU, 2000). A fourth function, that adoption also offers significant cost savings compared to children remaining in the care of Local Authorities (Selwyn, Sempik, Thurston & Wijedasa, 2006) has become increasingly evident. Indeed, at the time of the Prime Minister's Review (PIU, 2000) adoption offered a means of meeting the New Labour agenda of social inclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001) of looked after children (LAC) (DoH, 2000a), by breaking the cycle of generations of some families from entering care. Thus, making LAC economically independent and ensuring they contributed to the tax system rather than drawing from it. This aspiration by the New Labour Government was evident in the five outcomes (be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being) of Every Child Matters (HMSO, 2003) and formalised in legislation in the Children Act 2004 (HMSO, 2004).

Interestingly, while the functions of adoption identified by Goody (1969) are still relevant 40 years on, adoption is increasingly presented in an idealistic manner as the best option for vulnerable and abandoned children (Hearst, 2012). Indeed, in line with government aspirations texts such as Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby's, (1997, p2) presented this ideal in stating adoption is:

a legal procedure through which a permanent family is created for a child whose birth parents are unable, unwilling or are legally prohibited from caring for the child. The focus of good practice in adoption is on the long-term welfare of the child... At best adoption also meets the needs of adopting families.

Such statements may pull on the heart strings of individuals by reinforcing stereotypical images of helpless children in care in need of rescue from harmful and abusive environments. Indeed, statements by successive governments have presented adopters as heroic, (DfE, 2011a). However, such messages do not reflect the challenges that adopters can face (Quinton et al 1998) or the life changing impact of adoption (Treacher, 2000). Significantly, while adopted children do frequently gain a loving family (DfE, 2011a) they also lose a family and its history as well as their community (Hearst, 2012) and frequently can experience a significant change in culture (Thompson, 2012). Academics and practitioners continue to use the analogy of the 'adoption triangle' (Morris, 1999) that includes the adoptee, the adopter, and the birth parent. While it is not within the remit of this project, it is important to recognise that this analogy does not represent the fact that adoption can have a significant impact on the lives and relationships of many others, including: extended family members within the birth family and adoptive family, birth siblings, birth children or other adopted children within the adoptive families and significant friends of the children and the families (Crawshaw & Balen, 2010).

Successive government documents both pre and post the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (HMSO, 2002) have reinforced the message that the best interest of children should be at the heart of the adoption system. In the Prime Minister's Review of Adoption in 2000 (PIU, 2000, p5) the then Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote:

adoption of children in care from the 21st century is less about providing homes for relinquished babies and more concerned with providing secure, permanent relationships for some of society's most vulnerable children.

The children that successive governments have increasingly aspired to place for adoption are likely to be older and have experienced trauma, neglect and abuse (ONS, 2011a). Thus, they can have a range of complex physical and emotional needs (Hodges, 2005). However, existing literature (Crawshaw, 2010) suggests that most adults who apply to adopt may continue to do so because of involuntary childlessness and the need to become parents. This is in line with Rowe and Lambert's (1973) study 37 years earlier that gathered data from children's case files from 33 statutory and voluntary adoption agencies. Rowe and Lambert's (1973)

study did not interview prospective adopters but inferred that most adopters seek young healthy children who can easily be integrated into their families. While this may be a logical assumption, this literature review has not identified any studies that have explicitly considered adopters' wishes and feelings about the types of children that they would ideally like to parent.

Adopters' motivations and desires about the sort of children they would ideally like to adopt, including age, number, gender, race and needs of children are explored as part of this research.

1.5 The changing nature of adoption

Due to a lack of records it is difficult to find an accurate history of the development of adoption (Keating, 2009). Texts such as Fratter, Rowe, Sapsford and Thoburn, (1991) state that the purpose of the first adoption legislation (HMSO, 1926) was to give legal stability for children born out-of-wedlock and orphans who had lost their parents in World War One. However, in contrast to arguments that adoption was considered a win win situation as it met the needs of the children and more significantly it met the needs of couples who could not have birth children (Simmonds, 2000), the development of adoption legislation in Britain faced significant challenges (Keating, 2009). The values and attitudes of Victorian England, particularly towards children born out of wedlock and their mothers, resulted in social policies that made it very difficult for the mothers to keep their children (Behlmer, 1998). However, at the same time there was also a considerable resistance to the concept of adoption as it was perceived to enable the mothers to escape:

the consequences of sin (Walker, 2006, p212).

Responsibility for the child without support was believed to be a reminder to the mother of her wrong doing and an attempt to ensure that she sought redemption (Walker, 2006). Frequently, the only formal support available to these women was through the Poor Law which was punitive and often resulted in institutionalisation in workhouses (Alcock, 2008). Even after the formation of the Welfare State between 1945 and 1948 (Alcock, 2008) there was little support for unmarried mothers. Fears of the consequences from society and even their own families compounded the situation for the birth mothers (Keating, 2001). This frequently resulted in unsupported mothers who could not afford to care for their children turning to

individuals who often advertised their services to take care of the infants in exchange for a fee (Keating, 2009). During their investigation of this phenomenon the British Medical Journal (BMJ, 1868, p75.) used the term 'baby farming' to describe the practice. The phrase is now commonly used in adoption texts. In some cases, the baby farmers abused, neglected or even murdered the children, (Keating, 2001). One example is the case of Amelia Dyer a baby farmer who was hanged in 1896 for killing babies that were left in her care (Paterson 2011). Indeed, the concept of adoption became associated with baby farming, hence had sinister undertones (Behlmer, 1998). Furthermore, the ideas of the Eugenics Society that were prevalent suggested that children of the poorer classes, especially those of 'fallen women' were genetically inferior (Peel, 1997). A culmination of these factors stigmatised adoption, resulting in genuine adopters shying away or conducting the adoption in secret (Keating, 2009).

Behlmer, (1998) suggests that, in response to fears that baby farming was a growing business, campaigns by professionals such as doctors, children's charities and newly formed adoption societies including the National Children's Adoption Association had to force the Government at the time to introduce a range of policies and legislation to promote the welfare of children. As discussed earlier in this section this eventually led to the introduction of the Adoption of Children Act 1926 (HMSO, 1926). Most legal non-relative adoptions following that period up until the 1970s tended to be of healthy, young infants born to single mothers and placed with childless married couples (Fratter et al. 1991). However, this changed over time for several reasons.

Developments in medicine, particularly the introduction of the contraceptive pill in the 1960s reduced the number of unplanned pregnancies (Cook, 2004). Consequently the number of young, healthy, white children being available for adoption declined. Significantly, it is commonly suggested that the contraceptive pill gave women more control over their bodies and lives. However, the founder Marie Stopes was in fact a lifelong member of the Eugenics Society (Peel, 1997). Stopes intended for the contraceptive pill to be used by upper and middle class married couples to enjoy sex. However, her motivation to encourage poorer women to use it arose out of her concerns about the children of the poorer classes being inferior 'unfit weaklings and

diseased individuals' (Peel, 1997, p55). Notably such negative societal attitudes about children in care continue to persist (Ofsted, 2009).

Legal changes including the implementation of the Abortion Act 1967 extended women's rights to choose abortion (DoH, 1999). British society's attitude to sex out of marriage became more liberal; hence, the moral problems associated with single motherhood lessened (Kiernan et al. 1998). The introduction of means tested social security benefits in the 1970s to support low income families (Alcock, 2008) enabled more single parents to keep their children. The combination of these factors resulted in a significant reduction of babies available for adoption (Rowe & Lambert, 1973). It is evident that the number of adoption orders made fell from 21,495 in 1971 to 10,870 by 1979. In 1999 it stood at 4,323 including step parent adoptions (ONS, 2011a). Specific data was not recorded about children adopted from care.

1.6 The children who are currently likely to be placed for adoption post 1970s

Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 (HMSO, 1989) defines children in care as "looked after" children (LAC). There is an extensive amount of literature about LAC. Indeed, a search on the UoD library plus system using the term LAC identified 3,754 items. Data (DfE, 2012a) indicates that most LAC tend to enter care due to statutory intervention by local authorities as a result of having suffered or being at risk of suffering "significant harm" as defined by section 47 (1b) of the Children Act 1989 (HMSO, 1989). As such local authorities are usually responsible for LAC. At the point of this literature search statistics (DfE 2012a) indicated that at 31 March 2012, 62% of LAC entered care because of abuse or neglect. Other reasons included: family dysfunction (14%), family in acute stress (9%), socially unacceptable behaviour (2%), the child's disability (3%), parental disability (4%) and absent parenting (6%) (DfE, 2012a, figure 1, p2). In contrast to before the 1970s these are the children likely to be placed for adoption. Significantly 94% of LAC are over the age of one (DfE, 2012b). Furthermore, while the data shows that the majority (74%) of children in care are from a White British background (DfE, 2012a), it is important to note that the remaining 26% (DfE, 2012a) of children in care from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities in England is significantly higher than the total BAME population in England and Wales of 14% (ONS, 2011b). While the focus of this study is not to consider the reasons for this phenomenon, it is evident that BAME children

represent a sizable proportion of LAC. As such the investigation, will explore the effectiveness of the adoption process in assessing, preparing and approving adopters to meet the needs of LAC.

Significantly, some of the characteristics of LAC now chime with the findings of Rowe and Lambert's study (1973) that was the first large scale study in the UK. Rowe and Lambert's (1973) were commissioned by the Association of British Adoption Agencies in response to public concerns for would be adopters who were being denied the right to become parents while 'hundreds' (Rowe & Lambert, 1973, p13) of residential homes were thought to be full of young orphans. At the time there was a lack of accurate data. Interestingly, however, similar arguments are evident in recent influential documents such as the Narey report (2011) due to simplistic and inaccurate interpretations of the information that is now available. Rowe and Lambert's study (1973) considered the cases of 2812 children from 33 adoption agencies representing statutory and voluntary sectors (glossary) across the UK. Rowe and Lambert (1973) collected descriptive data about the children using a questionnaire that was completed by administrative staff and Social Workers from the agencies. The researchers appear to have been very aware about pressures on practitioners' time, hence avoided face to face interviews that might have provided richer data. However, the Rowe and Lambert (1973) did identify some key characteristics of children in care including that more boys (57%) compared to girls (43%) were in care, 71% of the children were of school age, indeed only 6% were described as babies. While the numbers of children in care because of being born out of wedlock had decreased, at the time they still represented 50% of the total sample of children. Curiously, 20% of the children were identified as "coloured" (Rowe & Lambert, 1973, p30). Then, as now, many of the children that needed substitute families had multiple complex needs.

In order to extend what is currently known, this study aims to understand and analyse the types of adopters now coming forward to adopt and the attributes of children they wish to adopt compared to the LAC.

Rowe and Lambert's, (1973) findings did reinforce the risks of 'drift' (Katz, 1999, p72) for children in care, the impact of multiple placement moves and few if any lasting relationships. Interestingly, Rowe and Lambert, (1973) identified that 'race' and 'age'

were key obstacles to finding family placements. Significantly, this continues to be the case almost 40 years later (DfE, 2012a). It is evident that sudden extended periods of separation from primary carers (Bowlby 1979; 1988) and a lack of stability (Harnott & Humphreys, 2004) can impact on psychological and emotional wellbeing. This may lead to mental health and behavioural difficulties (Kenrick 2009). Rowe and Lambert (1973) suggested that adoption and long term fostering both have a role to play in providing stability depending on the individual circumstances of children.

As this study focuses on adopters' experiences and perceptions, data on children will not be collected.

Existing literature on adoption considers issues of abuse and neglect that LAC may experience whilst in their birth families (Selwyn et al. 2006). It recognises that LAC are likely to face adversity for a considerable time (Quinton, 2012). Furthermore, the literature considers the impact of this on children (Howe et al. 1999). Indeed, numerous studies have focused on the challenges faced by carers looking after children who have suffered past traumatic experiences such as neglect, abuse and witnessing domestic violence (Beek, 1999, Biehal, Ellison, Baker, and Sinclair, 2010, Cairns, 2002, Fahlberg 1988; 1991, Howe, 2005, Macaskill, 1999, Rushton and Dance, 2004, Quinton et al. 1998).

This research does not aim to investigate the impact of traumatic early childhood experiences on the emotional and physical needs of children.

1.7 Attachment Theory

At the time of this literature review a search on the University of Derby's library plus system showed 21,033 items relating to attachment theory. This narrowed to 15,451 using key terms attachment, bonds and adoption simultaneously. This investigation does not seek to assess the formation of attachments between children and adopters or challenge that healthy attachments between children and carers are essential (Bowlby, 1988). However, given the considerable reference to attachment theory in the field of adoption (Bifulco, Jacobs, Bunn, Thomas and Irving, 2008) it is important to provide an understanding of attachment theory and its influence on the adoption process in the context of how it is used to inform the training and assessment of adopters.

Howe et al. (1999) suggest that the foundations of attachment theory lie with the works of Bowlby who was interested in the impact an individual's environment had on the person's psychological development. In his early work, Bowlby (1944) wrote about the concept of attachment in his explorations of the origins of delinquent behaviour. Bowlby (1944) was interested in the connections between the experiences of emotional traumas during the first decade of a person's life and delinquency during the teenage years. Crucially as attachment theory has developed it has increasingly been applied in social work practice to understand LACs behaviours in the context of their past experiences (Howe, 1999). Furthermore, attachment theory has also increasingly been used to try to predict the challenges that carers including adopters may face in caring for LAC as well as how carers may react to a child's behaviour dependent on the carers past experiences (Bifulco et al. 2008). This forms a key part of the assessment and training of adopters (Beesley, 2010). This is discussed further later in this chapter (1.12 & 1.13 p36).

Developing the concept of attachment further, Bowlby (1958) referred to theories of primary object sucking and primary object clinging to explain instinctual survival behaviour in babies of up to 12 months old that also served to create a bond between the child and the mother. Bowlby (1979) used the term attachment to conceptualise the human ability to develop strong emotional bonds with primary carers. While initially Bowlby's (1958) focus was on the bonds that children made with their mothers, it is important to note later Bowlby (1988) indicated the main reason for his focus on the mother was that at the time of his research it was much easier to recruit to samples of young children being cared for by their mothers rather than their fathers. However, for Bowlby (1988) both the mother and father were important figures in a child's life. The works of Bowlby were developed further by Ainsworth and Robertson (Howe et al. 1999).

Indeed, Bowlby (1988) credits Ainsworth for introducing the secure base concept that is central to attachment theory. To explain the concept Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1979) suggest that attachment behaviours form part of the human survival mechanisms that children are born with. Bowlby (1979) argued that attachment behaviours were designed to bring the vulnerable and dependent infant in to close proximity of an individual who the child perceived to be able to provide emotional and physical care, protection and nourishment (Bowlby, 1988). This would

usually be the mother figure. By responding appropriately and providing the infant with a safe and secure base, carers give children the ability and confidence to explore the world knowing that they can return to the carers in times of uncertainty, fear and distress (Bowlby, 1988). As children with secure attachments grow and develop they are confident that their primary attachment figures will be there for them even when they are not physically with them, hence they are confident to explore the world. In adolescence, such individuals become increasingly confident and competent (Hughes, 2012). This is crucial for healthy child development (Ainsworth et al. 1979). However, where carers are consistently neglectful and abusive it can have a severe detrimental impact on the child's development and may result in a range of complex needs and behaviours (Howe et al. 1999). Thus, adopters caring for LAC can face significant challenges in meeting the child's needs and coping with the resultant behaviours. In some cases this may lead to the adoptions breaking down (Argent & Coleman, 2006). Therefore, preparing adopters for such issues is considered an essential part of the assessment (Beesley, 2010) and training (Rushton & Monck, 2009a) processes.

Attachment theorists argue that many emotional and psychiatric disorders can be attributed to poor attachment patterns in early childhood (Bowlby, 1979). At the centre of the argument is the premise of dependent on how carers respond to children's behaviours and needs in early childhood impacts on the development of the child's internal working model (Howe, 2011). Attachment theory suggests that the primary carers responses to the young child's attachment behaviours such as crying, crawling and cooing are processed by the child and have a profound impact on the development of the child's mental representation of themselves, others and relationships (Howe, 2005). These individual mental representations are described as internal working models and can have a lifelong impact on the child's self-perception (Howe, 2011). The purpose of the internal working models is to enable the child to estimate how others are likely to react to them at the child's times of need therefore, manage his or her feelings at times of fear, anxiety and distress hence, enabling the child to make sense of their world (Howe, 2005). Internal working models are classified into five types of attachment patterns; secure, insecure and anxious, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised. Significantly, attachment theorists argue that childhood experiences of abuse and neglect can have a powerful

and lasting impact individuals' ability to manage stress, parenting skills and expectations of children (Shemmings & Shemmings, 2011). As such it is possible to see the relevance of attachment theory to the assessment and training of adopters. Indeed, aspects of attachment theory have become increasingly influential in social work practice and are frequently used in the field of fostering and adoption (Barth, Thomas, John, Thoburn and Quinton, 2005) to guide the assessment of children, their birth parents as well as foster carers and adopters. It is now widely accepted in practice that sudden extended periods of separation from primary carers, abuse and neglect impact on the psychological and emotional wellbeing of individuals (Howe, 2005). Existing texts (Archer, 2001) suggest that LAC's challenging behaviours and needs can be a result of past experiences of trauma and rejection. As such the focus tends to be on helping adopters to understand the child's history to assist them to estimate the issues they may face in caring for LAC, prepare adopters to deal with the challenges and help them to enable the child to develop a healthy bond with his or her new carers. This approach is intended to be supportive of prospective and approved adopters. However, it neglects the fact that as children progress through the developmental stages (Parrish, 2010) any child can present significant challenges to their parents and carers as part of normal child development (Howe, 2005). Furthermore, where the sole focus is on the past it can detract from the need to consider the children's behaviours and needs within the current context (Barth et al. 2005). This can lead to labelling the LAC (Lindsay, 2009) and therefore create the possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ironically it may prevent adopters from reflecting on their own parenting practices.

Attachment theory also forms a central aspect of the assessment of adopters and their ability to successfully parent children based on the adopters' own childhood experiences (Bifulco et al. 2008, Beesley, 2010). It is important to note that Bifulco et al. (2008) is based on opinion and does not recognise that in order to utilise attachment theory in this way requires an in depth understanding of the theory as well as full, accurate and current information about the adopters. In the opinions of Howe et al. (1999), Cairns, (2002), Schofield (2002), Howe, (2005) Hughes, (2012) attachment theory is relevant to the assessment of parent and child relationships. However, this is in the context of assessments where children are in situ. Indeed, in such circumstances Howe et al. (1999) and Schofield (2002) suggest careful

observation of the parent and child relationship is crucial. However, according to DfES (2006) and in the opinion of authors such as Beesley (2010) attachment theory can be used predict the likelihood of success of adoptive placements and should be a central part of the assessment process. This requires great care as the assessment of adopters is frequently based on theoretical situations especially if the adopters do not have any children. Furthermore, without a depth of knowledge and understanding of attachment theory as well as full, accurate and current information such approaches can be blunt and lead to inaccurate assumptions and conclusions (Barth et al. 2005).

As attachment theory informs the assessment and training of adopters it is relevant for this investigation to understand how it is applied in practice.

1.8 Permanency

As indicated earlier (1.4 p9), alongside concerns for children's welfare, successive governments in Britain have been under pressure to control and reduce public spending (The Economist, 2010). In 2006 Selwyn et al. indicated that depending on the type of placement a child in care was in it could cost a local authority up to £2000 per week per child. Furthermore, because of adverse experiences prior to entering care and the inconsistent quality of the care system itself, LAC often need additional support in adult life (DfES, 2007). Teenage girls in care are two and a half times more likely to become pregnant, (SCIE, 2004). Almost half (45%) of LAC compared to 10% of the general population were assessed as having a mental health disorder, 30% of care leavers aged 19 were not in employment, education or training (NEET) (DfES 2007). Crucially traumatic early life experiences can erode the care leavers' resilience and parenting ability, making it more likely their children will also enter care and continue the cycle (Howe, 2005). It is evident that providing LAC with permanency that includes stability, consistency and a sense of belonging in a setting that can meet their immediate and long term needs is crucial (Lowe & Murch, 2002). Permanence is defined as:

a framework of emotional, physical and legal conditions that gives a child a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity. (Harnott & Humphreys, 2004, p3).

The Prime Minister's Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) marked a significant shift in adoption policy, legislation, procedure and practice. The Review (PIU, 2000) focused on the concept of permanence for children as the rationale for changes to the adoption process and strongly inferred that adoption offered the most stability. In contrast Lowe and Murch (2002) suggest that, depending on the needs and circumstances of LAC, residential care, long term fostering and adoption can all offer positive forms of permanence. However, the Prime Minister's Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) used Fratter et al.'s, (1991) study as a piece of evidence to support the claim. Fratter et al. (1991) did consider a sample of 1,165 placements using questionnaires completed by only voluntary agencies. The PIU (2000) does not recognise that this sample would have been skewed in favour of adoption as 58% of the children were already either adopted or the adoption was pending. A further 6% were fostered with a view to adoption. Only 12% were permanently fostered. Furthermore, the review (PIU, 2000) also ignores that Fratter et al. (1991) in fact stated:

when other variables are held constant, there is no difference in the disruption rates between those who are placed for adoption and those permanently fostered (p48).

It is evident that adoption can provide children with a sense of belonging, stability, and legal security (Biehal et al. 2010). Further, it may lead to improved self-perception (Hanna & McRoy, 2011) and a better quality of life compared to children who remain in care and experience multiple placement moves that is commonly referred to as drift (Katz, 1999). However, the same studies (Biehal et al. 2010, Hanna & McRoy, 2011) also highlight the on-going challenges that children and adopters face. Simply placing a child for adoption will not transform the child overnight and lead to positive outcomes (Quinton et al. 1998). Furthermore, comparing educational, employment and mental health outcomes for LAC with their peers who have not experienced the level of adversity, to measure the quality of the care system, is simplistic (Hannon, Wood & Bazalgette, 2010). Comparing outcomes for LAC with their peers who have faced similar adversity but not entered care may provide more accurate data. This is not within the remit of this study but would benefit from further research.

Research based on some of the early work of the Permanency Planning movement from the USA had, and continues to have a significant influence over UK Government thinking (O'Hara, 2008). This is due to the principles of performance management including timescales and targets being embedded into the concept as well as notions of rescuing LAC (O'Hara, 2008). The principles of permanency have been largely accepted in the UK without question, for example, Selwyn (2010) suggests the principles of planning for children identified in Goldstein, Freud and Solnit's, (1973) publication are still relevant today in Britain. However, Goldstein, Freud and Solnit's, (1973) text was published in the USA. It is not primary research. It uses psychoanalytical theory to outline principles when planning for children's placement in a legal context. Crucially, considerable care is required in applying these principles in Britain given the cultural nuances (Munro, 2008), due to differences in legal systems and differences in definitions. Epstein, (1999) highlights that some of the research from the USA that was used in the permanence studies was limited due to financial constraints. This resulted in data collection from a single agency. Hence there was little data triangulation. Furthermore, Epstein, (1999) states that not all the studies in the USA were conclusive in their findings. These studies are not mentioned when the positives of permanency are reported. Indeed, the increase in the number of adoptions that did not last was considered an acceptable risk (Goldstein, Freud & Solnit, 1973). Rosenthal (1993) suggests these were as high as 26% in one agency that specialised in placing children with complex needs such as significant challenging behaviours, between 1975 and 1981. There is little mention of the impact of this on the children or the adopters. This is not within the scope of this research. However, whilst a number of studies mentioned in this review have considered possible variables that may relate to adoption disruptions, further research is required on the long-term impact of this on the wellbeing of adopters and children following an adoption disruption.

In Britain, Selwyn and Quinton's (2004) study funded by the Department of Health, compared outcomes of a sample of 130 children from one local authority, who were placed either for adoption or long term fostering. The study states that of the 46 children placed for long term fostering only 50% remained in placement at the time of follow up. Whereas of the 84 placed for adoption, 83% of children remained in placement at the time of follow up. However, the average age of children placed for

adoption was three years compared with seven years for those placed for fostering. Furthermore, it is important to note that the initial plan had been adoption for all the children in the sample. The reasons some of the children were eventually placed for fostering was that adoptive placements were not found due to a range of issues including the children's age, behaviour and the length of time taken to make decisions by professionals. It is not known whether these children would have remained in placement if an adoptive family had been found. Significantly, Selwyn and Quinton (2004) did not consider the outcomes for children who had a plan for long term fostering from the outset. This is not within the remit of this study and requires further investigation.

This investigation does seek to consider the types of children adopters ideally want to adopt and the effectiveness of the process in enabling adopters to care for the children placed with them.

Beckett, Pinchen and McKeigue, (2012) in their small-scale (n=59) study with data from one local authority, found 86% of adoptions outside of the family remained intact following the completion of legal proceedings. In comparison, only 11% of permanent fostering placements remained intact. However, the children placed with long term foster carers were significantly older. Furthermore, Beckett, Pinchen and McKeigue, (2012) did not differentiate between those children who had had a planned move to permanent foster parents who had been assessed and approved for this task and those where the status of the placement had simply been changed from short term to long term. The key source of information was from social workers records, hence did not provide any primary data about the experiences or wishes of adopters.

In contrast this research aims to understand and critically analyse adopters' experiences of the adoption process from the point of applying up until after a child is placed. Data from adopters will be triangulated with data from professionals about their perceptions of the adoption process.

Simplistic arguments that adoption offers more stability have led to increasing pressure on local authorities to place children for adoption (DoH, 2000a), with the belief that adopters can be prepared to care for children of any age and with significant needs. By identifying the types of children adopters are looking for at the

early stages of their journey, this study will compare the adopters' ideal child to a LAC that may eventually be placed with them.

1.9 Push for Speed

As a pre-cursor to the Prime Minister's review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) politicians such as Paul Boateng (Deputy Home Secretary and Minister for Young People 1999-2001) argued 'anything but adoption is wrongheaded' (The Economist, 1998). Boateng (The Economist, 1998) suggested that assessments of adopters were overly intrusive and referred to the National Child Development study conducted in 1958 as evidence that children placed for adoption achieved better outcomes. However, the National Child Development study was an investigation of perinatal mortality and considered social and obstetric factors linked to stillbirth as well as health, education and child development (Power & Elliott, 2006). It did not specifically consider adoption. The findings that children from prosperous backgrounds performed better at school are not surprising. Boateng (The Economist, 1998) did not address the delay in decision making for children due to increasingly complex legal requirements (Barratt, 2010) or the need for more up to date research.

Because of the increasing focus on adoption the 1998 Local Authority circular (98) 20 (DoH, 1998) set out clear expectations for local authorities to consider adoption for all children in care. The emphasis on adoption was so significant that the document, without references, states:

Research shows that generally adopted children make very good progress through their childhood and into adulthood compared with children brought up by their own parents and do considerably better than children who have remained in the care system throughout most of their childhood (DoH, 1998, p2).

The study for the Prime Minister's Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) that followed has formed a key platform for adoption policy and legislation in England. The study (PIU, 2000) for the review was conducted within eight weeks and summarised existing evidence. The document (PIU, 2000) did recognise the need for ongoing support for children, adopters and birth families. Furthermore, it identified flaws in the legal system that potentially caused some delay. However, the document also explicitly introduced the free market approach to adoption with a clear focus on performance measures including targets and timescales. Significantly, the required timescales

were not based on any evidence or research. While the Prime Minister's Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) referred to a partnership between Government and adopters, the recommendations for minimum standards (DoH, 2003) were akin to a customer service model more reflective of for profit businesses discussed in texts such as Goodman (2009). Indeed, the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) (DfES, 2003) was introduced to ensure prospective adopters were not rejected unfairly by adoption agencies. Significantly, despite accusations that many families were being turned away needlessly, statistics from the IRM (2009) do not evidence this. A total of 79 prospective adopters applied to the IRM between 2004 and 2009 to have their cases reviewed. Of these, one withdrew before being heard. Of the remaining 78, the IRM considered 26 were possibly suitable to adopt. The findings of the IRM found that the reasons for non-approval were multiple and complex including medical factors, stability of the relationship, withholding of information, references and understanding the needs of LAC.

This investigation does aim to understand the experiences of adopters at the different stages of the adoption process and whether the focus on speed has had an impact on this. Furthermore, the research will explore adopters' perceptions of the support available to them.

It is interesting to note that while the review (PIU, 2000) argued that children's needs should be at the heart of the process, it encouraged the increasing use of sales and marketing techniques to place children whom the review identified as less likely to be found adoptive homes, and referred them to as:

the stock of children (PIU, 2000, p19).

The review (PIU, 2000) suggested that white girls were more likely to be placed than white boys, and argued that this contrasted with the LAC population. However, the statistics presented were only from 1998/9. The total number of children adopted that year was 2,200 (PIU, 2000) of whom 51% were boys (1122) and 49% were girls (1078). There was no further evidence to substantiate the claim.

The first part of this study (chapter 3) does aim to understand the type of children that adopters would ideally like to parent.

The review (PIU, 2000) encouraged recruiting more non-white adopters and increasing the use of transracial placements for Black, Asian and Mixed parentage children, as in total only 10% of all children adopted were non-white compared to 17% of the total LAC population. Interestingly, the review did not question the reasons why so many Black, Asian and Mixed parentage children were in care when in 2001 only 7.1% of the total population of the United Kingdom described themselves as non-white (Jefferies, 2005).

The reasons for Black, Asian and Mixed parentage children being in care are not within the remit of this study however, it will consider the effectiveness of the adoption process in approving applicants from diverse communities (chapters 4 & 5). Furthermore, the research will explore adopters' willingness to accept children from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds compared to their own (chapter 3).

The review (PIU, 2000) eventually resulted in the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (HMSO, 2002). Because of the changes and the pressure to place more children from care for adoption the number of LAC adopted increased from 2,200 in 1999 (ONS, 2011a) to their peak of 3,800 in 2005 (DCSF, 2007). However, statistics (DfE, 2011a) indicated that the number of children entering care had increased and the number of children adopted had decreased. Reacting to this, the Government warned local authorities that their children's care services could be outsourced unless the number of adoptions of LAC increased (DfE, 2011b).

Analysis of the statistics (DfE, 2012a) highlights a complex situation that requires a considered approach. Local authorities have strived to intervene earlier since the death of Peter Connolly in 2007, (Laming 2009). The number of children who entered care because of 'abuse and neglect' increased by six per cent between 2007 and 2011 (DfE, 2012a). This suggests that professionals are responding to concerns about children's welfare. Critically, while the total number of children adopted was 283 fewer in 2011 compared to 2007, the largest drop was for children aged five and over. At the same time the number of children who left care through the use of Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) (glossary) (CA1989 s14A (1)) (HMSO, 1989) in 2011 increased by 980 compared to 2007. This explains some of the reductions in adoptions. SGOs can be suitable for older children as they do not sever all legal ties with birth family, and enable children to maintain their identity but do provide legal

security (Brayne & Carr, 2008). Significantly, studies (Biehal et al. 2010) continue to suggest that adoptions of children placed at older ages are more prone to breaking down before the child reaches adulthood. Such findings may have made courts and local authorities more cautious when making plans to place children aged over five for adoption. However, to force local authorities to place more children for adoption the Government published performance tables (DfE, 2011c) to name and shame them. While placing the most children at the fastest pace is not an indicator of long term success, local authorities that do so are considered to be more effective. This (DfE, 2011c) assumes either that there are significant numbers of would be adopters who wish to adopt children over the age of five, and/or that individuals who wish to adopt young children can be encouraged to adopt older children and trained to effectively care for them.

This study aims to identify the types of children applicants wish to adopt and whether this changes over a period of time. Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of the research is designed to enable an understanding of adopters' perceptions of the effectiveness of the adoption preparation training at different stages of the process (chapters 3 - 5).

An increased emphasis on speed is evident in the Adoption National Minimum Standards (ANMS) (DfE, 2011d). The principles of performance management were more evident, for example standard 10 (DfE, 2011d) has short rigid timescales for every stage of the approval of adopters. Furthermore, compared to the previous National Minimum Standards for Adoption (DoH 2003) there were some significant omissions including the removal of the explicit requirement to place siblings together wherever possible. These attempts to hasten the process did not recognise that for many children relationships with their siblings may act as a protective factor and make children more resilient (Schofield & Simmonds, 2009).

This investigation will explore adopters and professionals' perceptions of the speed of the process (chapters 4 & 5). However, the consideration of the impact of separating siblings is outside the remit of this study.

The ANMS (DfE, 2011d) had a strong focus on recruitment of adopters. With the exception of child protection they lacked emphasis on careful selection, and

suggested that most prospective adopters could be prepared to meet the needs of children. The standards (DfE, 2011d) emphasised that the focus of pre-adoption training should be on helping adopters to understand the experiences of children in care and assume this would allow adopters to care for the children. This research will explore the effectiveness of this approach (chapters 4 & 5).

Aims to increase the speed of placing children for adoption were also evident in the Family Justice Review (Norgrove, 2011). The review (Norgrove, 2011) accepted that current court processes were complex and lengthy. Norgrove (2011) also recognised that courts lack trust in local authority social work, which led to the high use of additional experts resulting in unnecessary costs, delay and drift for LAC. However, the recommendations (Norgrove, 2011) included changes to adoption processes including the removal of the requirement for Adoption Panels to:

consider the suitability for adoption of a child whose case is before the court (Norgrove, 2011 p112).

Interestingly, in addition to removing Adoption Panel scrutiny of children's cases, courts were advised to:

only consider the core or essential components of a child's plan (Norgrove, 2011 p96).

The review (Norgrove, 2011) did not see the need for courts to consider plans for siblings either. The recommendations may have result in speedier processes, but may also have resulted in alternative challenges for adopters, LAC and professionals. This investigation may be able to explore some of the impact of such changes.

Despite concerns, the fact that the Family Justice Review (Norgrove, 2011) was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice did guarantee a period of consultation with stakeholders including adoption agencies to enable some amendments to be made. In comparison the Narey Report (2011) which has had an enormous influence over Government policy was commissioned by the Times newspaper due to the papers claims with evidence that:

Thousands of children are left languishing in temporary foster care or residential homes (Narey, 2011 p1).

The Times described Narey (Narey, 2011) as an expert on adoption, though he lacked a profile in research and had considerably more experience of the prison service than adoption (O'Hara, 2006). The report (Narey, 2011) was only available to those who purchased a copy of the Times on the day of publication and to subscribers through its pay wall. The report (Narey, 2011) recommended drastic changes to speed up adoption and minimised concerns about the long-term stability of adoptions. However, as it (Narey, 2011) was not an official Government document, no consultation was required. The report (Narey, 2011) was completed and published within three months. The premise of the report (Narey, 2011) that thousands of children remained in care while increasing numbers of would-be adopters were being denied the right to parent was reminiscent of the historical moral panic related to adoption described by Rowe and Lambert (1973). The report (Narey, 2011) was predominantly based on anecdotal evidence from conversations Narey appeared to have had with a selected number of professionals, would-be adopters and a very limited and brief reference to literature that omitted key texts including Thoburn, Norford and Rashid (2000) and Quinton et al. (1998). It portrayed skewed personal opinions as facts without references or evidence. As discussed earlier in this paper, the assertion that adoption offers the best form of permanency for all children in care cannot be sustained (1.8 p20). Concerningly, Narey (2011) took a pro-life approach to unplanned pregnancies and suggested encouraging women to give up these children for adoption. This went beyond meeting the needs of children in care to creating a supply of babies for would-be adopters. Narey (2011) referred to the USA as providing a model for adoption, where there appeared to be a two-tier system. Wealthy applicants could pay up to \$40,000 to adopt a healthy baby (adoption.com 2011), while children in care and adopters from poorer backgrounds received a second class service. Instead of recommending national data collection on adoption disruptions, Narey (2011) misrepresented statistics and confused data on disruptions of infants with data on older children. In contradiction to the findings of the renowned inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence (Macpherson, 1999) which overwhelmingly reinforced the existence and negative impact of racism, Narey (2011) stated:

An Asian, black or mixed-race adult born in the UK is accepted as being just as British as a white British adult (Narey, 2011, p12).

Narey, (2011) did not recognise the need to recruit and approve more adopters from BAME communities, but instead used the lack of available BAME adopters as a justification to place more BAME children with white adopters.

Whilst this study does not aim to consider the complexities or ethics of transracial adoption (1.6 p14), it will consider adopters' willingness to accept children from different racial, ethnic and religious communities to their own. Furthermore, if possible this research aims to explore the effectiveness of the adoption process for adopters from BAME communities.

Despite significant flaws in Narey's (2011) arguments, seven days after the report's publication the Children's Minister formally wrote to Narey (Loughton, 2011b) appointing him as the Government's advisor on adoption, thus accepting Narey's (2011) report as the blue print for future government policy on adoption.

1.10 Adoption Disruptions

When an adoptive placement fails to offer permanence and results in the child returning to the care of a Local Authority either before or after the adoption order is made, it is commonly referred to as a 'disruption' (Argent & Coleman, 2006, p1) (glossary). The term aims to recognise this as an interruption to the family placement process (Argent & Coleman, 2006), not an ending for the child. However, it does not reflect the strength of emotions due to feelings of rejection that further undermine the self-esteem of children and adopters. This is not within the remit of this research, however, it does seek to assess the effectiveness of the adoption process in enabling adopters to avoid disruptions.

Interestingly, there are no national statistics about the number of adoption placements that break down before the child is legally adopted or that do not last until the child reaches adulthood. Argent and Coleman, (2006) state that UK government websites quoted an estimated 20% disruption rate of children placed for adoption. Rushton's (2004) scoping review of research also suggested an average of a 20% disruption rate following placement. The use of disruption rates as an indicator of outcomes is a blunt instrument to measure success but is a stark reminder that simply placing a child for adoption will not transform the child overnight nor meet the needs of adopters and lead to a success (Quinton et al. 1998).

The literature highlights that researchers continue to strive to identify variables to predict the future success of placements. Quinton et al.'s (1998) study of children placed for adoption and fostering aged between five and nine years also found that siblings who had been placed alone were more vulnerable to placement disruption. In addition, Quinton et al. (1998) suggest that the child's characteristics, such as rejection by their birth parents as well as overactive and restless behaviours, were contributory factors in placement disruptions. These variables, combined with characteristics of the adoptive families including the presence of adopters' birth children or previously adopted children and a lack of carers' responsiveness and sensitivity in parenting children increased the risk of disruption. However, this does not reflect the strength of emotions due to feelings of rejection that further undermine the self-esteem of children and adopters. This is not within the remit of this study, however, throughout the investigation does aim to assess the effectiveness of the adoption process in enabling adopters to avoid disruptions.

Selwyn et al. (2006) again found the child's age and behaviours as well as the presence of the carers' own children were contributory factors to placement disruptions. Furthermore, it was suggested that a lack of warmth from the child towards the carers played a part. However, it is interesting to note that these conclusions were drawn from data of case files that were reviewed and therefore were based on Social Workers opinions. The only carers that were interviewed were ones where the children remained in place.

Biehal et al.'s (2010) mixed methods four-part study, does suggest that the child's age of entry to care and at placement, children's emotional and behavioural problems as well as the carers' parenting styles maybe predictors of risk. However, Biehal et al. (2010) reinforce the way these and other factors interact is complex and more significant than individual variables.

The age of the child appears to be a recurring theme and closely associated with behaviour, however, Quinton et al. (1998), Selwyn et al. (2006) and Biehal et al. (2010) do not consider whether the carers had set out to foster or adopt older child or whether they had been encouraged to take an older child by professionals.

This research aims to understand adopters' preferences about the types of children they want from the stage of applying to adopt compared to the children that may be placed with them.

Interestingly, while professionals frequently believe that it is more difficult to find adopters for children with significant health concerns and disabilities (Gould, 2010), Fratter et al.'s (1991) study that is now over twenty years old found the placement of children with serious health problems, Down's Syndrome and physical disabilities were less likely to break down.

This investigation does not aim to compare disruption rates for children with and without disabilities however, it does explore adopters' willingness to consider children with such needs (chapters 3 - 5).

The texts mentioned in this section explicitly recognises that there is a complex interplay of the variables and urge caution about applying these in a simplistic manner. Indeed, even placements of children who exhibit few difficulties and are placed with adopters with seemingly ideal characteristics can still fail (Argent & Coleman, 2006). However, the quest to identify a formula that enables an accurate prediction of success of placements is evident.

This investigation explores the impact that research findings such as Fratter et al. (1991), Quinton et al. (1988), Selwyn et al. (2006), Biehal et al. (2010) may have on practice and the experience of adopters (chapters 4 & 5).

1.11 Choosing to adopt

From early studies into adoption such as Rowe and Lambert (1973) to recent ones including Quinton (2012) suggest infertility remains a key motivator to adopt. This literature review found that there is an extensive amount of research into infertility. Indeed, a search using the University of Derby's library plus system of the term infertility identified 90,611 texts, studies and articles. HEFA, (2012) suggest that eight of every one hundred couples in the UK trying to get pregnant do not succeed within two years. Not all of these individuals choose to pursue any type of fertility treatment. Furthermore, even out of those aged under 35 who are most likely to achieve pregnancy using IVF only 32.2% are successful (HEFA, 2012). In addition to

the medical aspects, feelings of loss maybe exacerbated for those who experience infertility due to the inability to fulfil the social, cultural, religious and familial expectations (Bagshawe & Taylor, 2003). As the lives of family members and friends with children become increasingly focused on child oriented activities, feelings of isolation for those facing involuntary childlessness can intensify (Schmidt, 2010). Notably, while health organisations including the NHS (2012) provide significant amounts of information about treatments for infertility they do not appear to mention adoption as a positive option to become parents. It is very difficult to identify accurately how many people enquire about adoption; however, Crawshaw and Balen (2010) suggest that only a small proportion of people who experience infertility consider adoption. Significantly, few studies have explored what motivates some people to inquire about adoption and their experiences of applying to adopt. It is evident that the journey to adopt a child usually starts with the decision to start a family and parent a child, rather than thoughts about adoption (Crawshaw, 2010).

Malm and Welti's (2010) study that was conducted in the USA did consider what motivated people to apply to adopt and foster. Malm and Welti (2010) suggest that while some choose to adopt as a first option due to altruistic and religious reasons, 78.3% of the sample (n = 1,185) who adopted children that they did know prior to the adoption did so due to the inability to have a birth child. Malm & Welti, (2010) collected data using a telephone interview of adopters that had already had children placed with them, hence relied on the recollections of adopters of events that took place before they applied to adopt. Furthermore, Malm & Welti, (2010) did not consider any barriers that applicants may have faced when applying to adopt. Bausch, (2006) suggests individuals with pro-birth beliefs are more likely to adopt. Both Malm and Welti (2010) and Bausch (2006) conducted studies in the USA, which has significantly different cultural and religious attitudes as well as a different adoption system from the UK. This includes significant charges (adoption.com 2011) to adopters if they wish to adopt a baby from the USA. Due to the cultural nuances (Munro, 2008) the findings of these studies cannot simply be applied in the UK.

Cudmore's (2005) description of a project that aimed to explore the emotional impact of infertility highlights the potential detrimental impact of fertility treatment on individuals' relationships, self-esteem and feelings of shame. Cudmore (2005)

argues that by applying to adopt individuals not only risk a further loss of privacy but must revisit painful memories and feelings due to the experience of involuntary childlessness and fertility treatment. Indeed, applicants may fear how Social Workers will interpret their feelings. Such issues may deter people from applying to adopt. This is not part of this research but may benefit from further investigation.

Van Den Akker's (2001) study that consisted of a sample of 105 women who were faced with infertility suggests that women were not likely to adopt if they felt a genetic link was important. Van Den Akker (2001) provides a useful insight into individuals' views on genetic importance and perceptions of the family. However, Van Den Akker (2001) used retrospective questionnaires that were posted by adoption agencies to female adopters who were asked to answer the questions for themselves and their partners. The questionnaire was made up of semi structured and open ended questions such as:

How much does it mean to you to have a baby? How much does it mean to your partner to have a baby? (Van Den Akker, 2001, p150).

While postal questionnaires do not enable clarification of issues, questions such as the ones above are open to interpretation (White, 2009). Furthermore, there are ethical issues in asking one partner to speak for another (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

The data collected as part of this research uses a mixed methods approach. It aims to use a questionnaire (appendix A) in the first part (chapter 3) that should be completed by both partners if they are applying to adopt as a couple. The second part of the study (chapter 4) involves face to face interviews (appendix B & C) with adopters that will enable clarification of issues. Furthermore, the data is triangulated with data from small focus groups of professionals involved in the adoption process.

Goldberg, Downing and Richardson, (2009) argue that in contrast to heterosexual couples, same sex couples are more likely to have been exposed to alternative forms of family, hence biological ties may be of less importance to them. Furthermore, adoption offers equality as the child will not have a biological relationship to either parent. Again, Goldberg, Downing and Richardson's, (2009) study is from the USA, hence caution is required in applying the findings as

discussed earlier. Furthermore, while adoption legislation and policy over time (Brammer, 2010), has increasingly encouraged same sex couples to apply to adopt, the research that does consider the experiences of lesbian and gay adopters is limited and tends to either focus on the undeniable discrimination that they face in society (Hicks, 2011). Alternatively, authors such as Tasker and Golombok, (1997) and Tasker, (2007) consider the effects on children of being raised by same sex or single gay or lesbian adopters. While such studies (Hicks, 2011, Tasker and Golombok, 1997 & Tasker, 2007) provide some insight, this research seeks to gain a deeper of understanding of the experiences and perceptions adopters during their journeys to adopt. Therefore, if possible same sex couples and gay or lesbian single adopters will be included as part of the sample of this study (chapter 3 & 4). Further literature relating to the matter will be considered in chapters 3, 4 and 5 if the sample does include same sex, gay or lesbian adopters.

A survey by Adoption UK (Adoption UK, 2011) of its 5000 'members' (including prospective foster and adoptive parents) focused on the experiences of the recruitment, assessment and preparation process. Adoption UK (2011) drew themes from the 179 responses that represented a low response rate of 3.6%. The study (Adoption UK, 2011) highlighted some of the challenges prospective adopters can face before their application to adopt is accepted, including being turned away because their profile did not fit the type of children the agencies were trying to place, or not receiving a response at all. Adoption UK's (2011) study's suggested areas for improvement included the need to enhance the level of service to people when they initially approach an adoption agency. The study (Adoption UK, 2011) was based on an online survey and relied on participants' recollections and memories of the process and their ability to reflect on these using an online data collection tool. The study (Adoption UK, 2011) does not state any inclusion and exclusion criteria hence it is difficult to comment on any variables that may have impacted on the results including the length of time respondents may have been approved or if they had children placed with them. Furthermore, it is further important to recognise that internet based surveys do raise concerns about 'sampling representativeness and validity of data' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011 p285) as they can over or under represent certain sections of society based on age and gender.

In contrast this investigation will gather data from prospective adopters whose application has been accepted but are still at the early stages of the process. The study will follow a sample of participants up until a child has been placed to explore their experiences throughout the process.

Rushton (2003) recognised a need for more research into the recruitment of adopters especially those from BAME communities, and the effectiveness of marketing campaigns. Rushton (2003) suggested that while recruitment drives such as BAAF's National Adoption Week arouse a significant amount of interest, only a small fraction went on to adopt.

This research seeks to understand the motivation to adopt of a sample of adopters based on diversity. It will also explore their perceptions of the quality of information about adoption in supporting their decision to apply as well as experiences of the application process (chapters 3 - 5). Furthermore, Social Workers' expectations of applicants who may have experienced infertility will be explored (chapters 4 & 5).

1.12 Assessment of adopters

In England, adopters can only be assessed and approved by registered statutory and voluntary adoption agencies (HMSO, 2002). The process of preparing, assessing and approving prospective adopters is regulated under the Adoption and Children Act (HMSO, 2002). At the time of this literature review and commencement of the research the DfES, (2006) practice guidance that was developed to support the statutory guidance (DCSF, 2005) was applicable. A performance management approach is evident throughout the guidance (DCSF, 2005) with rigid timescales being set for every aspect of the process from the time prospective adopters make an initial enquiry up until approval. Furthermore, the guidance requires adoption agencies to plan their recruitment activities and prioritise applications based on the types of children in care waiting for adopters. It is evident that adoption agencies have very little discretion in how they conduct the whole process. Significantly, however, this has not been made explicit when successive governments have criticised the adoption process, as discussed earlier (1.9 p24).

DCSF (2005) set out the key aspects that the assessment of adopters must cover including the necessary checks. These have been incorporated into the prospective

adopters' report (PAR) (HMSO, 2002) (glossary). The template form that most agencies use is supplied by BAAF (2012a). Noticeably the form is regularly updated; however, there is no requirement to use the most recent template, hence different agencies use different versions of the form. The focus on risk assessment with an emphasis on '*prediction, control and culpability*' (Houston & Griffiths, 1999, p1) is evident.

As discussed earlier (1.11 p32) existing literature suggests that most people who consider adoption do so because of infertility. DfES (2006) states that individuals who are still pursuing fertility treatment should not be excluded from applying to adopt. However, they should be enabled to understand that applying to adopt simultaneously is not in the best interests of children. Adopters should be encouraged to wait until they have finished their treatment and have committed to adoption (DfES, 2006). Crawshaw (2010) highlights a dichotomy in relation to infertility and suggests that adopters usually focus on their loss, and the stress of managing this. However, in contrast Social Workers are required to consider the potential risk to children from adopters who have not fully addressed what it means to not have a birth child and the resulting risk to the adopted child. No research is apparent on this phenomenon. Crawshaw (2010) provides a useful theoretical insight however, does not explore how professionals and adopters manage this or the impact of the assessment process.

Beesley's (2010) text is designed to support Social Workers to conduct effective assessments. Beesley (2010) does reinforce the need for assessments to recognise individuality and cultural variances and to be conducted sensitively. Notably, Beesley's (2010) substantial text suggests a need to develop a depth of understanding of adopters and LACs histories, family structures, ages, attachment patterns, attitudes and values for the assessment to predict future outcomes. However, this does not recognise the challenges of doing this in a society such as the UK where the need for privacy in the family is embed in legislation (Brammer, 2010) and culture (Thompson, 2012). While Rushton (2004) states that his scoping and scanning review of previous research is not a comprehensive critical literature review, it does cite 85 references and suggests such approaches are not unusual. Rushton's (2004) does include international and UK research and highlights that

studies have indicated that certain variables such as age, education, experience and religion, as well as applicants' traits including warmth, consistency, flexibility, tenacity, sense of humour and capacity to reflect can help to predict future outcomes of placements. However, Rushton (2004) argues that there is little evidence to support the assertion that possession of these traits necessarily leads to successful placements.

The current approach to assessing adopters is informed by the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (DoH, 2000b) which is a key social work tool for assessing what may be happening to children in their families. However, in the case of adoption the assessment is often a hypothetical analysis of how potential adopters may react when a child is placed with them. Furthermore, like Beesley's (2010) text book it is common for literature that focuses on the assessment of adopters to rely on attachment theory to predict future outcomes based on the information adopters provide about themselves and the common traits of LAC. However, Barth et al. (2005) highlight limitations of attachment theory to support this approach.

This study aims to understand the impact of this approach on the adopters' experiences and their ability to work in partnership with professionals as a result (chapters 4 & 5).

1.13 Preparing to adopt

Adoption agencies are required to arrange adoption preparation training for their prospective adopters (DCFS, 2005). Rushton and Monck (2009a) argue that the statutory guidance largely focuses on providing information about the adoption process and legal matters rather than skills required to be an adoptive parent. However, it is evident that it is recommended that the content of the preparation training should focus on information about the types of children that might be placed and their likely needs, the matching, placement and adoption process, and the skills required to care for such children (DfES, 2006). Preparation is purposely aimed at enabling prospective adopters to develop an in-depth understanding about the children that may be placed, as it is recognised that during this process some may come to realise that adoption is not for them. This is in addition to supporting applicants to develop necessary skills (DfES, 2006). Models and content of the preparation vary between agencies (Rushton, 2004). However, in England the BAAF

Preparing to Adopt-Trainers guide is frequently used by adoption agencies in its entirety or as a guide for structure and content. It has not been possible to consider the BAAF Preparing to Adopt-Trainers guide as part of this literature search as this publication is intended for adoption agencies and not generally available (appendix L).

Sagar and Hitchings, (2010) highlight Social Workers' concerns about adopters' lack of awareness and scepticism of the challenges LAC may present due to their experiences of abuse and neglect. Furthermore, professional apprehension about the adoption process being rushed and not giving adopters time to reflect. Sagar and Hitchings (2010) argue that post qualifying social work training would further enable professionals to better explain the needs of children available for adoption and the challenges adopters may face thus reducing the likelihood of placement disruptions. However, the sample for the study (Sagar & Hitchings, 2010) was from one local authority and comprised of interviews with just five Social Workers. The data was not triangulated to consider adopters' perceptions of the current approach to assessment or preparation for adoption.

This research aims to gather data from professionals from several adoption agencies (chapter 2). The data will be triangulated using face to face interviews with prospective adopters (chapter 4).

Rushton and Monck (2009a) indicate that there is a lack of research on the preparation of adopters for the task of caring for LAC. Rushton and Monck (2009a) argue that preparation currently does not adequately explain the challenges of caring for LAC and lacks information about strategies to manage children who may have experienced trauma, neglect and abuse. However, the findings of the study (Rushton & Monck, 2009a) are part of a larger mixed methods study (Rushton & Monck, 2009b) that specifically selected adopters who already had children aged between three and eight placed with them. The children were deemed to have 'serious difficulties' (Rushton & Monck, 2009a, p6). While 38 adopters were interviewed, the data was based on adopters' memories of the training from before they were approved and gathered at a time of high stress. In such circumstances it is possible for adopters to criticise the preparation or solely focus on the child's

behaviours to alleviate personal feelings of failure and guilt (Douglas & Philpot, 2003).

Significantly, while adoption agencies are required to provide preparation training for all adopters, (DfE, 2011d), the literature discussed here focuses on ensuring adopters are aware of the challenges that they may face when caring for children who have experienced trauma, neglect and abuse. It is not known whether the training provides the basic information that most new parents need, including looking after themselves to ensure they can provide the best care for the child who may be placed with them.

This study aims to explore adopters' perceptions of the value and usefulness of preparation courses from before they are approved, during the approval process and after a child is placed with them (chapters 4 & 5).

1.14 Being approved to adopt

Statutory regulations, (DfES, 2005) require adoption agencies to present the PAR to an adoption panel (glossary) to consider the case and make a recommendation. For adopters, the panel represents a key milestone as the recommendation of the panel represents a life changing moment. The constitution of adoption panels is stipulated by law (HMSO, 2011) that requires panels to be chaired by an independent person who must have appropriate skills and experience of adoption. While agencies must invite prospective adopters to the panel meeting, applicants are not obliged to attend. The intention of this is to promote transparency and inclusion (Gwilt, 2010). Under the regulations (DfES, 2005) adoption panels can recommend approval, non-approval or advise that further work is necessary. It is important to note that statutory agency adoption panels also consider proposed matches between approved adopters and children with a plan for adoption. However, the final decision in relation to the approval of adopters and the matching of approved adopters to children lies with a senior manager within the adoption agency who is known as the Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

Pepys and Dix (2000) outline how one local authority implemented the practice of inviting prospective foster carers, adopters, birth parents and young people to a fostering and adoption panel. The aim was to support the decision-making process.

Pepys and Dix's (2000) paper suggests that feedback from 14 follow up questionnaires that were completed by the prospective adopters and foster carers as well as two birth parents and two young people who attended the panel was overall positive. During a follow up study the same agency sent the questionnaires to 34 other prospective adopters, foster carers, birth parents and young people. Again, overall the feedback was positive. However, Pepys and Dix (2000) do not specify whether all of the prospective carers were approved and there is no explanation of how the questionnaires were administered. Furthermore, the feedback appears to only be on experiences of attending panels. It does not explore the impact on adopters' perceptions of the panel and the invitation to attend during the assessment process. Notably Pepys and Dix (2000) suggest that panel members found the practice of applicants attending helpful as it enabled them to explore issues directly with the applicants. However, Pepys and Dix (2000) do not consider the effect this approach may have had on prospective adopters.

O'Sullivan's (2004) observational case study of a local authority adoption panel recognises that there is little research on how panels work. Indeed, except for O'Sullivan's (2005) follow up study no newer studies were found as part of this literature search. Studies into adoption panels that were conducted prior to 1997 are outside of the remit of this review. Importantly, O'Sullivan (2004) raises the point that the purpose of adoption panels is vague as it is not clear whether panels make recommendations to the ADM or whether they confirm the recommendations of the assessing Social Workers. O'Sullivan (2004) suggests that, while the key source of information used by panels is the PAR which is written by the Social Worker, the quality and consistency of PARs varied, with some reports being over 100 pages long. While O'Sullivan (2004) does raise the potential of applicants being subjected to a further assessment by the panel if they attend, he does not explore the potential impact of this practice. Furthermore, O'Sullivan (2004) does not question how the quality of these reports may impact later when adopters are being considered for matching to a child.

This study will explore adopters' experiences of attending the panel as well as the adopters and professionals' views on the quality of information about on children and adopters (chapter 4).

In the follow-up study O'Sullivan (2005) indicates that adoption panels have access to a range of experts and experience. The study by O'Sullivan (2005) described how an adoption panel functioned. However, neither O'Sullivan's 2004 or 2005 study provides any data of adopters' perceptions and feelings about the approval process.

This research seeks to gain a depth of understanding of adopters' experiences and perceptions of the approval process. The potential impact of this on adopters' ability and willingness to work with agencies following the approval stage will be explored (chapters 4 & 5).

1.15 Finding the child

Following approval, the process of identifying adopters for a child involves a range of activities that are commonly known as family finding (Farmer, Dance, Beecham, Bonin & Ouwejan, 2010). As local authorities are usually responsible for LAC this task normally falls within their remit. The process of matching a child to adoptive parents is regulated by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (HMSO, 2002). The National Minimum Standards for Adoption (DfE, 2011b) set out timescales for referral to the Adoption Register, which was formally introduced by the Prime Ministers Review of Adoption (PIU, 2000). The Adoption Register is a central data base of adopters and children's details to enable the identification of a match. However, specific practices for family finding vary between agencies and have developed over time (Farmer et al. 2010).

Where a match is not identified from the local authority's own pool of adopters, several different approaches can be used to identify a possible match in addition to a referral to the Adoption Register. A common practice is for local authorities to publicise children's profiles and pictures through various mediums. Agencies commonly use the service offered by BAAF including the Be My Parent newspaper and online service as well as the Children Who Wait magazine by Adoption UK. In addition agencies are encouraged to use adoption activity days (DfE, 2011a). These activity days are a relatively new development (DfE, 2011a) that consist of events where a central venue is arranged and range from offering adopters the opportunity to meet LAC's Social Workers and find out more information through to meeting the children. It is apparent there is enthusiasm for marketing children to find families

(DfE, 2011a). Currently, there appears to be little consideration of the ethical aspects of these practices or how such activities may affect the welfare of the children.

While the impact on children is not within the remit of this study and requires further research, this study will consider adopters' experiences and perceptions of these approaches to family finding (chapters 4 & 5).

Due to cultural and legal differences care is required in applying Hanna and McRoy's (2011) suggestions, following their overview of seven assessment tools used in the USA to match children to adopters. However, Hanna and McRoy's (2011) summary of the approach to matching resonates with the approach in the UK:

Ideally, matching processes involve careful assessment of the child's background and physical and emotional needs with concurrent attention to the family's background, functioning, and ability to meet the child's needs (Hanna & McRoy, 2011, p46).

In the UK, this approach relies heavily on the information included in the child permanence report (CPR) and the PAR, (DfES, 2005), hence it is contingent on the subjective assessments by individual professionals. Indeed, the information included can be dated by the time it is used for the matching process.

Quinton (2012) recognises that there is little research on the phenomenon of matching children to adopters, however, suggests that the studies focusing on adoption disruptions offer useful findings. Indeed, the current approach to matching is driven by the desire to reduce placement breakdowns and optimise the use of scarce resources (Quinton, 2012). To achieve these aims the use of a formula to predict success by comparing the children's characteristics, including age, previous disruptions, maltreatment and attachment to birth family, with the parenting abilities and characteristics of adopters is prominent (Quinton, 2012). Significantly, the voice of adopters and how they decide on which child is right for them is absent from such studies. It is hoped to be able to consider this in this study.

Selwyn and Sempik, (2011) suggest that the interagency fee (BAAF, 2012b) (glossary) that may be applicable when adoption agencies place children with adopters approved by other agencies can deter local authorities from placing children with adopters approved by voluntary adoption agencies (VAA). This may

indeed be the case as Selwyn and Sempik (2011) state the fee charged by local authorities was £13,138 in comparison to £20,640 charged by VAAs in 2009. While Selwyn and Sempik (2011) discuss the true financial costs of children remaining in care, they do not state whether adopters are aware of the fee and whether this may influence their choice of agency. This decision might limit the children adopters are presented with following approval.

This doctoral research aims to understand adopters' perceptions and experiences of identifying children, how effectively adopters are enabled to participate in the process of being matched, and adopters' rationales for selecting the children who are eventually placed with them (chapter 4).

1.16 Post Adoption Support

The challenges of caring for children who have experienced neglect, maltreatment and trauma are well documented in studies such as Quinton et al. (1998), Cairns (2002) and Biehal et al. (2010). The formal recognition in 2000 (PIU, 2000) of the need to provide ongoing support to adopters and children post the legal adoption was therefore welcomed. The establishment of adoption support services was required by Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Brammer, 2010). The range of services that must be provided was formalised by the Adoption Agency regulations (DCSF, 2005) and further reinforced in the National Minimum Standards for Adoption (DfE, 2011d).

Beek (1999) highlights that effective and early support for adopters caring for children who are exhibiting challenging attachment related behaviours can help to stabilise adoptive placements. However, in Luckock's (2008) opinion the provision of adoption support in the manner required by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 highlights a paradox in government policy. Luckock (2008) argues that on the one hand this promotes the normalisation of adoptive families by encouraging them to access mainstream services, but at the same time gives them easier access to additional support in recognition of the adoption status.

DCSF (2008) suggests the use of the Assessment Framework (DoH, 2000b) to assess the support needs of children, adopters and birth families. This recognises the importance of early intervention, the need to understand the attachment patterns

of children because of their early childhood experiences and the parenting capacities of adopters. Critically, DCSF, (2008) suggests the use of Fahlberg's (1991) Observational Checklists to conduct assessments, despite these having been developed over 20 years ago, and not recognising that these are reliant on the subjective observations of individual professionals who will be influenced by their own attitudes and values, (Thompson, 2012). Furthermore, Barth et al. (2005) point out the limitations of using attachment theory in this manner.

Significantly, texts to date do not consider the impact of the assessment process and the relationship that adopters have with the professionals and agencies before a child is placed on adopters' willingness to seek support following the placement of a child and after the legal adoption.

Such issues are explored as part of this research, furthermore, this study seeks to understand the types of support that adopters receive and value as well as the factors that enable them to seek support at an early stage (chapters 4 & 5).

1.17 Summary

This chapter has reviewed literature on the adoption of children. Overall the texts that have been considered are from the UK and dated between 1997 and 2012 when this study started. However, on occasion international literature and texts from before 1997 are included to give useful context where necessary. Furthermore, an explanation of how relevant literature was identified is presented.

The review considers the purpose of adoption and its historical development. The chapter indicates that the nature of adoption has changed significantly since it was formally recognised in England in 1926 (HMSO, 1926). While British governments tended to shy away from formal involvement in adoption prior to 1926, it has become increasingly politicised since the 1970s. From once being a process that was largely used to provide substitute families for young healthy white children, it can now potentially be a plan for any LAC regardless of age, race or ability (DfE, 2011a). The influence of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and concepts such as permanence (Harnott & Humphrey's, 2004) are discussed. This is followed by a consideration of successive UK governments motivations and policies to increase the number of adoptions as well as to speed up the process. This has increasingly gathered

momentum since before the election of the New Labour Government in 1997. The literature suggests that adoption agencies, practitioners and researchers are increasingly concerned about adoption disruptions (Argent, 2006) because of the changes that are being imposed. From the adopters' perspective, the chapter discusses existing research on why individuals may choose to adopt as well as the assessment, preparation and approval process. Furthermore, it considers literature related to adopters finding and being matched to the child as well as post adoption support.

From conducting the literature review it is apparent that there are a significant number of texts that consider the issues that adopters may face when looking after their adopted children (Rushton & Dance, 2004). There is also an extensive amount of literature focusing on the impact that neglect, abuse and trauma has on LAC and the resulting challenges for their carers (Howe, 2005). Furthermore, several studies have aimed to understand the variables related to adoption disruptions (Rushton, 2004).

It is also evident that there are gaps and shortfalls in existing literature. This includes some studies being reliant on data based on adopters' experiences and perceptions of the adoption process several years after children had been placed with them (Rushton, 2004). There is little literature that explicitly considers why some people choose to adopt while others who find themselves in similar situations do not (Crawshaw & Balen, 2010). Furthermore, there is very limited information about adopters' experiences of applying to adopt as well as the assessment, preparation, approval processes and of being matched to a child (Adoption UK, 2011).

This study seeks to add to the body of knowledge on adoption by considering why individuals apply to adopt and the types of children they would ideally like. The inquiry will consider adopters' experiences and perceptions of the adoption application, assessment, preparation, approval and matching processes (chapters 3 - 5). Furthermore, it will investigate the types of support that adopters receive and the sort of support they value (chapters 4 & 5). Data from adopter participants will be triangulated with data from professionals involved in the adoption process. The study does not aim to analyse the causes of adoption disruptions, though findings from the study may enable some comments to be made that relate to the subject.

Chapter 2 Research Method

2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers the research methodology that will be utilised to gather and analyse data to meet the research aim and objective that are set out below (2.2 p 47). In doing so the chapter discusses the philosophical underpinning of the study and outlines the rationale for the use of a mixed method, case study research design that is underpinned by a pragmatism (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to consider the effectiveness of the process used to assess, prepare and approve adoptive parents to enable them to meet the needs of LAC (Children Act 1989 s22 HMSO 1989).

The chapter provides a detailed description of the research method that will be used including the pilot of the data collection tools to ensure relevance and quality.

Furthermore, this chapter provides details of each part of the data collection and analysis process. Part one uses a semi structured questionnaire (appendix A) to collect quantitative and some qualitative data from a random probability sample of adopters. Part two of the study is designed to explore themes identified from part one in more detail using face to face interviews with adopters. Part three is designed to triangulate the data from adopters with data from professionals involved in the adoption process.

Details are also provided of the ethical approval process, the resources for the study, inclusion and exclusion criteria, the sample and the analysis process.

It is important to note that the development of the research method is informed by the literature review (chapter 1). Supporting documents are provided in the appendices.

2.2 Research aim

To compare the experiences and perceptions of prospective parents on their journey to adopt a child with those of Social Workers and social work managers.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To explore adopters' experiences and perceptions of the adoption assessment, preparation and approval process in enabling them to meet the needs of 'Looked After Children'.

2. To identify what factors adopters' consider most important in supporting them at the different stages of adoption.
3. To include a representative sample of prospective adoptive families.
4. To compare adopters' experiences and perceptions with the experiences and perceptions of adoption Social Workers and social work managers.

2.3 Philosophical underpinning - ontology and epistemology

Ontological assumptions, and how individuals see social reality, have a significant impact on the conduct, findings and products of any research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggest that researchers' assumptions about the nature of social reality (ontological assumptions) influence their choice of methodology (epistemological assumptions) to identify 'truth'. If social reality is considered external to individuals, then assumptions can be made that phenomena can be objectively measured and quantified to identify meaning and truth (Ponterotto, 2005). This positivistic epistemological approach suggests that social reality can be studied by directly applying quantitative methodology and procedures used to study the natural sciences (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Positivist researchers argue that knowledge is based on determinism or '*cause and effect thinking*' (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p 40), therefore, by focusing on how select variables interrelate one can predict outcomes (Crotty, 1998). This approach views human behaviour as a reaction to external or internal stimuli. Consequently, it assumes the cause of any behaviour lies in past events or circumstances (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Positivism therefore promotes the use of empirical detailed observation and quantitative measures to test theories (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Due to the recognition that natural science and its methodology cannot be totally divorced from socio-political and cultural factors (Thompson, 2012), positivist claims that science is wholly objective cannot be upheld (Crotty, 1998). Post-positivists accept that research cannot be completely objective, absolute and definitive (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Hence, they present findings in terms of probability rather than absolutes. However, they maintain scientific findings are more objective and certain than opinions and beliefs (Crotty, 1998).

Evidence from the literature review (chapter 1) suggests that authors such as Quinton et al (1998) utilising qualitative methods can knowingly or unknowingly

conform to positivist ontological and epistemological stances in their aim to identify variables and vice versa. Quinton, (2012) alludes to this and suggests that the concern to identify predictors of potential placement disruptions has limited the understanding of overall placement outcomes.

Such approaches suggest that knowledge is accurate, objective, value neutral and absolute (Berg, 2009, Crotty, 1998). If this were the case it would suggest that it is possible to predict precise outcomes in the context of adoption of children by identifying a scientific formula that considers how variables interrelate. However, despite the positivist argument that the natural sciences are objective as scientists are detached from the phenomena they study, it is undeniable that researchers are human. As such science is subject to vested human interests, values, attitudes and error (Crotty, 1998). Positivism does not recognise that human beings interpret events and apply their own meaning (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, it overlooks the role and impact of personal, cultural, and structural values (Povee & Roberts, 2014, Thompson, 2012) in science (Sonuga-Barke, 2010). Hence, to date in the field of adoption, this formula continues to elude researchers and practitioners as it is extremely difficult to generalise findings (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Alternatively, a constructivist approach suggests that social reality is a result of an individual's cognition (Bergman, 2010) hence, is open to interpretation. Individual attitudes, values, education, life experiences and culture (Thompson, 2012) impact on perceptions and interpretation of phenomena. If this is the case then rich qualitative data is more likely to enable an understanding of the meaning that individuals apply (Berg, 2009). Furthermore, the values and beliefs (Povee & Roberts, 2014) of researchers play a crucial part in all aspects of the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009,). Axiology not only impacts on the choice of methodology but influences the choice of the topic to be studied (Ponterotto, 2005), data analysis and interpretation (Sonuga-Barke, 2010).

An understanding of the individual experience, context, intention (Berg, 2009), culture, attitudes and values (Thompson, 2012) can enable researchers to understand the individual's behaviour. Instead of seeing human beings as passive and reacting to internal or external stimuli, it is important to recognise that human beings interpret and interact with the social world. Situations change and develop

and are open to interpretation by individuals based on their culture, values, (Thompson, 2012) personality and attachment patterns (Howe, 2005). Furthermore, meaning is created in a social environment through human interactions (Creswell, 2009). As a result there can be numerous interpretations of the same event. In the context of this research it reinforces the need to analyse and aim to understand the adoption process from the view point of adoptive parents (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In recognition of that, this study aims to collect rich data from participants, over a period of time as opposed to a single event to gain a depth of understanding of adopters' experiences.

However, constructivist approaches also have inherent weaknesses. Power dynamics allow individuals and organisations in a position of authority to convince less powerful individuals and groups to accept their versions of reality (Silverman, 1998). It is therefore difficult to assess whether participants are articulating their own views, interpretations and intentions or those of others. Furthermore, subjective accounts of adopters can be incomplete or open to misinterpretation, hence, can be misleading (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Other criticisms of qualitative research suggest that the data are merely anecdotal and personal, therefore, vulnerable to researcher bias (Bryman, 2008). Thus, the data are open to different interpretations and conclusions. Moreover, due to the personal nature of the data, critics argue that they lack reproducibility and generalisability (Mays & Pope, 1995). However, it is important to be aware that the same criticisms can be applied to quantitative methodology, where the data are equally open to interpretation and findings are seldom absolute (Creswell, 2009). Due to such criticisms, there is a risk that in an attempt to defend qualitative research, researchers can seek to justify findings by applying positivistic validating criteria (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001). This can undermine the ontological and epistemological underpinning of the research. Having considered the different perspectives it appears that the mixed methods research design of this study utilises the strengths of both positivistic and constructivist epistemologies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have inherent weaknesses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). It is difficult to develop a full understanding of the context of the adopters' journey in depth using quantitative methods alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Indeed, McAuley, Pecora and Rose (2006) suggest that

utilising a single approach could be considered narrow and risks excluding the views of adopters and professionals. The literature review (chapter 1) highlights that studies such as Adoption UK's (2011) do not provide enough detail of adopters experiences of early stages of the adoption process. Without an understanding of the context, researchers' own attitudes, values, personal experience and assumptions (Thompson, 2012) can influence the interpretation of data. Alternatively, it is harder to generalise findings of qualitative data because of the focus on personal experience and interpretation as well as smaller sample sizes (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Furthermore, the collection of data at different points will support a deeper understanding of the process and how adopters' experiences and perceptions change over time. A single data collection point will not enable this.

2.4 Pragmatism

Mixing research methods recognises the influence of the natural, physical world (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and maintains a high regard for the subjective human experience and interpretation of events and circumstances (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This study utilises such a pragmatic approach to develop a depth of understanding of the experience of adopters' journeys. This serves to enhance the construct validity (Yin, 2009) of this study.

The philosophical meaning of pragmatism recognises that social reality can be external and objectively measured but also socially constructed and subjective to the individual (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). No single approach is the best or provides the full picture. Pragmatism focuses on solutions and recognises that the attitudes and values of the researcher play an important part in research. It advocates for the utilisation of mixed methods research approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Povee & Roberts, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Hence, this research has a pragmatic underpinning.

The desire to identify solutions resonates with approaches in adoption practice and is therefore popular. However, given that adoption practice and policy has a significant impact on the lives of vulnerable children and their families as well as adopters it is essential that recommendations are based on rigorous and credible research methods. Significantly, it is important to note that from experience, research conducted by practitioners without a depth of understanding of ontology,

epistemology, axiology and the influence of these on research outcomes can be overly descriptive and inaccurate (Denscombe, 2010). In such circumstances pragmatism may be interpreted in terms of its common-sense usage that implies 'anything goes' (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This impacts on themes, outcomes and recommendations from the research that can then be applied to practice. In the field of adoption this can lead to assumptions about predictors of success and failure of placements. As a result, crude and inaccurate tools can be developed and implemented to predict the likelihood of placement success (Quinton, 2012).

In contrast a true pragmatic philosophical approach reinforces the benefits of mixed methods research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) as a means of providing a depth of understanding of phenomena through method triangulation (Povee & Roberts, 2014; Spillman, 2014).

However, the use of a mixed methods research design does pose an additional challenge as it requires researchers to have a knowledge and understanding of both qualitative and quantitative research methods (Povee & Roberts, 2014). Without this it is impossible to understand how any research has been carried out and its implications (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In this investigation a mixed methods design will enable the development of a fuller picture as it will build upon data through the different stages and methods of analysis (Spillman, 2014; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The use of case study research is particularly appropriate in this context of finding out about the effectiveness of the adoption process in enabling adopters to meet the needs of 'LAC as it allows the investigation of:

contemporary phenomena in depth within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009, p18).

The level of rich data that a case study design provides (Neal, Thapa & Boyce, 2006) will enable a depth of understanding of issues. Case study research can be criticised for its lack of scientific measurement and provision of empirical proof (Greenwood & Lowenthal, 2005) which makes it harder to generalise findings (Yin, 2009). However, attempting to separate the phenomenon of adoption from its context, will ignore the lived experience (Greenwood & Lowenthal, 2005). This is

likely to lead to an inaccurate interpretation and analysis of the data. The longitudinal qualitative nature of this study addresses this issue.

A case study design will allow an in-depth exploration of the experience of the journey to adopt within its context (Cousin, 2005). Each case will be analysed to identify themes and key issues. Comparison between the cases is likely to highlight central issues and themes (Richards, 2015). Triangulation of the data from the cases will enable the researcher to identify patterns of convergence and corroborative information (Gray, 2014). This should increase the validity of the data and enable some generalisations to be made.

2.5 Method

This is a longitudinal study that utilises a pragmatic, mixed methods multiple case study (Yin, 2009) research design. This will be carried out in a sequential fashion (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

The research seeks to identify and follow a purposeful sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p200) of adopters through their journey to adopt a child. The study will collect data to describe and analyse how their experiences over a period of up to two years' impact on their perceptions (Langdridge, 2007) of the adoption process and the implications this may have for them, the child they adopt and the adoption agencies that work with them.

Figure 2.1 (p 54) shows the overall research design.

Overall research design

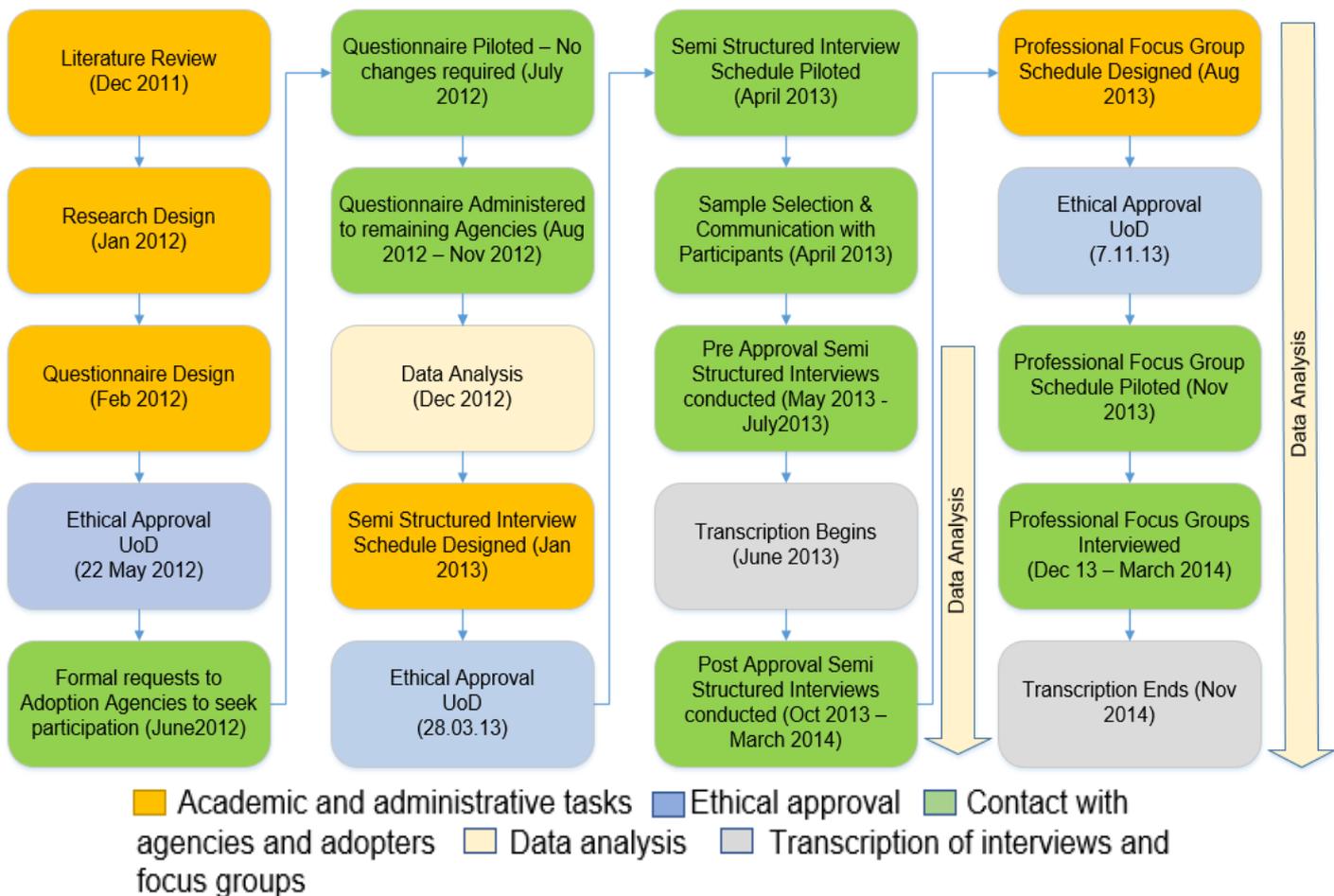


Figure 2.1

This design does have complexities including the potential length of time and the resource intensive nature of it (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). However, the design distinguishes it from many other studies into adoption as it traces how attitudes and perceptions of the process of adoption develop over time, from the point participants' applications to adopt have been accepted. This is important as feelings and perceptions change and develop over time (Langdridge, 2007).

Furthermore, in contrast to many pieces of research this is designed to triangulate the experiences of adopters with the views of professionals involved in the adoption process. The use of a mixed methods approach will provide a broader and deeper understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) of issues.

The clear steps of the design make it easier to implement however, a drawback is that the data collection for the whole study may take up to two years as participants' journeys will vary in length. During this time some participants may choose to

withdraw from the study. Furthermore, some participants' may choose to withdraw from the adoption process or may not get to the stage of a child being placed. Contributions from any participants in this situation are equally important to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the phenomena.

It is recognised that the chosen data collections methods including the use of questionnaires, interviews with adopters and interviews with professionals in small focus groups (no more than six participants) have several strengths and weaknesses. Questionnaires do allow the collection of data from larger numbers of participants in an efficient manner (Creswell, 2009) This is conducive for descriptive and explanatory research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). However, questionnaires are not ideal for explanatory research unless closely aligned to other research methods (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009) as is the case for this investigation. Furthermore, to be effective questionnaires must be carefully designed to ensure participants interpret the questions consistently (White, 2009). Alternatively face to face interviews do allow open ended questions to be asked and issues to be explored (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). This allows the gathering of rich data and dependent on the researcher's approach and skills can enable a depth of understanding (Creswell, 2009). However, potential participants may be concerned about participating in interviews without understanding the context of the research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, interviews can be time consuming hence, are not conducive for large sample sizes without access to significant resources (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). As explained earlier (2.5 p53) this study uses a mixed methods approach. The questionnaire in part one will enable the collection of data from a larger sample of adopters. Furthermore, it will allow the researcher to introduce himself and the research to potential participants. This will support the recruitment of participants for the later parts of the study. To ensure that participants understand the questions the research tools will be piloted as explained in the sections below.

2.6 Pilot Study

The study will be conducted in three parts: A quantitative part that uses a questionnaire to collect descriptive data from adoptive parents (appendix A). A qualitative part that involves two semi structured face to face interviews with adopters at different stages of the process (appendix B and C). Finally, a qualitative part with small (up to six participants) focus groups of professionals who are involved in the recruitment, assessment, preparation, approval and placement process (appendix D). To ensure the relevance and quality of the data gathered (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) the design includes piloting of each part. The data collection tools will be sent to nominated professional contacts in the participating Adoption Agencies to seek their views about the appropriateness and relevance of these. Furthermore, the questionnaire for part one will be tested with a group of applicants from one of the participating agencies. If the questionnaire does not require changes then the data from this sample will be included in the study. This will be explained to participants of the pilot study. Participants of the pilot study will be asked to complete the consent forms that include the 'opt in' forms for the latter parts of the study. For subsequent parts, in addition to the professional views up to two approved and experienced adoptive parents will be asked to comment on the relevance and appropriateness of the semi structured interview schedules. This will help to ensure that the questions are clear, relevant and appropriate.

2.7 Part One:

This quantitative first part of the study is crucial as the questions are designed to direct the whole study and identify themes for exploration in subsequent parts (White, 2009). A semi structured questionnaire (Gillham, 2000) (appendix A) designed to gather largely quantitative and some qualitative data, from a random probability sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) of prospective adopters who have formally applied to adopt a child and whose application has been accepted by an adoption agency is used. Administering the questionnaire in a consistent manner is aimed to ensure data are collected in a consistent manner to enhance their validity and reliability (Denscombe, 2010).

The development of the semi structured questionnaire (Gillam, 2000) was informed by the literature review (chapter 1) and has been designed to serve three key purposes: Firstly, to identify trends and themes that emerge at the pre-approval

stage of the adoption process. Rushton and Monck (2009) suggest there is a limited amount of research on adoption conducted prior to the approval stage. As such it is envisaged that information from this part can be used to inform practice. Secondly to identify and select a purposeful sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) (ideally based on diversity) of participants for the second part of the study. Thirdly, to identify possible themes for further exploration in the subsequent parts of the study.

To do this, question one (appendix A) captures demographic data including; the age range, gender, language and ethnicity of applicants. Furthermore, the questionnaire incorporates an 'opt in form' (appendix A1) that participants can complete to volunteer for the next part of the study, therefore allowing a purposive sample to be identified.

Questions two to six (appendix A) capture data about participants' motivation to adopt, choice of agency, sources of information before making their formal application and the awareness of the need for an assessment by a Social Worker. These data are likely to give a useful insight into what drives participants' behaviour in relation to their initial application to adopt.

Finally, questions seven to eighteen (appendix A) explore a range of areas that the literature review (chapter 1) has suggested require further investigation. These include the applicants' perceptions of the adoption assessment process and the Social Worker before and after initial contact with the professional, their ability to discuss issues freely and openly with the Social Worker as well as reasons for this, applicants' feelings about the pre-adoption training, access to support and the characteristics of the child they wish to adopt. This enables some measurement of change in perceptions (Langdrige, 2007) and attitudes (Thompson, 2012) based on contact with professionals. Furthermore, these areas are commonly considered as part of the adoption assessment and matching stages. However, the data collection questions are formulated to focus on the aims of this study (White, 2009). The qualitative second part of the study aims to follow up on how these experiences, perceptions and desires of the sample of participants develop over time up to six months after a child is placed with them (appendix B).

To ensure participants understand and can answer the data collection questions as well as to maintain a professional approach, the questionnaire (appendix A) avoids compound and normative questions and does not contain false presumptions. Consultation with two approved adoptive parents and Social Workers from an adoption agency regarding the questionnaire confirmed the appropriateness of questions. Questions one to six, eighteen and nineteen (appendix A) are descriptive closed questions, whereas questions seven to seventeen and twenty are explanatory questions designed to gain richer data (White, 2009). This approach is also used in the development of the semi structured interview questions considered later in this chapter.

To administer the questionnaire, each adoption agency is asked to facilitate the researcher attending the first day of the adoption preparation training. Ideally this will be for up to one hour. This will be negotiated with each to take into consideration their different training plans. This is an opportunity to initially meet potential participants, verbally explain the aims and objectives of the research, answer any questions and inform them of the ethical approval for the involvement of Social Workers and social work managers. Written information (appendix A1), the questionnaires (appendix A) and opt in forms (appendix A1) will then be handed out. The researcher will collect the completed questionnaire from the participants who wish to complete the questionnaire immediately. However, it is recognised that some people may wish to consider their participation further. For this reason, stamped addressed envelopes are provided to enable participants to return the questionnaire directly to the researcher. This aims to reassure participants that, except for child protection and safeguarding matters, the information they have provided will not affect their application as individual information will not be shared with their adoption agency. This is in line with the research ethics approval for this study. Adoption Agencies are made explicitly aware of this before they choose to support the study.

2.8 Part Two

Part two of the study aims to qualitatively explore themes identified from part one in more depth (this will be done in the analysis of the data (chapters 4 & 5). It includes two semi structured interviews (appendix B & C) with each adoptive couple or single applicant. The rationale for the use of semi structured, face to face interviews is that they allow the collection of a rich 'authentic account of the subjective experience'

(Silverman, 2011, p131). Furthermore, the flexibility of semi structured interviews to explore unpredictable themes offers the potential to gain a new insight into the experience of participants. Coupled with this the case study design (Yin, 2009) will allow the study to follow the adoption journey of each participant. Due to the very individual nature of experiences and perceptions (Langdrige, 2007) care is required in making generalisations. However, a case study design (Yin, 2009) enables a degree of generalisation to enable recommendations to be made.

The interviews will be recorded using digital recorders to capture the conversation for accuracy and analysis. It is recognised that any overt research can impact on the normality of the setting and result in a 'halo effect' (Denscombe, 2010, p150). Participants can alter their usual behaviour and activity to take account of the researcher's presence. The researcher aims to work with adoption agencies and provide clear verbal and written explanations of the purpose of the research and how the data will be used. This is intended to build a rapport with participants and promote trust. Participants will be enabled to provide the data at a venue of their choice to make them feel more comfortable. Moreover, participants will be given the opportunity to review the transcripts from the interviews for the purposes of transparency, accuracy and clarification (Sarantakos, 2013).

Ideally the first interview (appendix B) should take place just before the participant attends the adoption panel or soon after. The interview schedule (appendix B) is designed to collect rich data that will enable a depth of understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Questions one and two (appendix B) ask participants about their motivation to adopt and clarify whether their feelings about the child they may consider to adopt have changed compared to their feelings from part one of the study. Question three (appendix B) explores the availability and the value of information about the process and their experience of applying to the agency. Question four (appendix B) seeks to confirm the information they provided to questions seven and eight (appendix A) on the questionnaire from part one. This focused on their feelings about the prospect of being assessed, and seeks to consider if that has changed and the reasons why that might be. Questions five to nine (appendix B) consider the preparation training, questions ten to fourteen (appendix B) focus on the assessment, question fifteen (appendix B) considers the approval process. Questions sixteen to eighteen (appendix B) collect data about

support. Question nineteen (appendix B) allows participants to discuss any other issues that they feel are pertinent to the assessment, preparation and approval process.

A process of coding the questionnaires from part one will enable cross referencing to participants' responses in part two. This will allow method and data triangulation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The second interview (appendix C) is planned to take place up to six months after a child has been matched and placed with participants. At this stage it is envisaged that participants will be able to describe their lived experience of the matching, introduction and placement as well as caring for the child. This second interview will not only build on themes identified in the first interview but further explore areas from part one (appendix A) of the study. Questions one to three (appendix C) focus on the child placed and participants' access to information. This allows data triangulation between the earlier parts of the study. Question four (appendix C) explores participants' experiences of being matched. Questions five and six (appendix C) consider the introduction and placement process. Questions seven to nine (appendix C) consider adopters' experiences of caring for the child and their perceptions of the value of the training to prepare them for the task. Question ten (appendix C) focuses on their feelings towards contact, if there is any, with members of the child's birth family. Questions eleven to fourteen (appendix C) discuss the availability and sources of support. Question fifteen (appendix C) considers how ready participants feel to legally adopt the child. Question sixteen (appendix C) allows participants to discuss any other issues they feel would be relevant.

As identified in the literature review (chapter 1) there is very limited research on the experiences of adopters in the early stages of the adoption process (Rushton & Monck, 2009a). These questions (appendix B & C) address some of the key issues identified in the literature review as requiring exploration.

To promote accuracy and authenticate the interviews, participants, will be offered the opportunity to read the transcripts of the interviews.

It would be very interesting to conduct a further interview after five years of a child being placed, to explore changes, developments and participants' experiences to date. This would have to be done as part of a post-doctoral research project.

2.9 Part Three

The adoption process is formal and bureaucratic (Lousada, 2000). As such it is important to recognise that perceptions of the process vary between groups of professionals and adopters as well as between individuals. To triangulate data, the inclusion of professionals involved in assessing and supporting adoptive parents is important. The views of Social Workers from adoption teams involved in the recruitment, selection, preparation, assessment and support of adoptive families are crucial as the attitudes and perceptions of these professionals can have a profound impact on the experiences of adopters due to their key roles in the process.

The research aims to collect rich data from small focus groups of professionals using semi structured interviews (appendix D). Questions one and two (appendix D) of the interview schedules are designed to gather data about professionals' vision of the purpose of adoption as well as identify their perceptions of the unique selling points of their agency. Questions three to eight (appendix D) explore professionals' views about the nature and the effectiveness of the assessment process. Questions nine to twelve (appendix D) consider the training provided for adopters by the agency. Questions thirteen to sixteen (appendix D) focus on the approval process. Questions seventeen to nineteen (appendix D) explore the matching process. Questions twenty to twenty-two (appendix D) consider support for adopters. In doing this the study aims to triangulate the professional views with the experiences described by adopters. As indicated in the literature review (chapter 1) existing studies (Rushton & Monck, 2009a) rarely triangulate data in this manner.

The interviews of professionals will be conducted with small (up to six) focus groups of staff from the adoption agencies supporting this study. Information (appendix D1) about this part will be provided to the nominated contact person for each adoption agency. They will be asked to disseminate the information to relevant individuals and inviting them to participate. Potential dates for the focus groups will be negotiated through the nominated contacts. It is envisaged that these guided discussions will allow debate, serve to triangulate information as well as generate ideas and thoughts (Berg, 2009). This will allow an in-depth exploration of the processes of each agency and identify any cultural issues within the organisations. However, it is important to

recognise that Social Workers are increasingly busy, hence not all of them will want to or be able to participate.

This part again aims to explore and analyse themes from the previous stages as well as explore issues that professionals consider pertinent to the study. In doing this it will allow the triangulation of key issues. The interview schedule (appendix D) is designed in consultation with the adoption agencies involved. The schedules will be piloted with two adoption Social Workers to ensure the questions are clear and relevant.

Potential adopter participants will be informed of the ethical approval for the involvement of Social Workers and social work managers during the briefing sessions.

2.10 Ethical Approval

Given the very personal nature of adoption and the potential to touch on highly sensitive issues, careful consideration of ethical factors is essential. While participation in the study is voluntary, transparency and clear information are essential to enable individuals to make informed decisions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Each part of this study has been given ethical clearance by the University of Derby's Faculty of Education, Health and Science's Ethics Committee (appendix E1, E2, E3). Participants will be provided information (appendix A1, B1, C1, D1) and requested to sign consent forms (appendix A1, B1, C1, D1) at the beginning of data collection for each part.

To make initial contact with potential participants and due to the potential to touch on issues that might cause distress, the involvement of adoption agencies is important as they can provide appropriate support to individuals if necessary. Furthermore, the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) have been made aware of the research and are supportive of it (appendix F). If participants experience distress but do not feel able to discuss issues with their own agencies they can be referred to BAAF who can provide independent support and advice.

For sample purposes (2.14 p66) it is important that both statutory (glossary) and voluntary (glossary) adoption agencies are involved. Adoption agencies do not have set ethical clearance procedures. However, they adhere to the General Social Care

Council's Codes of Practice for Social Workers (2010) (subsequently replaced by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012, standards of proficiency. Social Workers in England). Senior managers at Director or Head of Department level can agree to the agencies involvement in the study. Following ethical approval by the University for the first part of the study, a letter (appendix G) was sent to voluntary and statutory adoption agencies within an 80-mile radius of Derby to ask if they are interested in participating in the study. Due to resourcing issues, the involvement of agencies further than this would not be practicable.

Figure 2.1 (p54) illustrates the points at which ethical approval is sought before the commencement of each stage. Participant information and opt in forms are provided to each participant (appendix A1, B1, C1, D1). This includes making participants aware that individual data from the research will not be divulged to agencies; however, any information that raises concern regarding the protection of vulnerable children or adults will be referred to appropriate agencies.

2.11 The researcher's stance

In addition to the University of Derby's ethics requirements, as previously stated (motivation for the study p3) the researcher is a qualified Social Worker with 25 years of experience and is registered with the HCPC. As such the researcher will work in line with the HCPC (2012) standards of proficiency for Social Workers in England. This includes a commitment to and adherence to professional confidentiality.

The researcher has a depth of understanding of social work practice including adoption services. This includes being an adoption Social Worker, Service Manager of adoption services, adoption panel advisor and latterly a Chair of adoption panels for both statutory and voluntary adoption services. As such the researcher has extensive experience of the whole adoption process including recruitment, preparation, assessment and support of adopters, as well as working on a multi-agency basis to find and arrange placements. This enables the researcher to easily understand technical terminology and points made by participants about the process, furthermore, to ask questions objectively and interpret and analyse the results. Therefore, respondents can talk openly and with confidence in the researcher's knowledge of the adoption system.

Over time as a practitioner and educator the researcher has developed sophisticated skills of interviewing. Preparation prior to the interviews is essential including arranging interviews at a time and place when participants are comfortable (Thompson, 2009). Furthermore, ensuring participants are fully aware of the purpose of the interview and study before giving consent to participating in the study is essential. Using inclusive language is an important aspect of this (Dodd & Epstein 2012). The possession of key interviewing skills including active listening, the ability to acknowledge the range of feelings including anger and upset that adopters may express, the sensitivity to recognise non-verbal communications, directing the interviews where appropriate to maintain focus but not dominating the interview or putting words in the mouths of participants are essential (Thompson, 2009). Drawing on the researcher's personality that is sensitive to the views and needs of others as well as knowledge and experience of the adoption process will further support the research. The ability to tolerate silence to enable participants to think and reflect as well at times of emotion and upset is essential to showing respect for participants feelings and not missing key information (Thompson, 2009). These skills were also used within the focus groups.

2.12 Resources

Resource requirements including time and financial support must be recognised to enable the planning of research (Bryman, 2008). This mixed methods study is part of a level eight supervised professional Doctoral programme. Apart from a percentage of financial support from the researcher's employer towards the tuition fee, the study is funded by the researcher, hence, the resources available are limited. This has been taken into consideration in designing the research methodology as well as the scope of the research. The fact that the questionnaires and interviews are conducted by a single researcher does promote consistency (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Cooperation from adoption agencies and individual participants is essential for a study of this nature that aims to understand the participants' lived experiences. Trust and good will from participants are essential. Given the pressures on agencies and individuals it is important to recognise commitments they have and fit in to their availability. It can be difficult to plan time due to changes in plans or unforeseen circumstances. Support from BAAF (appendix F) for the study provides significant

reassurance for adoption agencies and participants of the credibility of the researcher and the study. Moreover, it enables further access to current research, literature and some mentoring from professionals with extensive knowledge of the field.

Social research of this type regularly involves lone working and travel. This can raise issues of safety for researchers and participants. Risks in this study are minimised by the fact that the researcher and participants have been subject to Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. Furthermore, the adoption agencies involved have previously met participants and the researcher.

Other physical resources for the study include the purchase of electronic data recorders to be used to record interviews and focus group discussions. Speech to text software has been purchased to allow the researcher to personally transcribe all interviews. This is also important for confidentiality purposes. Furthermore, this supports the analysis of the data which is discussed later in this chapter.

2.13 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The study seeks to consider the experiences and perceptions of adults on their journey to adopt. To consider if these experiences differ depending on whether voluntary or statutory agencies conduct the process, the involvement of voluntary and statutory adoption agencies is critical.

Ideally the sample of adopter participants should be based on diversity to include married and unmarried couples as well as single adopters. Furthermore, the inclusion of applicants from diverse cultural backgrounds, same sex adopters, second time adopters, those wishing to adopt younger children as well as those choosing to adopt children with complex needs, older children and sibling groups is significant.

To enable individuals' contributions to be understood with as little loss of meaning as possible, normally participants who can speak fluent English will be selected. From experience the use of interpreters can lead to a loss of some of the true meaning.

Except for language issues, adopter and professional participants will not automatically be excluded unless the adoption agencies advise against the inclusion

of individuals due to the research having a detrimental impact on individuals or a child.

2.14 Sample

In the first part, the study aims to recruit a random representative sample (Creswell & Plano Clarke, 2011; Foster, 1996) of prospective adopters. The inclusion of both voluntary and statutory adoption agencies is important to allow the triangulation of data from adopter and professional participants. As statutory adoption agencies tend to recruit and assess more adoptive families, the inclusion of a higher number of voluntary adoption agencies may be necessary to provide a balance to the number of participants from both sectors. However, due to the very individual circumstances of applicants, locality, processes and resources of agencies, it is unlikely that an equal number of adopters will be involved from each adoption agency.

The second part of the study aims to select a purposeful sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p173) of participants based on diversity from the total number of participants who opt in from the first part. Existing literature (chapter 1) suggests that a significant number of people who wish to adopt do so to either start or extend their family unit, usually due to infertility (Treacher, 2000). A significant number of these families wish to adopt a child as young as possible. This is to fully integrate the child into their family and to experience parenting from the earliest possible stage (Schofield & Simmonds, 2009; Treacher, 2000). Including such adopters in the study is important as they reflect much of the adoption population. However, to gain an understanding of whether perceptions and experiences of a diverse range of prospective adopters vary, a purposeful sample (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p173) based on diversity is important. In addition to White British adopters seeking to adopt single children, under the age of two, the study aims to include single applicants, same sex applicants, applicants from BAME communities and applicants wishing to adopt children over the age of two and those wishing to adopt two or more children. However, it is important to note that due to the number of families from BAME communities applying to adopt being limited, current Government policy focuses on promoting transracial adoptions (DfE, 2011a). While the inclusion of gay and lesbian adopters is considered important it is considered to be inappropriate to include a very personal specific question about sexuality on the questionnaire (appendix A).

The third part of the study aims to include a random representative sample of professionals who are involved in the recruitment, selection, preparation, approval processes as well as supporting adopters. The professionals will be from the adoption agencies supporting the research. Due to the varying sizes of the agencies and pressures on Social Workers it is unlikely that equal numbers of professionals will participate from each agency.

2.15 Analysis

A thematic analytical approach will be utilised throughout the study. This is due to its accessible and flexible nature, given thematic analysis is not devoted to a single ontological or epistemological stance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is in line with the mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Furthermore, thematic analysis can enable researchers to present rich complex data in detail and in an accessible manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes will be identified on the basis of capturing patterns across the data set that are relevant to the research aim and objectives (Gray, 2014).

The researcher's own attitudes, values and previous knowledge (Thompson, 2012) form an integral part of the analysis in an inductive study of this nature (Gray, 2014). This study explicitly recognises this by recording the researcher's observations and thoughts (appendix J). This allows reflection on how conclusions are reached (Richards, 2015).

Bazeley (2013) suggests for thematic analysis to be effective the data must be thoroughly interrogated across the data set to ensure it enables a depth of understanding of the findings. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases the researcher transcribing the data himself as well as reading and re reading the transcripts will support the process of familiarisation with the data. This will help to generate the initial codes. In doing so this will allow the search for themes and the review of these themes. The themes will be defined and named and then presented in the findings chapters (3 & 4). Due to the volume of data that is likely to be collected over the course of the study, computer based software will be used to store, catalogue, code and analyse data. However, in recognition that a pure reliance on computerised analysis packages ignores the value of manual analysis of raw data, and can result in inaccurate conclusions being drawn (Prymachuk & Richards,

2007), each data item (Braun & Clarke, 2006) will be manually sense checked for outliers and accuracy. Furthermore, as the data are gathered there will be an ongoing process of checking for accuracy with participants by enabling them to have access to the data items. Moreover, data will be checked against the researchers' notes and personalised memos made to record observations and initial thoughts throughout the study (appendix J). This approach is aimed to develop an awareness of themes and sub themes as well as highlight connections (Bazeley, 2013)

In part one, following the manual checking of each questionnaire, data will be entered into a Microsoft EXCEL spreadsheet (appendix H) that has been designed to descriptively code and summarise the information from the questionnaires. The document is encrypted and stored on a computer that is password protected. The spreadsheet has a series of electronic pages designed to allow the researcher to easily manoeuvre through the information. The first page records each participant's agency as well as their name, contact details and willingness to participate in the second part of the study. This allows the allocation of an alpha-numerical code to each participant. These codes are used throughout the study for confidentiality purposes.

Each question from the questionnaire (appendix A) is replicated on the spreadsheet. Filters can be applied to identify variables and draw out themes (appendix H). Qualitative comments are recorded against the code of each participant for each question. Using the find and select option allows the identification of reoccurring words and phrases. These will be descriptively categorised into topics to initially identify themes (Richards, 2015). Each theme will be analysed by the researcher to draw emerging theories.

The second part of the study involves two face to face interviews (appendix B & C) with each adoptive couple or single applicant. These collect qualitative data. Each interview will be digitally recorded. This will allow the researcher to clarify areas, explore emerging themes and make interpretative notes of observations, thoughts and ideas. The recorded interviews will be transcribed by the researcher.

Transcription will be time consuming however, as suggested earlier in this section it is integral to the analysis process as it allows the researcher to apply theory and add interpretative comments and thoughts throughout (Silverman, 2011). This is vital to

inductive data analyses and enables themes to be built up from the data and theory to be developed (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Furthermore, transcription by the researcher will ensure confidentiality and will reduce the loss of meaning. To check the accuracy of the data, participants will be given the opportunity to read and comment upon the transcripts.

Following the manual analysis of the data described above, NVIVO, a computer based software for the analysis of qualitative information, will be used to further interrogate the data. Identification of issues that occur and reoccur by participants within their individual interviews as well as those that are repeated across the data corpus are likely to be significant themes (appendix I).

The third part of the study involves the collection of qualitative data through semi structured interviews (appendix D) of small focus groups (no more than six participants per group) of professionals involved in the adoption process. These interviews will also be digitally recorded. Again, this will allow the researcher to explore issues and make notes throughout as described above. However, the number of participants per group and the limited amount of time professionals will have in each session is likely to make it very difficult to transcribe the full interview accurately. Instead the researcher will transcribe key themes that re-emerge, issues that raise strength of feelings, analogies and important quotes. The researcher will make notes of thoughts and observations during the transcription process (appendix K). NVIVO will also be used as it was in part two (appendix I).

It is recognised that NVIVO is only a tool that will assist the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yin, 2009). Analysis requires rigorous and careful study of the data and judgement by the researcher to identify patterns and report the importance of issues (Yin, 2009). It is not guaranteed that issues that emerge with the greatest frequency are necessarily the most significant. The strength of feeling behind the issue as well as the researcher's own ideas, theoretical knowledge of adoption and judgment, is likely to influence the decisions regarding the ranking of themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Metaphors and analogies can be powerful and highlight potential themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). However, it is important to recognise that culture impacts on the interpretation of the meaning. Due to the geographical distance between each

of the case studies in this research, it is vital that understanding and interpretation is checked with the participants, at the time of interview.

The researcher recognises that personal experience, learning, attitudes and values will impact on the process and findings (Thompson, 2012). Theory is a human construct and does not simply appear (Richards, 2015). The data in this study will be carefully explored by the researcher and theory will be applied to interpret the data to develop a depth of understanding. The findings are presented in chapters 3 and 4.

2.16 Summary

This chapter discusses the philosophical underpinning of the study. Furthermore, it explains and justifies the use of the mixed methods research design that utilises a case study approach (Yin, 2009) where the data is collected sequentially. Indeed, the longitudinal approach of the study distinguishes it from many other studies into adoption. Part one of the study uses a questionnaire (appendix A) to gather quantitative and some qualitative data from adopters. Part two involves up to two face to face interviews (appendix B & C) with adopters. The first interview either just before or after their approval and the second after a child has been matched or has been placed with them. Part three consists of interviews with small (up to six) focus groups of professionals (appendix D) to triangulate the data. Figure 2.1 (p 54) illustrates the overall research design.

Ethical issues that may arise are considered and explanations of how these will be addressed are given. The study has received ethical approval (appendix E1, E2, & E3).

Implications for resources and the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sample of participants are set out. The chapter concludes by explaining the thematic analysis process that is used throughout the study.

Chapter 3 Quantitative Findings

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results from part one of this research study. At this stage, prospective adopters were asked to complete a questionnaire (appendix A). In line with the research design (figure 2.1 p54) the prospective adopters' application to adopt had been accepted by an adoption agency however, they were still in the early stages of the adoption process. This first part gathered data about participants' motivation to adopt, the type of child or children that they wished to adopt and their perceptions of the process in its early stages. Capturing the data allowed the study to consider whether this early stage of the adoption process impacts on adopters' perceptions of the effectiveness of the process and input from professionals as adopters continue through their journey. Furthermore, having a snap shot of data at this stage allowed the study to assess whether the adoption process, including the information provided, assessment, training and approval processes impacted on participants' decisions and experiences during the latter stages of the adoption.

The chapter includes the demographic details of the sample of prospective adopter participants and their responses to the questionnaire (appendix A). The key issues considered include the reasons participants chose to apply to adopt as well as their choice of adoption agencies. The results also consider the adopters' awareness of and feelings about the assessment process in the early stages of their application, whether they felt able to discuss issues with the Social Worker freely and openly, their views about the adoption preparation training and any support they received. Data is also presented about the type of child the prospective adopters ideally sought to adopt including the age, number of children, gender, race, ethnicity, religions and needs. The results are explained using text, figures, tables and graphs. The final section of the chapter discusses key issues arising from the findings from part one.

3.2 Results

A total of twelve agencies were contacted. Five agencies responded. The researcher discussed the study with the management of each agency in person to explain the study. All five agencies agreed to participate. Each agency is considered as one case study and coded with a letter A, B, C, D, E to identify the agency and maintain

confidentiality. It is important to note that while it had initially been envisaged that the researcher would give adopter participants the questionnaires (appendix A) during the first day of the adoption training this was not possible for agency C. At the time the data was collected agency C did not provide the training at the start of the process. To capture data from adopters of agency C at the earliest stage of their application it was agreed with agency C that assessing Social Workers would be asked to take the questionnaires, participant information and opt in forms (appendix A & A1) with them when visiting prospective adopters and ask them to consider participation. Prospective adopters wishing to participate were asked to return the completed questionnaires and opt in forms directly to the researcher using a stamped addressed envelope provided. A briefing session was held by the researcher for Social Workers who agreed to take questionnaires to the prospective adopters that they were assessing.

A total of 100 questionnaires were printed. However, the agencies differed in size and had varying numbers of prospective adopter applicants. Furthermore, it was not possible to keep an exact record of the number of questionnaires handed out in all cases, therefore, the exact response rate cannot be commented upon. Where the response rate is known, it is reflected in Table 3.1 (p 73). To ensure confidentiality and to allow tracking of participants as the study progressed, each returned questionnaire was coded with the letter of the agency and a number to identify each participant, for example, A1, B1, C1, D1 and E1. Qualitative comments from participants are presented in italics and indented.

The sample of data from agency A was from the pilot study. As explained earlier (2.6 p56) this was considered appropriate as no changes were made to the questionnaire. The researcher had verbally explained this to the participants at the training session before they completed the questionnaires. Participants had agreed for the data to be included in the main study.

The demographic details of the sample are highlighted in Table 3.1 (p73). The categories used to identify ethnicity can be seen on the questionnaire (appendix A).

Demographics of the Sample		
Questionnaires returned from Agencies	Number returned	Response Rate
Agency A	10	100%
Agency B	13	Not known
Agency C	5	Not Known
Agency D	2	66%
Agency E	5	83%
Total number of questionnaires returned	35	
Total Number of Individuals	66	
Number of Applicants in a relationship	62	
Single applicants	4	
White British	57	
White "Other"	2 (1 Couple)	
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	2	
Indian	4	
Caribbean	1 (single applicant)	
Same sex relationships	0	
Age in years		
21-30	8	
31-40	32	
41-50	25	
50+	1	

Table 3.1

3.3 Decision to adopt a child

In response to question 2 '*Why have you decided to adopt?*' The majority (83%) of the total sample (n=35) indicated it was to start a family; 14% had applied to extend their family through adoption and 3% had already adopted and wished to adopt a second child.

3.4 Choice of adoption agency

Questions three and four (appendix A) focused on the reasons for participants' choice of agency and their main sources of information about adoption before they contacted the agency. More than half (57%) of the participants had applied to their Local Authority adoption service. Some (23%) stated their chosen agency had been recommended to them by someone else. The remaining 20% had selected the '*other*' option. The data shows that these applicants had chosen to apply to a voluntary adoption agency. Throughout the questionnaire (appendix A) participants were given the option to provide qualitative comments. Many (67%) commented that

they had found information about their chosen agency on the internet. Adopters C2 said that they had:

'plucked up the courage to call'

and had liked the approach of the call handler. Of the remaining participants that commented, 16.5% stated that they worked for their local authority hence could not apply to it. The other 16.5% said they had contacted their local authority and had felt the agency was not interested in their application.

Participants were asked to indicate their main sources of information about adoption before they had contacted the agency. The questionnaire (appendix A) allowed participants to select more than one source. More than half (63%) indicated that the internet was one of the main sources of information. Less than half (41%) stated friends had been a key source. Approximately a third (31%) indicated television and newspapers and 17% had got information from family members.

3.5 Assessment

Questions five to ten (appendix A) focused on participants' awareness of the requirement for an assessment by a Social Worker, their feelings about this and to what extent they felt able to discuss issues with the Social Worker freely and openly. All most all (97%) of the respondents stated that they were aware of the requirement for an assessment (question five) by a Social Worker (question six). In response to question 7 (appendix A) NVIVO 10 software was used to create the word cloud presented in Figure 3.1 (p75). The size of the word in the cloud indicates the frequency that the word was repeated in responses

Feelings about being assessed to adopt before meeting the Social Worker

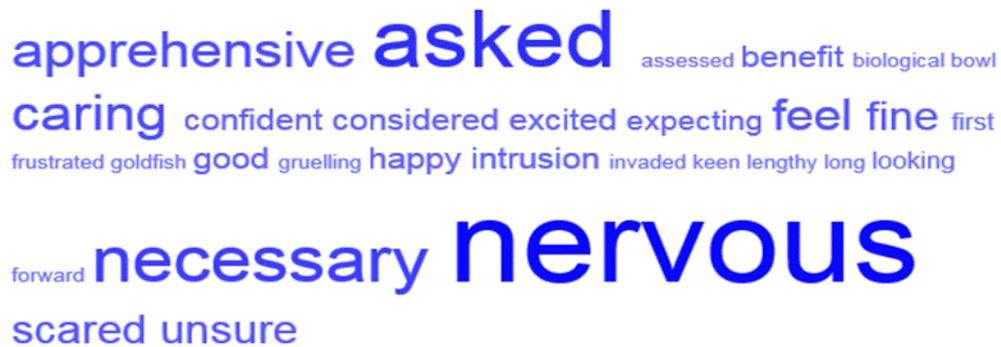


Figure 3.1

The findings suggest that feelings of nervousness, anxiety and being under scrutiny were common. For example, couple B2 commented:

We feel like goldfish in a bowl.

Table 3.2 below shows responses to question eight (appendix A) that asked whether their feelings had changed after meeting the Social Worker.

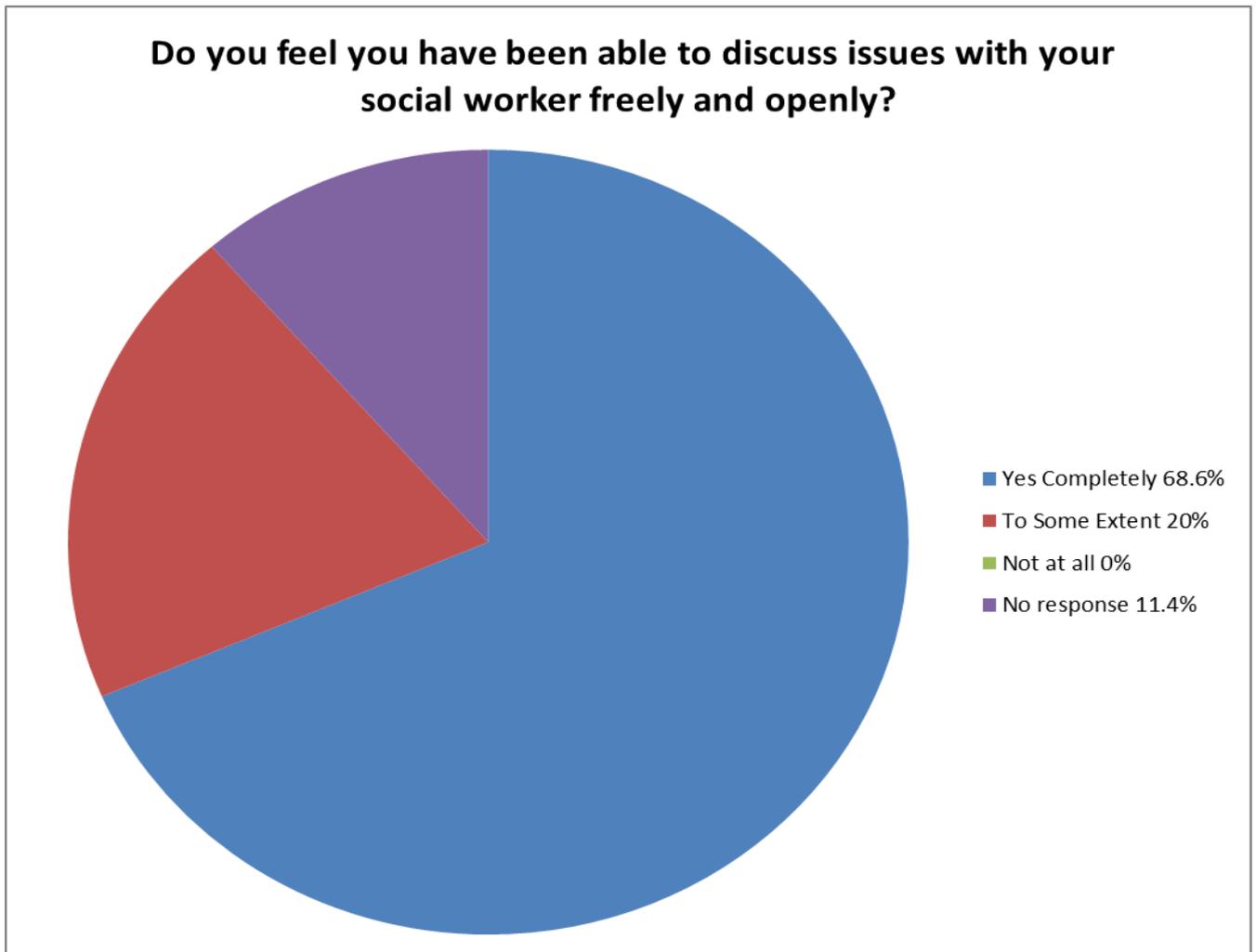
Changes in feelings after meeting the Social Worker

	%
Yes	31%
No	54%
Had not yet met the Social Worker	9%
No response	6%

Table 3.2

The 31% that answered yes reported that the degree of nervousness and anxiety had reduced by varying levels since meeting the Social Worker. Those that reported no did not elaborate any further.

Participants' were asked about whether they felt able to discuss issues with their Social Worker freely and openly (question nine appendix A). The results are shown in graph 3.1.



Graph 3.1

Qualitative comments from question ten (appendix A) indicated that the reasons that participants who had said yes completely in graph 3.1 related to professional practice by the Social Worker. Couple A1 stated that the Social Worker made them feel at ease by her statement:

You are not being judged just assessed.

Other comments from this group referred to having confidence in the Social Workers due to their honesty, friendliness, openness, easy to talk to and professional experience.

In comparison those that had stated: “*to some extent*” felt that some of the Social Workers questions were very basic and there was a degree of duplication in questions. Furthermore, these participants were concerned about saying something that might be construed in a negative manner.

The word cloud in Figure 3.2 shows the word frequency to illustrate participants’ statements about what had made them feel the way they did after meeting the Social Worker. The size of the word indicates the frequency that the word was repeated in responses

Feelings about the Social Worker after meeting them



Figure 3.2.

The issue of adopters' feelings towards the assessment are explored further in the qualitative second part (chapter 4) of the study with those that chose to participate. However, it is evident that the approach of the Social Worker had a significant impact on enabling participants to feel more at ease.

3.6 Adoption preparation training

As the adoption preparation process requires attendance at training that is provided by the chosen adoption agency, question eleven (appendix A) asked participants if this requirement had been discussed with them. All of participants confirmed that it had been. Question twelve (appendix A) explored participants' feelings about attending the training. While some participants expressed a degree of nervousness and anxiety, these related to concerns about the possibility of taking part in role plays, feeling shy and wanting to make a good impression. However, overall participants expressed positive thoughts about training and felt it would enable them to understand the process, ask questions, gain more information and provide opportunities to network with other people in similar situations to themselves. The key words used by participants to describe their feelings about the training (question 12 appendix A) are illustrated in Figure 3.3 (p79).

Feelings about attending training

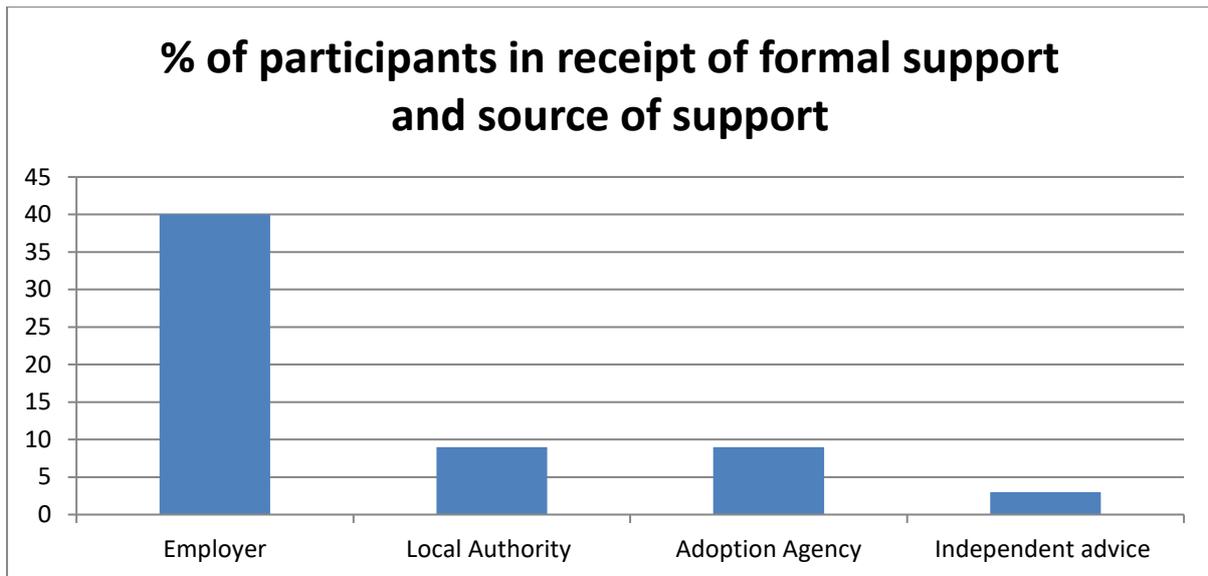


Figure 3.3

At this stage the data suggests that participants believed the training was an important part of the process. It would enable them to network with other people in similar situations, provide them with more information as well as develop skills required to care for an adopted child. Participants' feelings about the value of training are explored further in the qualitative second and third parts (chapter 4) of this study.

3.7 Support

Participants were asked if they received any informal or formal support in relation to their application to adopt (question thirteen appendix A). Most (94%) felt they had access to informal support from their friends and family. Only 3% felt they did not receive any informal support and 3% did not respond. However, the results for access to formal support were significantly different. These results are shown in graph 3.2 (p80).



Graph 3.2

It is not known whether all the applicants were in employment, however, at this early stage of the process only 40% of participants felt they were supported by their employers. It is important to question the impact this may have had on adopters' ability to fully engage with the adoption process. It is also of interest that while all the participants were being assessed by either a local authority or voluntary adoption agency very few saw these as sources of formal support. Furthermore, the awareness of access to independent advice appears to be very low. Access to informal and formal support as well as willingness to seek support are followed through in the qualitative second and third parts (chapter 4) of this study.

3.8 The Child

Questions fourteen to eighteen (appendix A) asked participants about the type of child they would like to adopt in relation to age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, the number of children as well as their willingness to consider a range of needs a child in care may have as well as the traumatic experiences they may have faced.

To support participants understanding and promote consistency in completing the questions race was defined as:

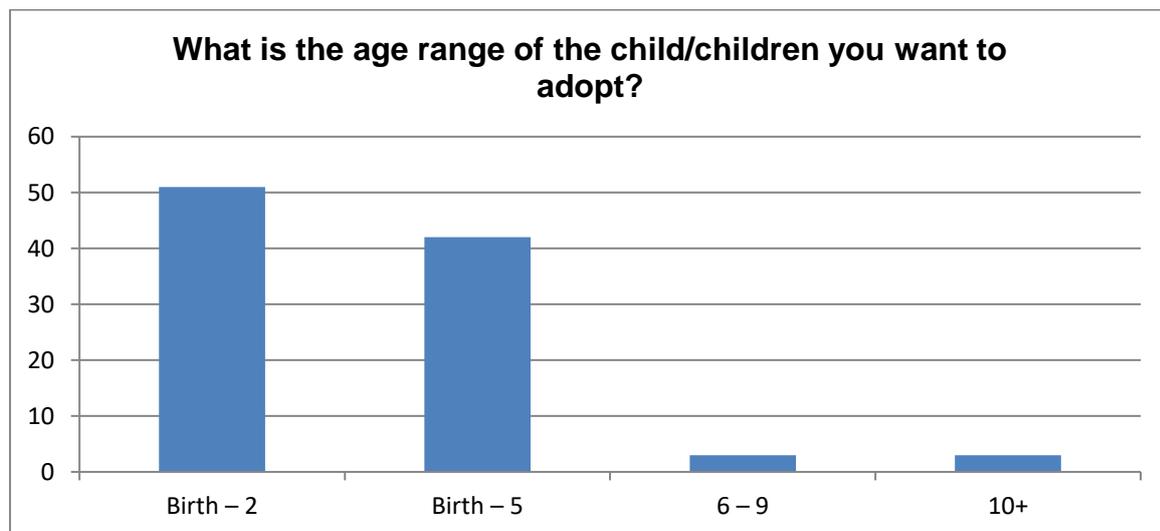
physical variations singled out by members of a community or society as socially significant (Giddens, 2006, p486).

Ethnicity was defined as:

the cultural practices and outlooks of a given community that set them apart from others (Giddens, 2006, p487).

Graphs 3.3 to 3.7 (p81 – p84) present the data generated from questions fourteen to eighteen (appendix A) in percentage terms. Graph 3.3 illustrates the ages of the children that the participants wished to adopt.

Age of the child/children



Graph 3.3

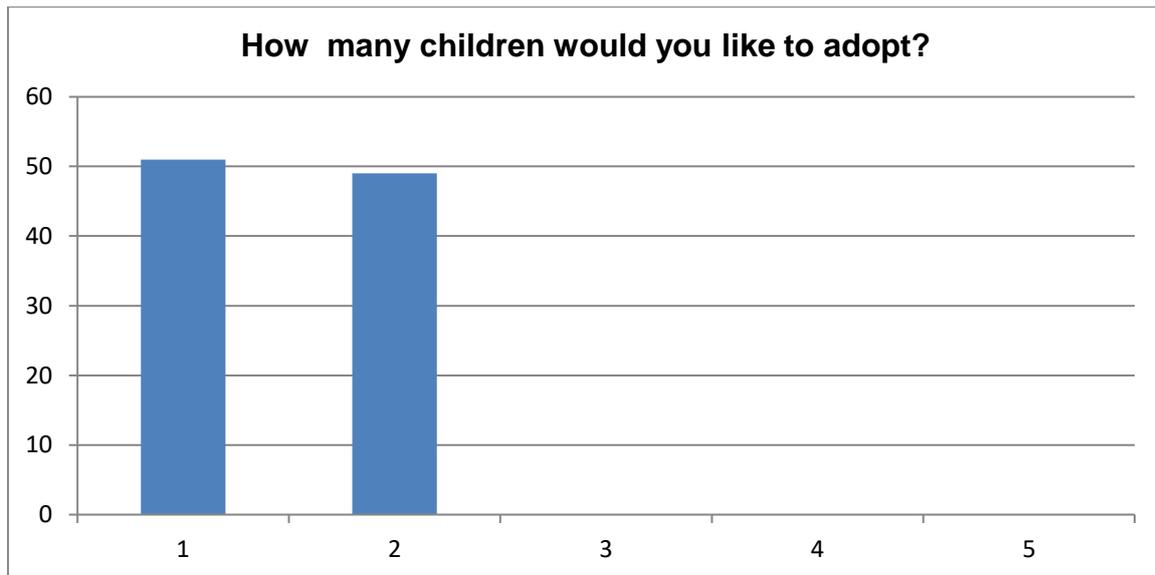
It is of interest to note that 96% of the sample wanted to adopt a child under the age of five with over 53% wanting a child under the age of two. Qualitative comments from participants suggested that the desire to adopt younger children related to the wish to have more time to bond with children, to experience the early developmental stages, the likelihood that the child would have experienced less traumatic and abuse experiences and to fit in with children already in the family. Participant D2, a single female prospective adopter who had indicated she wished to adopt one child aged three to five, stated:

I am a single adopter so I have to be realistic.

Couple C2 indicated they would consider a child from birth to ten plus because one of the partners was older and thus stated:

We don't expect to get a baby.

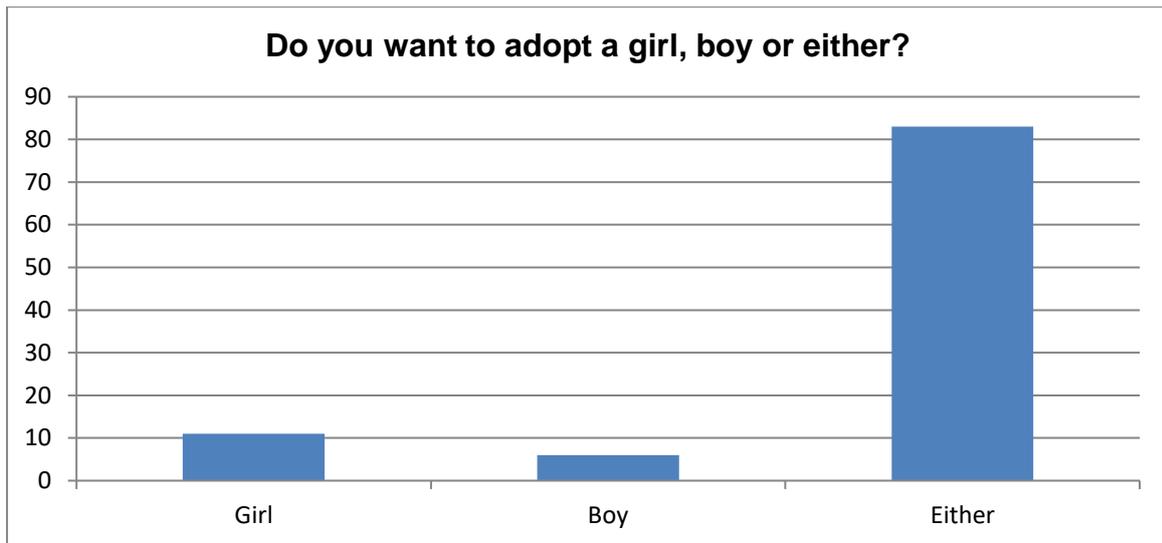
Graph 3.4 shows the number of children participants would like to adopt.



Graph 3.4 Number of children

The key reasons participants limited the number of children to one or two were financial considerations, size of their accommodation, to fit in with children already in the family and that this would be the first time they would be parents.

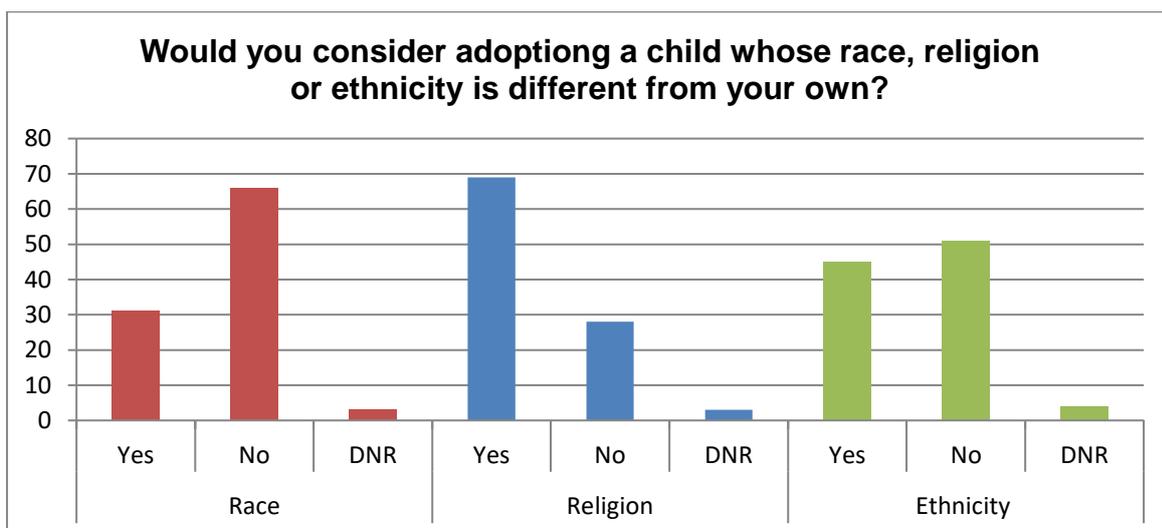
To understand the significance of child's gender participants were asked whether they would prefer to adopt a boy or a girl. The data is presented in graph 3.5 (p83).



Graph 3.5

The majority (81%) of participants did not state any preference in relation to gender. The common theme was that they would welcome the opportunity to parent a child regardless of gender. Those that did express a preference stated they had children in the family of the same gender or that one of the partners had children of the opposite gender already and their decision would give balance to the family.

Participants were also asked about their preferences in relation to the child's race, religion and ethnicity being different to their own. The data is presented in graph 3.6.



Graph 3.6

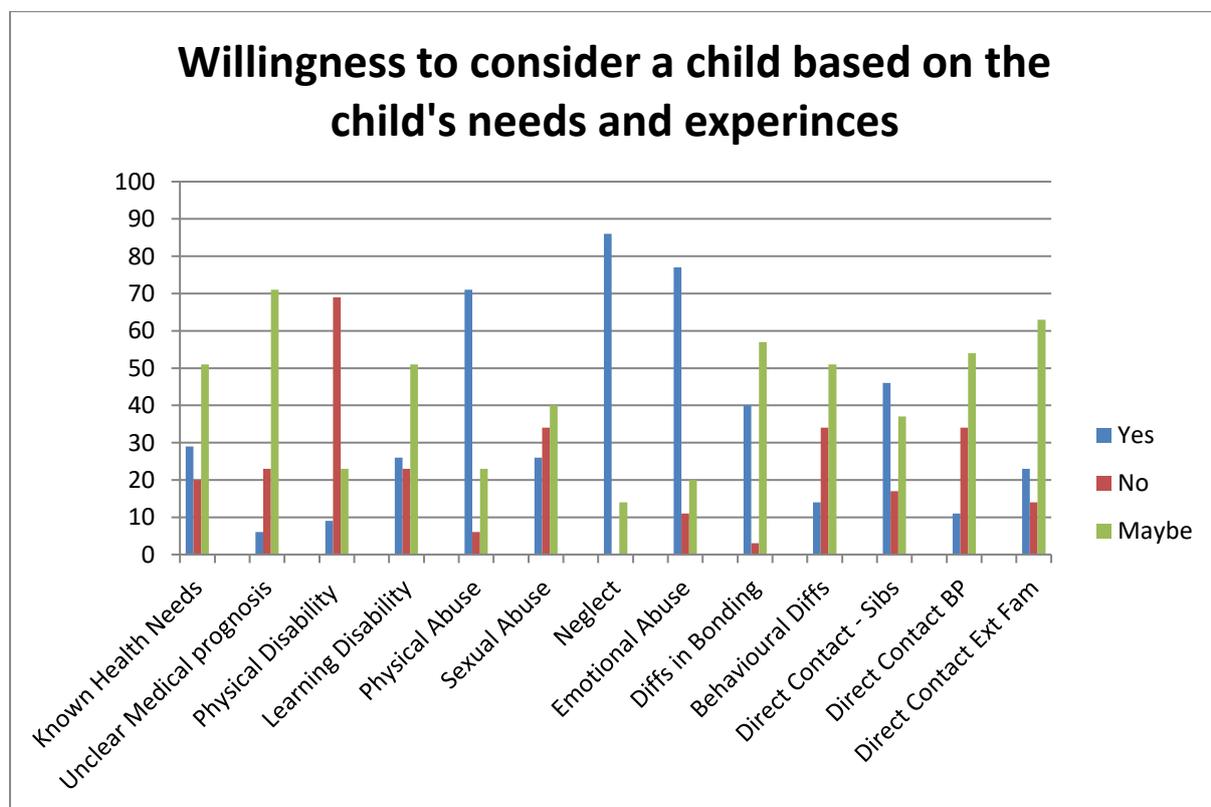
Qualitative comments from participants particularly focused on issues of the best match and race. Participants expressed concerns for the welfare of children in relation to transracial adoption. A comment by participant A5 illustrates this:

Children have enough stigma and possible bullying in their younger life without living with a family who resemble something totally different to themselves. I feel it would be unfair to add any further ammunition that may be used against them.

Alternatively, those that felt able to adopt a child of a different race, religion or ethnicity felt they would focus on the child regardless. Participant D1 commented:

The important thing is the child, not their race, religion or ethnicity although we would obviously promote knowledge of this.

Question eighteen (appendix A) focused on participants' willingness to consider a child based on a range of physical, emotional, medical needs and possible abuse a child may have experienced. The criteria used are explained in the methods chapter. The results are presented in graph 3.7 below.



Graph 3.7

Findings suggest that 69% of participants were not willing to consider a child with physical disabilities. In comparison, all the participants were willing to consider children that may have been neglected, only 6% felt unable to consider a child that may have suffered physical abuse, 11% were unwilling to consider a child that may have suffered emotional abuse and only 3% said they would not consider a child who may have difficulties in bonding. However, 34% said they would not consider a child with overt behavioural difficulties, 51% said they may be willing to and only 14% said yes. Participants did appear to have more concerns about direct contact with birth parents with 90% saying no or maybe compared to contact with birth siblings and extended family members. This is explored further in the second part of the study (chapter 4).

Over half (54%) of the sample indicated that the issues outlined in question eighteen (appendix A) had been discussed with them by the Social Worker (question nineteen appendix A). However, qualitative comments in questions twenty and twenty-one (appendix A) indicated that all participants were still in the very early stages of the process and had either just had one visit by a Social Worker or were still in the very early stages of the training.

Discussion

3.9 Decision to apply to adopt

The data from question two (appendix A) suggests that the participants' application to adopt was related to involuntary childlessness. Indeed, adoption was a means to starting or extending participants' families. While authors over time (Rowe & Lambert, 1973; Fahlberg, 1991; Cudmore, 2005) have recognised this there has been little in depth consideration of it. The findings of this study indicate that this is an ongoing theme. However, the decision to adopt a child following the realisation that it is not possible to have a biological child is very personal and is not automatic (Crawshaw & Balen, 2010). It is therefore surprising that there is currently very limited research on this. The qualitative comments from question three (appendix A) suggest that having contacted the agencies the approach of the call handler from the agency had a significant impact on the participants' decision to make the formal application. While this was not the primary focus of the research it is an area that is explored further (chapter 4) as the investigation seeks to assess the impact of the adoption process on participants.

3.10 Assessment

While participants understood that the assessment was necessary they expressed varying degrees of anxiety, nervousness, fear and apprehension. To some extent it is natural for most people to feel some anxiety when being assessed. However, it is important to recognize that in this instance participants' emotional, physical and mental wellbeing may have already been eroded if they had undergone any period of fertility treatment (Young, 2007). Furthermore, involuntary childlessness can reinforce self-perceptions of being abnormal (Dominelli, 2002) or broken (Turner, 1999), hence they may have been even more sensitive to the prospect of being assessed. Moreover, there is a significant power imbalance between prospective adopters and Social Workers during the assessment that has a life changing impact on adopters (Smith, 2008). This may explain the feelings participants expressed. Thompson (2009) argues that a professional who promotes partnership can make being assessed a positive experience and build trust. The data (Graph 3.1 p74) indicates that the approach of Social Workers had enabled 68.6% of participants to discuss issues freely and 20% to discuss issues to some extent. Thompson (2009) argues self-disclosure can invoke feelings of fear. The approach of the professional can have a significant impact on enabling individuals to trust and disclose personal information. In this early stage of the study the data suggests 88.6% of participants were trusting of professionals to some extent. This is explored in more detail later (chapters 4 & 5).

3.11 Training

Training was considered an important part of the process to gain more information and develop skills required to care for an adopted child. However, another strong motivation was to network with others. The experience of involuntary childlessness can invoke self-perceptions of abnormality due to children being a significant part of the concept of the normal family (Parry, 2005). Furthermore, it can have a detrimental impact on individuals' lives and lead to strong feelings of isolation (Young, 2007). The training may have offered the first opportunity to meet and develop networks with others facing similar issues. The value and perceptions of training are explored further in the latter stages of this study.

3.12 The children participants were willing to consider

Apart from one couple all participants wanted to adopt a child under the age of five (graph 3.3 p81). The only reason given for a willingness to consider children over five was that one of the partners was over the age of 50 and considered to be '*older*', hence the couple '*did not expect to get a baby*'. In contrast the total number of children in care in England in 2014 under the age of one was 6% and the total number of children under the age of four in care was 18% (DfE, 2014c). It is important to remember that only 9% of the total number of children in care were waiting for adoption in 2014 (DfE, 2014c) (the data does not show the ages of children in care waiting for adoption).

Participants limited the number of children to two or under due to lack of parenting experience, practical considerations including accommodation size and financial considerations. While the first two issues are understandable the data does suggest that some participants may have been willing to consider larger sibling groups if effective financial support arrangements were in place. This is an area which may need focus when developing support services; however, it is not within the remit of this study.

In this sample the gender of the child did not appear to have a significant impact on participants' willingness to consider a child.

3.13 Race religion and ethnicity

The data shows participants had a preference to adopt a child that resembled them. In particular this related to racial origin. Two recurring reasons were to easily integrate the child into their family and concerns for the child's welfare. Participants expressed worries about the potential of a child from a different racial origin being bullied and stigmatised, especially at school. Further worries were in relation to the child's future identity needs.

It is important to note that those participants that did state they would consider a child from a different racial origin were either in a relationship where the partners were of different racial origins themselves and/or felt the attachment needs of children were a priority. However, given the choice they would have preferred to adopt a child that resembled themselves. They recognised the difference but stated they would be able to meet the racial and cultural needs of the child. Triseliotis

(2000) suggests this is a positive approach rather than denying difference. However, this also reinforces the importance participants placed on having a child that is of the same race in terms of physical likeness. This is explored further in the latter parts of this study (chapter 4).

Interestingly successive governments policy since the Prime Minister's review of Adoption (PIU, 2000) has increasingly focused on the use of transracial adoption as a means of securing permanence for children from BAME communities. Indeed, it is suggested that the main barrier to transracial adoption is a professional:

belief in a perfect or near perfect match' (DfE, 2011a, p21).

These findings suggest that adopters are equally concerned about transracial adoption. Furthermore, it is notable that despite this study recruiting participants from five different agencies within an 80-mile radius of the researcher's base only seven out of a total sixty-six individuals identified themselves as being Mixed (White and Black Caribbean), Indian and Caribbean origin. The findings suggest a need to focus on recruiting more BAME adopters in addition to the recent increased focus on adoption in general if more BAME children are to be placed for adoption (Jakhara, 2014).

3.14 Disability

Question eighteen did not specify the degree of need a child may have; however, despite this, 69% of participants (graph 3.7 p84) stated that they would not be willing to consider adopting a child with a physical disability. This suggests participants assumed it meant the child having a significant degree of need. As there is no qualitative data from this part of the study the specific reasons are not known. However, the data suggests that the term physical disability continues to invoke a fear response (Goodwin, Thurmeier & Gustason, 2004). This is possibly due to ongoing societal assumptions that physically disabled children will continue to be dependent (Dominelli, 2002) throughout their lives. This does have significant implications about the quality of information provided when finding families for children with disabilities (Jakhara, 2014). This is explored further in chapters 4 and 5.

3.15 Neglect and emotional abuse

The data presented in graph 3.7 (p84) regarding the willingness to consider adopting a child, who may have been neglected and emotionally abused, suggests a desire to rescue children and alleviate their distress (Jakhara, 2014). This can be a powerful and compassionate instinct, which is necessary for the task of adoption, but one that is also closely linked with the need to be appreciated (Gilbert, 2009). However, participants' responses about the willingness to consider children that may exhibit overt behavioural difficulties reduced dramatically. This suggests that at this stage many participants were not able to understand the connections between children's past experiences and potential behavioural issues (Jakhara, 2014). Children that have suffered significant trauma are unlikely to be able to demonstrate appreciation for the care they receive (Hughes, 2012), and that may result in adopters feeling let down as placements proceed. The adoption training is intended to play a significant part in enabling adopters to understand the needs of children. The effectiveness of this is considered in the later stages (chapters 4 & 5) of this study.

3.16 Summary

The findings of this part of the research indicate that the main motivation to adopt continues to be to start or extend the family. Prospective adopters continue to wish to adopt a child as young as possible and who bears some physical resemblance to the adopters and their family. At this stage participants were positive about training, but commonly expressed feelings of anxiety and nervousness about the assessment. This suggests adopters are acutely aware of the power imbalance between professionals and themselves. The recommendations that professionals make are likely to have a life changing impact on adopters, hence they are keen to make a good impression. However, the professional style of individual Social Workers is key to adopters choosing to apply to an agency as well as feeling able to discuss issues freely and openly.

The concept of physical disability appears to lead to assumptions about a high degree of need, hence few participants were willing to adopt physically disabled children. However, participants did appear to be driven to rescue children that may have been neglected or emotionally abused. However, many participants did not

appear to recognise a possible connection between the experiences and behaviour of the child.

Chapter 4 Qualitative Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings from parts two and three of the study. Data from up to two interviews (appendix B and C) with a sample of adopters, is triangulated with data collected from interviews (appendix D) with four small (up to six participants) focus groups of professionals involved in the adoption process. The sample of adopters had consented to their ongoing participation in the study from part one. The inclusion of Social Workers and their managers in the study was explained to adopters during the initial briefing in part one of the study (2.7 p56) and had been explained to them at the start of the interviews in part two. The focus groups consisted of staff from four of the five agencies that participated in the study. It was not possible to arrange an interview with agency C (voluntary agency) due to significant changes in its management structure. Professionals were not required to have had any involvement with the sample of adopters. To have required this could have compromised the anonymity of the adopters.

Silverman (2014) suggests that quantitative data alone can exclude important qualitative information that can be gained through conversations as well as observations of behaviour and phenomena in everyday situations. Indeed, the qualitative data from this study provides rich, descriptive and contextual information that supports a depth of analysis of the adopters and professionals' perceptions and experiences. Significantly, the face to face interviews supported an exploration of issues and themes as the researcher was able to ask supplementary questions for purposes of clarity (Silverman, 2014) during the conversations. Furthermore, by taking the questionnaire (appendix A) that the adopters had completed in part one of the study to the interviews with the adopters, the qualitative part of the study also allowed a checking and clarification of aspects of the data from part one of the study. Moreover, it was also possible to explore how adopters wishes, feelings and perceptions had changed over the different parts of the study. This was important for validity purposes, (Richards, 2015).

Adopters and agencies are identified using the code that was allocated in part one of the study (3.2 p71). These are presented in tables 4.1 and 4.2 (p93 & p94).

NVIVO 10 software was used to assist in sorting and analysing the qualitative data. Nine key themes emerged from the data. These include:

- Choosing adoption to start or extend a family
- Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption
- Inflexibility and the competing demands on time
- Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC
- Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process
- Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters
- The adopter and child synergy
- Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement
- Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal

Participants' voices are expressed throughout using quotes that are indented and italicised. It should be assumed that both partners of an adopter couple agreed with the statements unless stated otherwise. This is also the case for professionals in the focus groups.

4.2 The sample

Three single applicants and twenty-two couples initially agreed to participate in part two of the study. They were all contacted; however, only eight couples and two single applicants responded. One further email reminder was sent; however, due to the sensitive nature of the adoption process it was decided not to further pursue those who had not responded. It is significant to note that of those that did respond, none of the BAME participants had been able to progress their applications to adopt. In one case the agency had put the application on hold for reasons that were unclear to the applicant. One couple's relationship had ended, in part due to the intrusive nature of the adoption assessment process. The feelings of intrusion were exacerbated for cultural reasons. Furthermore, one couple (second time adopters) could not participate due to the siblings of their adopted children being placed with them earlier than anticipated. Significantly, as indicated in table 3.1 (p73) there were no same sex adopters in this sample. Furthermore, the one single adopter who participated in part two was not asked about her sexuality as that would have been intrusive and inappropriate. It was therefore not possible to select a purposeful sample of participants based on diversity as envisaged in the methodology.

The characteristics of adopters that participated is set out in Table 4.1 (page 93).

Adopter participants

Participant Code	Couple/Single	Ethnicity	Occupation	Number of Interviews
A2	Couple	White British	Professional	2
B1	Couple	White British	Managerial/ Professional	2
B2	Couple	White British	Managerial/ Professional	2
C1	Couple	White British	Professional/ Self employed	2
C2	Couple	White British	Managerial/ Professional	1
D2	Single	White British	Professional	2
E5	Couple	White British	Professional	2

Table 4.1

(N.B: Throughout this chapter an F or M is added to the code to identify female and male participants respectively)

The sample of professionals was made up of adoption Social Workers and managers from four of the five agencies that participated in the study. A focus group discussion was facilitated for each agency. This was not possible for agency C due to significant changes in the management structure that resulted in that agency not responding to requests to arrange a group discussion. The characteristics of the groups are set out in table 4.2 (p94). As explained earlier (2.7 p58) adopter participants had been made aware of the involvement of Social Workers and social work managers in the study during the initial briefing. The researcher also reminded adopter participants at the beginning of each of the interviews as part of the consent process.

Focus groups of professionals

Agency	Type	Number of participants in the group
A	Local Authority	3
B	Local Authority	2
D	Voluntary Adoption Agency	3
E	Voluntary Adoption Agency	6

Table 4.2

All participants were white and able bodied. Gender is not disclosed for confidentiality purposes.

4.3 Choosing adoption to start or extend a family

Except for adopter D2F who is single and had chosen adoption to start her family, the decision to adopt for all other participants was due to them not being able to have a birth child for medical reasons. In line with Jennings, Mellish, Tasker, Lamb, Golombok (2014) findings, the data confirmed that adopters saw having a child as the next natural step in their lives. As discussed in the literature review (1.11 p32) this was an important part of their feelings of inclusion (Schmidt, 2010). As suggested by Becker and Nachtigall (1992), adopters' accounts commonly confirmed that following a diagnosis, medical professionals were quick to promote intrusive and expensive medical interventions as a cure for infertility. Participants B1 explained that the treatment had had a profound physical, emotional and financial impact on them.

B1F said:

A horrible journey. Really testing, physically, mentally, emotionally very draining and at that point we thought do we really want to do this again? It's not cheap. It takes its toll on family life, on everything. Its emotional impact is severe.

Remarkably, adopters compared doctors to sales people and said that if they declined the offer of treatment due to personal beliefs, or decided to not have further treatment, then medical professionals lost interest. This is illustrated by B2F's comment:

They don't give you any information at the doctors about adoption. All they want to do is refer you to their mate who's going to earn an absolute mint out of you from IVF. He said: "I've got a friend I can refer

you to” ... It’s just money, money, money. At that point we left the practice... We were on our own then.

Significantly, no further support or advice was offered. The option of adoption was never mentioned. Whilst this is not part of this investigation, it suggests a gap in current provision by health and social care agencies.

All the adopters commented that they had contemplated adoption for several years before making a formal application to adopt. C1F said:

We had (name of child) nearly 9 years ago ... I just haven’t been able to get pregnant since ... We accepted it wasn’t happening. As the years went we decided on adoption.

However, when eventually contacting adoption agencies all the adopters said that professionals were not accepting of the fact that their decision to apply to adopt was considered and not a knee jerk reaction to finding out they could not have a birth child.

Interestingly professionals from all the groups expressed concerns about some applicants choosing to apply too soon. A few examples of couples applying to adopt while still considering medical treatment appeared to focus the professionals’ attention on the need to counsel out applicants who were not deemed to have come to terms with infertility. A participant from agency A said:

If they have just finished IVF... They need to wait six months, then come back to us when they have got over the loss of not having a birth child.

While there is no evidence to support this simplistic approach, it was commonly applied by all the agencies.

Ironically choosing to adopt (1.11 p32) to fulfil their desire to become parents and fit in by conforming to family and societal expectations (Schmidt, 2010) was immediately questioned by all the professionals. A professional from agency E said:

It’s about placing children... Not about solving infertility... the children’s needs are always paramount.

The professionals’ attitudes tied closely with existing literature on the needs of children in care and the concept of permanence (1.8 p20). It is of significance that expectant birth parents are encouraged by family, friends and wider society to focus on the positives of having children. Indeed, the challenges of childcare are frequently

presented, in a nostalgic manner, as part of the joys of parenting. In stark contrast, adopters were immediately presented, with the difficulties of caring for damaged children.

Adopters A2F said:

They showed us a video of a child ... how it develops ... Like this is what you could have had but you're not having a kid like that you're getting a damaged one.

For individuals who had come to adoption because of involuntary childlessness, and already saw themselves as broken, it potentially reinforced messages that they were only worthy of caring for malfunctioning children. This is not considered in existing literature and there was little acknowledgment by professionals from the focus groups of the adopters' need and desire to be parents. Indeed, professional participants did not appear to recognise that as an important part of enabling adopters to meet the children's needs. Instead, in line with existing literature (1.10 p30), professionals stressed the need to assess and manage the risk of adopters not coping and the children returning to the care system. This indicates a lack of balance to the current approach of assessment. This is considered further later in this chapter (4.15 p109). While it is not part of this research it does raise questions about this approach. The impact of traumatic experiences on children's behaviours and needs is undeniable. However, this sole focus may lead to children being dehumanised and could lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy in some cases.

4.4 Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption

The data from this study suggests that ample information was available to adopters at all stages. However, the quality of the data was inconsistent and on occasion severely lacking. This was a running theme throughout the study and resulted in significant challenges for all the adopters, at different points in their journeys.

4.5 Finding out about adoption

Successive governments have considered the internet as the key means to provide adoptive applicants with necessary information (DfE, 2011a). Indeed, the internet was used by all adopters when searching for information about adoption. However, they reported varying degrees of success. Couple E5 who coincidentally lived within the area that was covered by the first adoption agency listed alphabetically found it

easy to contact the agency and get more information. Furthermore, adopters B1, B2, C1 and D2 who used information from the internet in conjunction with information from friends and family reported it was relatively easy to find and contact the agencies as well as starting their applications to adopt.

Intriguingly, adopters A2 and C2 who were very articulate and able but had relied purely on the internet and the media, reported that they found the information on the internet misleading. Adopter A2F said:

It made us believe that we wouldn't have anonymity ... from the birth parents ... A lot of them said they have weekly contact. So we'd made a decision because of that to adopt internationally.

It was not until adopters A2 spoke to a Social Worker at the third agency they contacted that they were asked why they were considering international adoption? It was only then that they were told that the information from the internet was inaccurate, hence they applied to adopt from the UK. The impact of such inaccuracies in information from the internet are not considered in existing adoption literature and require further consideration.

Significantly, when applying, none of the adopters were aware that usually only local authorities were responsible for children in care. Furthermore, even after the children had been placed none of the adopters were aware of the interagency fee (1.15 p42). To date this lack of awareness by adopters has not been discussed in other studies, hence it is therefore not known whether this may have influenced the adopters' choice of agency. Notably a search done by the researcher using the term 'adoption' (which was used by adopters A2, D2, and E5) in the same search engine on 10 October 2015 found this raised a total of 220,000,000 hits. The search suggested competition rather than collaboration between agencies to recruit adopters. Conflicting and emotive stories of children being unnecessarily removed from birth parents, as well as ones suggesting that the adoption process was unnecessarily lengthy and complex were prevalent. However, the gov.uk/child-adoption website that provided some factual information was seventh on the list and the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) that provides independent objective advice and information was thirteenth on the list.

While it is not within the remit of this study, it does raise questions about how many potential adopters are deterred from adoption or choose to adopt internationally

because of such issues. Parsloe and Leedham's (2009) work on coaching and mentoring suggests that the ability of professionals to actively listen not only to what is said but the way it is said and why furthermore, ask questions that go beyond the veneer of the initial issue presented, are essential skills required to enable a depth of understanding. However, data from the interviews with the adopters suggests that not all professionals either had this skill or used it.

4.6 Finding out about children

All professionals argued that the quality of information about the children was key to enabling adopters to make informed decisions. However, it was apparent from discussions in all the focus groups that in the experience of professionals the information provided by children's agencies beyond the initial profile, was frequently inconsistent and out of date in some cases by over ten months.

A professional from agency E stated:

It (information) varies enormously. We get the short profile which is all rosy. Occasionally some of the challenges are indicated. When we ask for the CPR the quality of those varies ... Some are very good and will provide you with up-to-date medicals, reports from foster carers, school reports. Sometimes there is a lot of copying and pasting and sometimes it can be out of date by over six to ten months. The child has changed a lot in that time.

Interestingly while the adopters were expected to understand theories of child development (4.8 p100), professionals from all groups argued that children's Social Workers did not always appreciate how much a child can change and develop even over a short period of time. This emphasises the need for up to date and accurate information. While information from children's foster carers was considered crucial by professional participants, they expressed concerns about the attitudes of some children's Social Workers towards foster carers.

A professional from agency A stated:

We are mindful that they (foster carers) have got the children 24/7... When placements don't go well the question is often: "who listened to the foster carers?" But sometimes the Social Workers are quite dismissive of them.

Furthermore, professionals expressed further concern about some children's Social Workers' skills of helping foster carers to provide balanced information, manage the carers anxieties and cope with their loss and grief resulting from children moving on.

Post their approval, all the adopters' accounts suggest that there were significant omissions from the information they were given about the children. However, the volume of information provided made it difficult to identify these. The missing information included significant details about the children including their legal status, histories, family members, past experiences and medical needs. This resulted in unnecessary anxiety and distress for adopters A2, B2, D2 and E5 as well as potential long term detrimental impact on adopters and children. It is important to note that this was a consistent message from most of the adopters interviewed across four agencies. This suggests this is a common occurrence.

In the case of adopter D2F vital information had been missed during the assessment of the child's family. This resulted in the child remaining in care and a plan for adoption being agreed. Not only did this contravene the philosophy of the Children Act 1989 (Brammer, 2015) but had a profound detrimental impact on D2F and her wider network. D2F explained:

It was due to go to Panel ... But ... when my documents went to the matching Panel one of the Panel members ... said: "He's (birth father) not missing ... and he has relatives who I would deem to be suitable" ... I'm feeling angry, generally devastated ... We had dates in place for me to meet the child ... and even meeting birth mum ... That was where my life was about to go and then it didn't ... The biggest implication is for my work ... They found somebody to cover. Somebody moved from (name of city) to here ... He shifted his entire life to cover my job ... Normally ... I would have thrown myself into work but I didn't have that either ... I'm in an office on my own which is quite isolating.

Significantly, as discussed in the literature review (1.9 p24) due to the Government's push to hasten the placement of children with adopters, the statutory need for Adoption Panels to consider whether adoption is in the best interest of the child before a plan for adoption is agreed and family finding starts was revoked because of the recommendations of the Family Justice Review (Norgrove, 2011). This lack of independent quality assurance had grave implications for adopter D2F. However, she did not feel that her Social Worker understood the emotional impact this had had on her or the ramifications of this on her, her work colleagues or her employers.

Despite local authorities having secured placement orders (section 21 Adoption and Children Act 2002, Brammer, 2015) before placing the children, adopters A2 and B2 were shocked to find that the courts had agreed to hear legal challenges by the children's birth families after the children had moved to live with them. This is considered later (4.24 p125).

In the case of adopters B2 the situation had been exacerbated due to poor communication within the child's local authority between the legal and the social work departments. The adopters had found it difficult to get accurate information which had compounded their fears. B2F explained:

We still don't know (eight weeks later) ... The Social Worker was due to visit but she was late and then phoned to say she couldn't come till the next day ... It was all because this was going on in the background. I'm massively concerned ... Knowing would have made no difference to us taking (name of child) ... But now there's that niggling feeling in the back of our minds, you feel people aren't telling you the whole truth.

B2 explained that even basic information was incorrect. For example, having received the birth certificate after the child moved in it became evident that the child's surname was different to the one used on other documentation. It is significant to note that the level of uncertainty due to such issues had undermined the adopters trust in the Social Workers as well as increased levels of stress (4.24 p125). The impact of such issues is not addressed in existing literature.

Adopters E5 reported that essential medical information about a possible serious medical condition for one of the children had been omitted. This had only become apparent on the day they were due to attend the panel to be matched to the child. E5F explained:

The Chair of the Panel said: "you haven't had this information until last night are you happy with it?" ... They dropped that on us at the last minute. We were thinking, "Oh my God" ... (Name of adopter) was going to say, "No because you've just dropped this on us" ... I said if you say, "No" ... I think they will stop the panel.

While the Panel tried to ensure that the adopters had the information they needed to make an informed decision, it left the adopters in a dilemma. To have said no would have resulted in the matter being deferred. This would have had far reaching emotional and practical consequences for the adopters and the children. Hence, they decided to continue. Interestingly while professionals spoke at length about the need

to prepare adopters for potential behavioural and emotional issues presented by children, at the point of the second interview none of the adopters had experienced difficulties with the children beyond usual childhood issues and behaviours. Instead the issue of poor quality information and breakdowns in communication had led to significant amounts of additional distress, anxiety, inconvenience, and reduced the adopters' confidence in the child's agencies. These are discussed later (4.26 p127 & 4.29 p130). Crucially, however, at the time of writing this study, proposals in the Children and Social Work Bill (DfE, 2016b) suggested key changes including the possibility of dispensing with adoption panels. While the data suggests panels can create challenges, without them there is likely to be even less scrutiny of the information provided to adopters and may lead to even more challenges later on in the process.

4.7 Inflexibility and the competing demands on time

The data indicates that adopters and professionals had competing demands on their time that led to tensions between them. None of the adopters were entitled to any adoption leave until they had been matched to a child and the introduction process began (4.25 p124). As individual adopters that were part of a couple had different employers an M and F has been added to identify the male of female adopter. C1F was self-employed as a childminder, hence faced a loss of income. Adopters B1M/F, B2M, B2F, C2M, D2F had some flexibility in their working patterns, hence could accommodate attendance at the training and assessment during working hours where required without using annual leave. However, this was not afforded to adopters A2, C1M, C2F and E5M/F by their employers. A2M commented:

By the time we had got the process done, I'd only got two weeks holiday left for the remainder of the year ... When we raised it with the first Social Worker she said: "Well we actually use that as a litmus test to test your commitment."

Despite successive governments forcefully wanting to increase the use of adoption as a key form of permanence for children as discussed in the literature review (1.7 p19), there is little practical and financial support for adopters before a child is matched. Instead adopters appear to be reliant on the good will of employers. Given the stressful nature of adoption as well as the need to prepare for a child coming to live with adopters it is interesting that the importance of time off for appointments and holidays is not explicitly recognised in national or local policy and practice. Indeed,

data from all the professionals suggests that the imposition of increasingly rigid performance measures by successive governments may have exacerbated the situation. A participant from Agency B said:

There are some genuine reasons why people cannot meet the timescales ... The scorecards only count the time scales not the circumstances ... This can also put additional pressure on the adopters. Even if we offered every appointment in the evenings they still have to work and still need the time to reflect ... They sometimes turn around and say: "We need time to think about it and we have got other things going on". But you now have to book a panel slot virtually as you start the assessment ... But that is falling foul because on occasion they have to be taken off the panel as matches are given priority.

(N.B. As stated in chapter 1 (1.6 p14) local authorities are usually responsible for LAC. As such normally statutory adoption agency adoption panels are expected to consider matches between adopters and children).

Professionals were very aware of the emotional and practical impact of cancelling panels on adopters. Furthermore, they were worried that the pressure to place children quickly restricted the adopters' ability to fully understand and reflect on the information they provided about children. However, due to the implications of not meeting performance measures, agencies were left with few options.

Adopter D2F's statement corroborates this:

They did want to do it quite quickly... I work 44 hours a week. Then doing work experience at a nursery and filling in the home study book and doing some reading as well. At times, it felt like there wasn't enough time to fit all that in ... You did want to give some thought about the answers.

There was a strong consensus amongst all professionals' in all the focus groups that the need to complete assessments quickly increased the risk of harm to children as well as of failure of placements.

The data indicates that professionals managed their anxieties about performance measures in different ways. Adopters B1, B2, C1 and E5's accounts suggest that that this did not have any significant negative impact. However, this was not always the case. A2M said:

I was jumped on and told: "We won't be rushed" and I kept saying, "I don't want you to rush ... just take your time"... What seems to happen is one size fits all ... If it's necessary to take three months, take three months if it needs three years take three years.

This suggests that the professional's concern about timescales may have created barriers in communication and resulted in frustration for adopters. There is little consideration of such issues in existing literature.

4.8 Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC

All professionals confirmed that their agency provided pre-adoption preparation courses for adopters in line with the requirements of the Adoption: National Minimum Standards (ANMS) (2011). Notably as in existing literature (DfE, 2011a) they referred to this as 'training'. Hoverstadt, (2008) whose study considers businesses approach to staff development argues that training in fact reduces variety and aims to provide instructions on how to conduct tasks. This is akin to operational manuals that are provided with household appliances. The data suggests this approach is common in adoption agencies. Indeed, it has been supported by existing literature as given in p38 (1.13).

In line with many studies (1.13 p38) professionals from the groups commonly considered topics such as child protection, safe caring, child development, attachment, separation and loss, the impact of child abuse and neglect, understanding the needs of children in care, managing challenging behavior and information about contact with birth families as the most important to cover in the training.

4.9 The trainers

Professionals all said that staff from within their agencies generally delivered the training. The training commonly included an opportunity for applicants to talk to approved adopters and on occasion other professionals such as child psychologists. Agency A invited an adopted adult as they felt it was important to give adopters an insight into the experience of adopted people. Agencies A and B (local authorities) also invited approved foster carers to talk to applicants about their experiences. Adopters who met foster carers during the training were very positive about this.

Adopter A2M said:

Foster carers weren't on our radar ... I think it was actually enlightening to see how much they had to offer.

It is significant to note that once adopters met foster carers at any stage of the process, they valued their input. However, it is interesting that children's Social Workers were considered to be dismissive of foster carers (4.6 p98).

Interestingly, despite the training being considered to be a vital part of the process only one professional from all of the groups held a formal teaching qualification from some time ago. The level of this was not disclosed. Professionals largely relied on experience from practice, attending developmental sessions such as "preparing yourself for court" and observing other colleagues delivering the training. One professional from agency B commented:

I learnt by being a second or third trainer on the course ... Over the years, I moved from being the extra person to be in the lead role.

Intriguingly, while all groups of professionals referred to using research to inform the training, at dissemination events that were held by the researcher to present initial findings from this study, professionals frequently commented that when reading research studies, they focused on the summary of findings as they did not have time to consider the whole text nor focus on the methodology of the studies. Thus, they were not critically considering the relevance or applicability of the research to practice. The data from adopters suggests this approach negatively impacted on the adopters' learning. A2F said:

They'd got a new manual which I think is a BAAF manual ... I think they were trying to pick bits out of it ... I don't think that the training course was professionally put together and it certainly weren't delivered by professional trainers.

All the adopters said they found the input from approved adopters who had had children placed very helpful. However, adopters B1 and B2 expressed concern for the welfare of one of the approved adopters. B1F said:

She looked like she was about to have a mental breakdown ... There were horror stories about what this kid had done at school, at home. None of their family spoke to them anymore because of the child.

This example not only raises ethical questions about the welfare of the individual concerned, but also highlights the professionals' need to reinforce the risk of adopting.

4.10 Content of the training

Existing research (1.13 p38) frequently suggests that the pre-adoption training does not prepare adopters for the challenging behaviours and complex needs of children in care. However, all the adopters from this study commonly said that the training was heavily weighted to give hard hitting information about the experiences of children in care and the significant additional challenges of looking after them compared to other children. Participant E5M said:

It was actually appearing to be quite negative... Worst case scenarios. These kids are going to be damaged, they are going to have horrendous upbringings and you are going to be taking on these.

Adopters understood the professional rationale to ensure that they were provided with realistic information. However, they all commented about a lack of balanced information and the potential of adopters withdrawing from the process due to heightened fears.

Data from all of the adopters further suggests that the professionals delivering the training tried to provide explanations for all possible behaviours of children and approaches on how to deal with them. This is synonymous to an operational manual. C2M commented:

They seemed to put a reason to everything. Why a child misbehaves. I've been a parent ... I kept my mouth shut ... Children are sometimes just children and they do just misbehave ... That doesn't come across at all ... Just that they are such problems all the time and how are you going to cope ... It drove you away from the older children because they were in their opinion too hard to handle.

In line with existing literature (1.13 p38), Social Workers, however, commonly believed this approach was informed by existing research, therefore essential. Practitioners all expressed concern that prospective adopters frequently dismissed the potential severity of issues. One professional from Agency D commented:

They don't really believe it ... It's too hard for them to think about children being left home alone, chained to their cot with no food and a dirty nappy. The idea of that is just too extreme. When they have

identified that this could be their potential son or daughter they are already starting to make that attachment and then they are reading the information and it can be very shocking.

The data suggests this approach resulted in adopters feeling very anxious and considering withdrawing and/or dismissing the information as untrue.

4.11 Purpose of training

Professionals commonly believed that the training served several purposes including; preparing adopters to reduce the risk of placements disrupting (4.14 p109), to enable adopters to network and build relationships with other adopters and to inform the assessment. A professional from agency A said:

Feedback from the training helps to assess whether people should continue or not. It's part of the selection process. Some people withdraw from the process after attending training. Training helps to show how they can work with other people and how they relate to the people.

However, adopters commonly said that they were very aware that they were being observed. C2F said:

You're being analysed to death, the first thing (name of Social Worker) said to us was, "I believe you knocked over a glass of water? How did you manage that?" I know (name of Social Worker) was only saying it as a joke but it is like Big Brother watching ... You feel like I've got nothing to hide, why should I be watched to that degree?

Interestingly while professionals from all the focus groups reinforced the need for adopters to be open and transparent with information, agencies did not explicitly inform adopters that the training was a key part of the assessment. Notably while texts such as Beesley's (2015) outline different models of assessment they do not consider such issues.

4.12 Value of the training

In contrast to existing literature (1.13 p38) data from parts one and two of this study suggests that adopters' perceptions of the value of training changed over time. At the time of the first interview participants B1, B2, C1, D2 and E5 stated that the training was helpful. B2M said:

It made me see that I'm not the only person going through this. Other people had had experiences like IVF and a lot more heartache than we had. I also found the course answered a lot of my questions.

Except for couple C2, adopters commonly expressed that the training had given them valuable context. This appeared to alleviate some fears and enabled adopters to consider meeting birth families. D2F said:

Now I understand the reasoning behind it, I've agreed that I will meet the birth mum. Even though I know that I will feel sick as a parrot on the day ... I know that there is benefit behind it.

While adopters A2 expressed some mixed feelings about the training, they recognized that this may have been due to their advanced knowledge and experiences through their work. A2M said:

Some of it's very tedious and at times condescending and patronising. But equally there were aspects of the training which I found to be quite useful and enlightening. Bare in mind that the training had to be pitched at a whole range ... But I think it was worthwhile.

Interestingly adopters C2's initial reservations about the training prior to attending were similar to others (3.6 p78). However, the data indicates that that the assessing worker's attitudes toward the training may have reinforced the participants' concerns and led to a self-fulfilling prophecy. C2M stated:

(Name of Social Worker) was very honest with us and said: "You'll go to these courses, do them and then when you've done them you'll come back and we'll forget about them ... Let me know what you think ... If you think they're crap tell me".

Notably, adopters C1 who attended the training by the same agency in the first interview reported very different views. C1M said:

It was more helpful than I thought it was going to be ... It's quite a simple way of looking at ... loss, development and stepping back. I just found it very useful.

By the time of the second interview participants A2, B1, B2, C1 and E5 had all had children placed with them. As explained earlier (4.6 p98) a child had not been placed with adopter D2. Participants C2 had withdrawn from the process before the case was presented to the adoption panel due to frustrations with the process (4.17 p113) and declined the offer of a second interview. Interestingly at the second interview adopters commonly reported that the training had been of little or no use to them. The training had overwhelmingly focused on the potential challenges that the children might present. Adopter E5M said:

It was appearing to be quite negative... Worse case scenarios. These kids are going to be damaged, they are going to have horrendous upbringings and you are going to be taking on these.

However, at the time of the second interview none of the adopters had experienced such issues. Instead, adopters felt ill prepared for issues they had faced including legal complexities, accessing medical services as carers without parental responsibility and the reality of becoming instant parents. A2F stated:

I would say is it's (training) not been of any use ... There was an awful big play on the psychology of children affected by adoption ... The training was if your child turns left instead of right why might they have turned left? ... Lot of speculation.

All adopters frequently commented on the need to include more practical advice. C2F said:

A bit more from adoptive parents. We had a very small evening session at the end of the training which I didn't feel was long enough...It would be more helpful to have people you could ask questions.

Adopter D2F stated:

People didn't realise how ... looking for the child was so hard ... Somebody was saying last night that they are looking for a child but they know that the Social Worker is looking at two families and it will get to a certain point where there will be a rejection. The training doesn't prepare you ... The amount of rejections that you might get from not finding children.

The competitive nature of adoption for adopters and children (4.20 p120) is evident throughout the study. As identified earlier (chapter 3) the majority of adopters tend to be of White British origin (Table 3.1 p73) and seeking young (Graph 3.3 p81), able bodied (Graph 3.7 p84) children that will fit into their families (3.8 p80). However, as indicated in the literature review (1.6 p14) there are fewer such children waiting for families.

4.13 Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process

While adopters had clearly taken several risks by applying to adopt including the possibility of being found not good enough and the impact a child may have on their family, they did not refer to this. In contrast professionals frequently used the term about potential danger for children and this was used as a rationale for existing practice.

4.14 Types of risk

Professionals did not distinguish types of risk; however, their responses suggest that they were concerned by two categories of risk: Firstly, risk of harm to children by unsuitable applicants slipping through the net if not assessed effectively. A participant from agency A said:

You're always being a detective. Gone are the days where you accept what people say. You look for corroborating evidence from references, employers, neighbours, friends, ex partners and from adopters' children if they have any. You don't ever believe what people tell you ... Serious case reviews suggest people can pull the wool over your eyes. Anyone can abuse children.

The repetitive nature of comments from the focus groups suggests that a lack of trust is embedded in the culture of the organisations. This may explain adopters' feelings of being constantly observed and analysed (4.11 p106). However, the ability to gain accurate information, without developing a sense of trust and rapport, as well as the skill to explore issues beyond the initial veneer in current practice (4.15 p110) is concerning.

Secondly the risk of placements disrupting in the future. As indicated earlier (4.3 p94), like most birth parents', adopters had not thought about the children returning to the care system. However, the professionals were much more vocal about this than the risk of harm to children. One professional from agency D said:

I attend Adoption Support Advisor meetings which include local authorities. They are predicting an increase in disruptions because of the lack of preparation.

While this indicates that professionals also question the quality of existing training it suggests a desire to increase the focus on the challenges of caring for children in care despite evidence to the contrary from adopters (4.12 p106). Indeed, to reduce this risk, professionals believed the use of measurable criteria in matching children to adopters was essential (4.15 p110). A professional from agency A said:

We look at things like age, contact and whether it is safe in the area that you will place the child. You do that for both sides. It is also about finding the right child for the adopters and giving them the choice as there are a lot of children that need placement ... You're still assessing risk.

Interestingly while adopters are judged for wanting a perfect child such approaches indicate agencies are also looking for perfection from adopters.

The presence of birth children within an adoptive family was considered a significant risk due to the possible rejection of the adopted child by the birth child. Indeed, agencies commonly preferred an age gap of at least two years between a birth child and adopted child. A professional from agency E said:

Having an adopted child when you have a birth child is a big risk ... They (adopters) think it will be fine. But helping them to realise it is a real risk. It could destroy their family.

Studies such as Selwyn et al. (2006) describe examples of feelings of children already in households. Quinton et al. (1998) recognise the presence of birth children in the adoptive home does create an additional dynamic for the family. However, there is no evidence that it has the impact described above. In line with any new child joining a family, data from adopters C1 who had a birth child does indicate a change the dynamics of the family including a degree of sibling rivalry. Indeed, the importance of clear boundaries for both children was evident. C1M said:

The hardest bit is trying to stop our daughter from being a third parent ... We have to keep reminding her ... While she is involved she is not on the same level as us. She will say things like, "If you do this you can go swimming on Saturday." That's not for her to decide so we have to reel her in.

The impact of the presence of birth children on the stability of placements is not within the remit of this study. However, the limited data suggests that the manner in which the dynamics between the children are managed is more important than the presence of a birth child. This may be explored further a post-doctoral stage.

4.15 Assessment of risk

The data indicates that adopters were very aware of the impact of the assessment on their future. B2F said:

That assessment makes a decision. Yes, or no ... You're under scrutiny ... You know that they're going to be asking you about your history, your relationship. No matter how nice and how professional they are or how necessary the questions are, nobody is going to be really happy about that. It's your personal stuff ... nobody really likes getting assessed.

However, as within existing texts on adoption (1.12 p36) there did not appear to be a recognition by professionals, that privacy in family life is embedded in the law (Brammer, 2015) and the culture of Britain (Thompson, 2012). It is therefore not surprising adopters find it difficult to discuss intimate family details with Social Workers. Instead data from the four focus groups suggests that professionals attributed such feelings to adopters being defensive hence the information they provided could not be trusted. A professional from Agency E said:

The whole process is full of doubt ... Adopters tell you what they want to tell you ... How do we know that that's the truth? It's just the information that they have chosen to share on that day.

Interestingly in line with many existing studies (1.12 p36) professionals constantly alluded to the need to apply a formula based on their understanding of attachment theory (1.6 p16) to predict the risk of placement failure. One participant from Agency A commented:

Every section in the assessment is about risk. Adopter's attachment patterns ... Their support networks, parenting experience ... How they cope with stress. If a person has a relatively stress free life will they cope with the child that brings a lot of stress? The impact a child may have on the person's psyche.

The need to predict outcomes accurately appeared to place a significant burden on professionals due to fears of increased levels of placement failures. To address such concerns professionals from all agencies commented on the usefulness of supervision and referred to the use of experts such as psychologists to aid this process. One participant from agency E stated:

Our post adoption Social Worker and the therapist run surgeries ... I took a case before it went to panel because I needed to unpick the potential impact on the birth child ... To get an objective and therapeutic stance.

Ironically in contrast to existing literature (1.12 p36) this formulaic approach appeared to be counterproductive and potentially increased the risk of harm and placement failure. Adopters C1 and A2 indicated that during the assessment they could easily identify what the assessing worker had wanted to hear. Both C1 and A2 explained that as long as the professionals were not challenged, it would have been easy to deceive the worker. C1M said:

It was so easy I was almost suspicious ... I think you can talk your way through it if you haven't got a criminal record ... Our Social Worker was waiting for the right answer and you could almost see the penny drop

... It was like a little button had been pressed and it was like, "Oh good we'll move on now".

Notably, however, no professional from the groups referred to the need to develop a rapport and trusting relationship with adopters to enable them to share personal information more openly. Furthermore, there was no mention of the need for active listening skills in order to develop a depth of understanding and analysis.

4.16 Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters

It was evident through conversations with adopters that ordinarily they would have been able to challenge any unfair treatment. However, even when faced with questionable practice and overt discrimination during the adoption process the data suggests adopters did not feel able to challenge professionals.

A2F stated:

Nobody would complain during that process because everybody would be too frightened of it looking bad on them.

As explained, those in the sample were not representative of disadvantaged groups. Indeed, they held jobs with significant responsibility. This reinforces that power is dynamic and relational, rather than simply an entity possessed by certain groups or individuals (Burck & Speed, 1995). While, it is not within the remit of this study, this does raise the question of the impact power dynamics may have on individuals and families from less powerful groups in society.

Professionals also expressed feelings of powerlessness and felt they had little control over the decisions made by the adoption panel or their agency. A professional from agency B said:

I hate panel with a passion. I tend to see my role as going with people to panel and trying to help them not to be so scared ... I just feel that it's such an ordeal for adopters. It's an ordeal for Social Workers so it's got to be an ordeal for adopters.

Interestingly professionals appeared to divorce themselves from the decision making process in favour of taking sides with adopters. Indeed, there did not appear to be a recognition that their assessments and reports had a significant influence on the panel's behaviours and actions and eventual outcome.

4.17 Professional power

The data indicates that the individual style of the professional conducting the assessment had a considerable impact on the adopters' experiences, willingness to share information and work in partnership with the agency. Participants B1, B2, C1, D2 and E5 expressed that overall the assessment process was managed well. Their assessing Social Workers were approachable, personable and conducted the assessment in a professional manner. B1M said:

Every time we finished a session (name of Social Worker) said, "Ok the next session will be about this topic; here's something you can do to prepare, here's how you can think ahead." That eased us into the next session ... The first time (name of Social Worker) came (gender) wrote down all the sessions in the diary ... We had a plan.

This appears to have resulted in adopters being reassured, hence, they meaningfully engaged with the assessment and found it easier to share personal information. Notably where participants developed this confidence in the worker and agency early in their journey, they appeared to continue to trust the professional and their agency even if they faced challenges later on in the process. B1M said:

Our own Social Worker became far less cooperative when it became apparent that we weren't going to have a child from our own agency.

However, despite these issues they remained positive about the agency and their Social Worker and believed that they would overcome the issues and continue to have a positive relationship.

In contrast, participants A2 and C2's accounts suggest that unprofessional behaviour exacerbated adopters' anxieties, created barriers to communication and made the assessment process much more challenging. C2F said:

We have been going through the ups and downs of are we going to have a child or not? We got a lot of cancelled appointments ... We emailed to say we decided it wasn't for us ... Nobody contacted us. Not a single word to say we're sorry to hear that you've dropped out.

Interestingly, the professional concerned had gained the couple's trust. This had led to a situation where participants C2 expressed some self-blame and were angry with the agency. However, they continued to trust and defend the assessing worker. C2M said:

Maybe we could have got on the phone and been a bit more demanding ... We were told it would be 12 months. We didn't want to jump on (name of Social Worker) ... (Name of Social Worker) was doing (gender) job.

Participants C2 eventually withdrew their application just before the approval stage. They explained this was due to the constant delays and poor communication by the agency. C2F stated:

We found that we were talking about the same things. Coming back and revisiting things ... It's almost like (name of Social Worker) is trying to test you to see if what you've said is the truth ... Judgements are being made ... I just got fed up ... I think the whole process messes with people's heads ... Enough, I will start to make some decisions now.

The data suggests that adopters C2 felt a loss of control over their lives and struggled with the lack of trust by professionals from their adoption agency. Given the significance of the initial decision to apply to adopt discussed earlier, such issues had caused significant emotional distress, practical difficulties as well as powerful feelings of inequality and injustice.

4.18 Power of the Adoption Panel

Professionals from all the groups referred to the need for prospective adopters to attend the adoption panel. A professional from agency B said:

It's not actually a requirement ... but we always tell them that it is in their best interest to attend because otherwise panel may ask questions that we are not able to answer and you could end up being deferred ... The first question would be why haven't they come?

Interestingly conversations with adopters suggested that they all believed attendance was a mandatory requirement and that they had no option but to attend.

Professionals from the groups commonly spoke about the power that panels had. They gave examples of the physical and emotional impact on applicants before they went into panel. A professional from agency A said:

It's nerve racking ... Adopters have said to me that these people who we don't know have read our report and are making decisions about the rest of our lives. What if it doesn't happen We have had people in tears, feel sick and literally even be sick ... This is their last chance to have a child.

Adopters' anxieties are understandable given that the recommendation of the panel can have a life changing impact. However, the data indicates that the way professionals referred to the panel during the assessment either reassured or raised adopters' concerns. Adopter A2M said:

They would ask: "Tell us a bit about you and your family." So you would. Then you'd get: "That's brilliant, that'll help us sell you ... We want to make you look good to panel". A lot of the time panel were thrown in: "Panel won't like that, panel won't like this, panel won't be very happy with that." ... Anytime you challenge what they were doing, it was: "We have to do that for panel". So panel seemed to be used as the big bad monster that was going to be waiting for when you came in, which actually seems far from the truth.

This not only suggests applicants can be guided to provide answers that assessing workers want to hear, but also that the panel can be used as a means of control. Interestingly the focus groups of professionals said they were reassured by the scrutiny of the panel. One professional from agency A commented:

Workers rely on panel to go through the report and pick up on issues ... It's the last gatekeeper and workers would not want someone approved if they have not covered everything. Workers feel reassured ... I don't think as a team manager you would want that responsibility on your own ... It's part of that safeguarding process and managing risk ... It's not just my name that's been put down it's a whole raft of people.

This indicates a desire to share the risk of getting the assessment wrong. However, the accuracy of the information presented to the adoption panel may be questionable at times.

Professionals from all the groups commented that adoption panels frequently had concerns about the potential of future placement disruptions, hence could be overly cautious and risk averse. One professional from agency E stated:

The panel is very cautious and tend to go for the number of children they think adopters can manage ... Obviously the more children the riskier it is ... Sometimes the panel's personal experience overrides the information in front of them. The panel chair is an adoption manager and has had quite a few disruptions so is very reluctant ... Panels make the recommendation regarding approval or non-approval.

While professionals reinforced that recommendations for non-approvals and deferrals of recommendations were rare, they commented about the difficulty in managing such situations. Professionals from all groups believed that deferrals were

often a result of poor quality assessments that did not address key issues. They understood the position of the panel; however, they were worried about the impact of this on applicants. One participant agency A said:

The recommendations that have been difficult are cases I have had to pick up afterwards as an independent assessor... It is difficult when you pick up an assessment of somebody that you do not know so well... That puts additional pressure on.

In these cases, the data suggests that the way the panel initially managed the message could have a significant impact on applicants' emotional wellbeing and the ongoing relationship with the agency. Participants of focus group A explained that their panel chair took time to personally explain reasons for the deferral and the process going forward to applicants. While the applicants found the situation difficult they were clear about the next steps and understood the panel had not rejected them but had requested some additional work to be done and the reasons for this. As a result, applicants continued to work with the agency. A professional from agency A said:

They accept that it has got to be right because they know it's not just about the approval stage it is about the matching stage later on.

Professionals from focus group B confirmed decisions to defer cases were easier to manage where panel gave tangible reasons; however, this was not always the case. One professional said:

I have had a couple of times when we had gone into the panel and then come out. Then there has been a discussion and a decision to defer ... It's been me that's had to go in to panel without the adopters. That's harder because you are the one that is told why it is being deferred and then you are the one that has to convey that to the adopters.

The professionals from group B did feel this approach was detrimental to the ongoing relationship with applicants.

Data from focus groups B, D and E suggests professionals believed on occasion panels went beyond their remit by asking unnecessary questions or trying to put conditions on the recommendation for approval that they legally cannot do. A professional from agency D said:

I think sometimes panel members can be quite discriminatory ... I think they can ask questions of some people that they wouldn't of others. I

had an example of this with an unusual religion where they asked the person to describe their religion. They wouldn't have asked anybody who was from the Church of England to describe how they felt about their religion.

Interestingly adopters B2, despite feeling well prepared for the panel by their assessing Social Worker, had found the experience in the panel very stressful and challenging. B2F said:

I've never been through such a sexist pompous experience in all my life ... He just kept going on repeating the same question. He said to me: "People respect you because of your rank. You will lose that. How will you cope with that?" ... I said I've thought about it carefully and I've got my identity outside of work. I know it's going to be a big change. Then he says: "Well I've got a mate who's a (profession) and he commands respect and you're going to lose that... How will you cope with a year off and you may have a long day with little intellectual stimulation?" ... He was just going on about his mate, "How will you cope with the monetary loss?" ... All these questions were directed at me. And then you (B2M) interjected and said: "She won't be doing everything by herself." ... It was like I'd been put through the mill just to provide entertainment for this independent member.

B2M added:

I wasn't asked any questions at all ... I may as well have not been there. I explained where I work has a flexi time system ... The fact that we are a couple is almost irrelevant. It's almost like: "Sorry he's adopting this child as well."

The matter appears to have been exacerbated by a lack of intervention by the chair of the adoption panel. The situation was eventually de-escalated by the intervention of another panel member. B2F explained:

He was nice cos he kind of levelled things out... Cos it was getting quite icy and he broke the ice. Because we have chickens and a cat he asked: "How does the cat get on with the chickens?"

As indicated earlier adopters B2 are very articulate individuals and are employed in senior positions. However, in this case they felt powerless to challenge the panel. Notably, most parents face the challenge of balancing childcare with work commitments and can experience a drop-in income. However, the data indicates even where adopters have usually given serious consideration to such matters they can feel they are not being believed by professionals and agencies. These feelings of inequality can undermine their trust in professionals going forward.

The adopter and child synergy

4.19 Finding 'the right child'

Professionals from all the groups emphasised the need to carefully match adopters to the child to reduce the risk of the child returning to care. A participant from agency B said:

Our role is to help adopters to make sure they are making the right decision ... So, it's a question of how much information we share with adopters prior to them being put forward for a particular child ... Talking to them about what the implications are, any concerns they might have and actually checking out that this is the right child for them ... We pre-select the children we share with them, making sure they meet the matching criteria that we have identified throughout the process.

While there is little evidence to support the success of the approach, the data suggests that professionals tried to identify variables from the information they had about adopters and the children as well as their understanding of research and theory in order to predict the risk of the placement failing.

Interestingly, except for couple B1 all the adopters that had had children placed with them (A2, B2, C1 and E5) had chosen the type of children that they had envisaged at the start of the study (3.8 p80), including age, number, gender, race as well as physical and emotional needs of the child. Indeed, as explained later in this section the only variation couple B1 had made was in relation to the child's medical needs. This does question the belief that adoption training may enable applicants to adopt children who are older and have more complex needs than the applicants first envisaged. Significantly none of the adopters could easily identify what had made them choose the children. They were clear that their decisions were based on their feelings rather than any tangible matching criteria. Adopters all stated that as soon as they saw the picture and read the initial short profile of the child they instinctively knew this was the right child for them.

Observations by the researcher from seeing the children with the adopters suggest that adopters A2, B1, B2, C1 and E5 had consciously or unconsciously been drawn to children that had a clear physical resemblance to the adoptive family. This included hair colour, facial features and stature. Both adopters B2 and E5 stated that they had become more aware of the physical resemblance since the children moved to live with them. E5M said:

We went on a shopping trip last week ... A woman came over and made a comment that didn't (name of child) look like me. Even down to eye and hair colour. We're quite astounded how good the match is.

In addition to family resemblance it appears that participants were drawn to images of children that appeared to be happy and active. D2F said:

I think there seems to be something in the eyes ... A kind of spark, and alertness or something.

Interestingly adopters appear to have made an emotional connection with the children without meeting them. Indeed, adopters B1 had identified a child through the BAAF Be My Parent magazine and contacted the child's agency directly but had been told that a family had already been found for the child. This was a significant disappointment. However, the participants explained that they were confident that the child would eventually be placed with them. B1F stated:

I said that's going to fall through because this is our daughter, I know it. A couple of weeks later we were still looking at profiles ... Nothing felt right. We were finding fault. Excuses really because we really wanted her. I re-contacted (name of agency) and they said, "It's really strange that you should contact us now as that match has fallen through" ... We knew we were perfect for her and we knew that she was perfect for us.

Notably participants B1 explained that at the beginning of their journey to adopt they had been concerned about taking a child with an unclear medical prognosis. However, they felt a connection with the child, hence did not feel the fact this child did have an unclear prognosis was an issue. B1M explained:

We felt like she was ours from the minute we saw the photo. We have said right from the beginning that there is a difference between what you would choose and what you would cope with if it happened. And because she already felt like ours it felt like everything we were learning fell into the latter category ... It's a tiny thing that's so irrelevant in some ways and yet so fantastic ... The very first thing we got was this little toy giraffe called (name of child). Firstly, the name of it was the same as (name of child) and secondly in the photographs that we saw (name of child), she had the same toy ... I could see her in our nursery, in the cot. I could see her in the house. But for all the other profiles we've seen I couldn't. Just something was shouting out at us. It just felt three-dimensional whereas the other profiles seemed two-dimensional.

The data further suggests that all the adopters were reassured by the fact that as far as they knew the children's birth parents had not misused substances, there was no

indication of intentional cruelty by birth parents and once in care the children had not had many placement moves. E5M said:

Birth parents were very a young couple ... Because of the adoption course we were quite strict on what we could and couldn't deal with. We steered clear of any history of drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse or anything like that.

Interestingly instead of the training and assessment enabling adopters to work with children that may have experienced such traumatic issues, it appears to simply deter them from accepting these children.

4.20 Adoption activity days

While adoption activity days are currently considered to be innovative, there is little current research (1.15 p42) on the impact of these on welfare of children. In this study, all the focus groups of professionals reported that their agencies had had some involvement in activity days that had been organised regionally. Professionals from focus group E were generally positive about adoption activity days. The conversation suggested that the activity days enabled adopters to see the types of children waiting for families and on occasion meet the child before committing themselves to the match. A participant from group E who had attended two events stated:

I thought they were handled very well ... There was a nine-year-old girl I was sat chatting to her because unfortunately there weren't that many people talking to her. She was really engaged in the process and she said, "Social Workers talk to me about mums and dads and I want to see what mums and dads looked like." She was really pleased to be there. The younger children were having a ball it was the best birthday party you could ever attend ... I did get some feedback from an adopter who said one girl had a following of loads of adopters ... My adopter said, "This poor girl was being followed around by adults trying to get in and play with her. It was all a bit too much" ... The foster carers are there with the children so in theory they should be managing that.

Given the successive governments (1.4 p9) and professionals from focus group E's argument that the needs of children are paramount (4.3 p94), it is surprising that in this context the potential detrimental impact on the self-worth and confidence of children that were either ignored by potential adopters or were very popular were minimised. In contrast, professionals from groups A, B and D were more cautious about adoption activity days. Participants reported that they could see some value to

them. However, they felt that the events catered for children and adopters where a match could not be found easily, hence suggested the activity days were a last resort. Professionals from these agencies expressed concerns about the potential impact on children. Several participants from groups A, B and D reported that they had had feedback from adopters who were equally worried about the impact on children. One participant from Agency D said:

I had a young girl who was linked up to one of my adopters through one of these days. I think she was about eight ... She made a beeline for one of the adopters and kept cuddling her. The messages that she had been given was this is possibly one of the last opportunities you will get to be adopted ... She went up to the adopter and said, "The best thing about today has been meeting you." The adopter was in bits with that.

This does raise questions about the impact of the practice on the self-esteem of children given the messages that attending such events is a last resort and the need to compete with other children to find a family that may accept them. Interestingly, however, there was little mention about repercussions of this or support for foster carers who would have to manage the resulting distress and behaviours of the child.

Out of the sample of adopters, participants C1 had attended two adoption activity days. They expressed similar concerns to those voiced by professionals from agencies A, B and D. Couple C1 explained that even though children were not present at the first event they were worried about the way children were portrayed. Participant C1M explained:

They did a booklet of the children including their ages and brief history. There were also videos showcasing them on the stalls ... It was Social Workers coming up to you and saying, "So what are you looking for today?"

C1F added:

One worker turned around and said "I've got one in black." ... You just come away thinking "What?!!"

C1M added:

That was all part of the dehumanisation process... You relate it to buying a car or a house... It was like a trade show.

Adopters C1's concerns were heightened by the second event that they attended where children were present.

C1F said:

What I couldn't cope with was the total imbalance of children to adults. There were maybe 40 children looking for new homes and 50 or 60 adults. The children were aged birth to ten years old.

C1M added:

One girl stood out ... She was just pottering on her own. She must have been nine. There were no black adults there but she was one of two black children ... She must have thought, "I'm not very likely, am I?" ... She didn't look like she was interested in impressing anybody ... It's like she understood the score.

Overall the data reinforces that most adopters tend to be from white English speaking communities who are competing against each other for young healthy white children. Older children and children from BAME communities are less in demand. However, due to successive governments pressure and the focus on adoption concern for these children's welfare is compromised. Worryingly the children appear to be aware of this and may see themselves as less desirable hence accepting that it is unlikely that they are wanted.

4.21 Meeting and getting to know the child

Commonly, adopters mentioned initially feeling awkward about spending extensive amounts of time in the foster carer's home to get to know the child. However, the welcoming nature, professionalism and trust exhibited by foster carers quickly alleviated such feelings. However, adopters reported that the lack of consultation and communication with them and the foster carers by children's Social Workers about the plans for introductions that were developed by the child's agency created significant challenges. Despite not being asked whether dates were convenient, all of the adopters felt that they and the foster carers were expected to fit into the plan. Indeed, adopters C1 were expected to accommodate late changes to the plan with no prior warning. There appeared to be little appreciation that adopters had made several practical arrangements to facilitate the introductions. Furthermore, the adopters had emotionally prepared themselves to meet the child they had longed for and were anticipating the moment. The reason for the change was due to the unavailability of a senior manager to chair the life appreciation event. Although life appreciation days are considered good practice, interestingly adopters C1 believed that the event was legally required before introductions could start. This approach appears to have unnecessarily increased levels of stress and anxieties. C1M said:

To book the time off and sort out adoption pay I had had a three-day battle with a very ignorant accounts manager ... We'd just got through that and were focusing on the adoption. Then they (child's agency) threw a spanner in the works ... I immediately started to think about the conflict at work.

Participants A2, B2 and E5 explained that the lack of flexibility in the introductions plans had been detrimental to the welfare of the child and had left the foster carers and themselves feeling emotionally and physically drained.

All of the adopters reported that having to take the child out for extended periods instead of spending time with them in the adopters' home was difficult. A2M said:

We were finding ourselves wandering around streets when we could have brought him home ... After three or four days, the foster carer said, "Look we need to do something on this particular afternoon." So, they asked if they could change the plan. We said, "Of course you can." ... We altered it and made it work between ... There was no flexibility so we felt dishonest.

Adopters suggested that while professionals did not understand this, foster carers were aware that it was not practical nor beneficial for the adopters to have to take the child out each time they met, hence tried their best to give adopters and the child time alone in the foster carers' homes.

In the case of adopters E5 the introductions involved the couple initially staying in the locality where the children were. This was followed by the foster carer having to bring the children to the home town of the adopters and having to stay in bed and breakfast accommodation with the children for several days. The plan required the adopters to care for the children during the day but it did not permit the children to stay at the adopters' home overnight until they finally moved in. E5M said:

That did unsettle them. (Name of child) will go to the stair gate and pull on it when he knows it's time to go to bed. He was doing that and we were having to say, "No hang on a minute we're walking you up the road." ... Literally with milk bottle in hand off we'd go ... There was no discussion. She (children's Social Worker) was very rigid and made that decision ... If we had said to the foster carer can they (the children) stop here for the night, she would have been okay but you're very tied to what is put in the plan. If we'd just done it off our own bat, we could have got into trouble with the Social Workers.

Interestingly adopters did not feel able to ask the Social Workers about changing the plan, or if they did ask requests were denied. A2F said:

When we mentioned it to his Social Worker, (gender) said, "People often ask to bring it forward but we never allow it."

Indeed, in the case of A2, B2, C1 and E5 there was little recognition of adopters needing to make practical arrangements while meeting the expectations of the introductions plan. B2F said:

It was all the practical things like fitting stair gates on top of the emotional stuff. I found that really hard. When my sister was pregnant I can remember the trips to Mothercare but they had weeks. We had about four days.

In contrast interventions by other professionals resulted in immediate changes to the plans for adopters B2 and C1. C1F said:

A couple of days before the life appreciation day we had a meeting with the psychologist ... She said, "Two weeks of introductions with a four-year-old and all this travelling ... That's too long." ... We were like "Yes". She carried a lot of weight with everyone.

Given by this stage the adopters had been through the training, assessment, and approval process and had been chosen to care for the child permanently, it is interestingly that neither the adopters nor the foster carers were trusted to be able to prioritise the needs of the children.

4.22 Becoming parents

At the time of the second interview with participants A2, B1, B2, C1 and E5 the children had been placed with them for between two and nine months. All the adopters compared their experience with that of the majority of parents who have birth children. A2M explained:

It's the experience of becoming an instant parent. You can't prepare for that. You can read as many books as you want and have as much theory as you want but the bottom line is when that door shuts and that child is there, you have complete responsibility ... It's not negative but it's daunting.

Commonly the adopters reported that having the children with them was the most rewarding aspect of the whole process. B2F said:

Being able to get to know her, I have a lovely day every day with her ... She doesn't stop talking ... She's just happy and that's down to the foster carers.

Adopters unanimously said that their families and friends were naturally eager to meet the children when they first moved in. Furthermore, like many new parents adopters felt support from their social network was essential. B2F said:

The day after we brought her home my mum and sister were at the gate wanting to meet her. My sister really took to her. My niece has got a baby and she (name of child) is baby mad so that has really helped.

Interestingly, however, they explained that they had been advised by professionals not to introduce the child to their family and friends too quickly. This was due to Social Workers concerns that the child would be overwhelmed by meeting too many people too soon.

Notably by the time of the second interview adopters' accounts suggested that they had only experienced minor complexities in relation to the behavioural and emotional needs of the children. These were within the realms of childhood behaviour. On occasion participants B2 and C1 who had adopted children over the age of four were able to relate some behaviours to the past experiences of the children. Indeed, some of the children's anxieties appeared to be a result of having experienced placement moves rather than early childhood trauma.

4.23 Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement

Adopters reported a range of difficulties post placement. However, in contrast to existing literature (1.16 p44), and to what the training had prepared the adopters for, the issues centred on unexpected legal complexities, poor communication and planning, the lack of legal parental responsibility and a lack of support from some employers.

4.24 Legal challenges

As indicated in the literature review (1.9 p24) the study did identify some of the possible impact of recent changes to the legal process to speed up adoptions. Participants A2 and B2 were very anxious due to unexpected legal complexities after the children had been placed. These appear to be recent developments and may also be the unforeseen consequences of the governments measures to speed up adoption, as even professionals could not explain how these situations had arisen. However, the impact on adopters and children was significant. A2M explained:

I got a call ... to say there's a problem with the adoption. Can you imagine? ... I am (name of child)'s dad apart from a piece of paper as far as I'm concerned ... There might be a problem equals I might not be his dad. I was in a state ... When I got home A2F was in a similar state ...

Worryingly, even in such circumstances the need for clear communication and the provision of full accurate information as soon as possible was not recognised. Adopters A2 and B2 explained that having been told there may be issues, Social Workers were reluctant to give further details on the phone. Instead professionals suggested they visit the adopters in the next few days. There appeared to be little recognition of the torturous wait and sleepless nights that adopters would experience between the phone call and visit, nor the knock on impact on the care of the children. Indeed, having anxiously waited, planned visits were changed with little or no notice. B2F said:

We were stuck here ... She (child) really is active so we have to entertain her ... I was struggling waiting and I was being told (by the Social Worker), "I'll be there at eleven, then it was three, then four and now we'll be there the next day." ... (Name of child) wanted to go out to the park ... That drove me bonkers.

This not only left adopters worried and speculating worse case scenarios including fears of losing the child they had longed for but also feelings of being let down by agencies, powerlessness and inequality compared to birth parents. Importantly this had implications for the psychological well-being of the adopters that may impact on their parenting and the parent-child relationship (Anthony, et al. 2005).

Notably despite having been through a process of being vetted, in contrast to the experiences of birth parents, the lack of parental responsibility afforded to adopters by law until the child is legally adopted, created additional challenges for adopters trying to meet the needs of the children. B1M said:

It's been a nightmare ... It was difficult getting her MMR done as her notes haven't come yet ... I think that the level of authority that you have as a in between parent is frustrating prior to the final adoption. There are still too many things that we can't do.

Significantly, adopters (B1, C1 and E5) were not clear about the next steps in relation to the legal adoption even though they felt more than ready and there were no legal complexities.

4.25 Employment

Unlike pregnancy and maternity, adoption is not listed as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 (Brammer, 2015). As a result, adopters were more reliant on the discretion of their employers. A lack of understanding and flexibility of some employers and in the case of B1F a withdrawal of an offer of a new role that she had applied for exacerbated anxieties and feelings of inequality and discrimination. The feelings of disappointment were intensified for adopter B2F by her colleagues who despite being aware B2F had adopted did not acknowledge the fact. B2F said:

I have worked there for 18 years. When somebody has a baby we always send flowers ... The two bosses I haven't heard from ... You are treated differently to if you had a baby and had gone through a pregnancy ... Everybody has physically seen you ... I always take a present in ... I have been disappointed with some people not bothering.

As discussed earlier participants C1 (4.21 p122) had also experienced some difficulties with C1M's employers. They explained the situation was made worse by the fact C1F is self-employed and was not entitled to any financial benefits. Furthermore, they had found the system for applying for financial support and reimbursement of expenses difficult. C1F said:

We lose about £250 a week ... That meant we had £100 a week for statutory adoption leave. You can't live on that and pay the bills. Then you are forking out for petrol ... It was reimbursed but it had to be paid up front ... I remember during the process texting: "It's all going really well. By the way have you heard anything about the finances?" ... That made you feel a bit mercenary.

While adopters C1 had been encouraged to apply for means tested financial support they explained they did not meet criteria as their income was just above the eligibility criteria. This was not only disappointing but the data suggests that the association of means tested benefits with the poor had left them feeling like many who are reliant on state benefits of being undeserving and trying to take advantage. This has not previously been considered.

4.26 Contact

Adopters confirmed that due to the training they understood the rationale for contact between the children and members of their birth family. Indirect contact through the child's agency in the form of annual exchange of letters had been arranged for all of

the children. However, again a lack flexibility, lack of trust in the adopters to act in the best interest of the children, poor communication, and a lack of in-depth knowledge of the cases by the child's agencies, continued to create difficulties and reinforced feelings of inequality. The foster carers visiting the child post placement on the day required by the agency, despite adopters B1 requesting a delay as the child had been poorly and not ready had left the child distressed and not sleeping for several days.

For adopters B2 a lack of planning and in depth knowledge of the case by the child's Social Worker potentially jeopardised confidentiality and the security of the placement. B2F explained:

We went to (name of agency) headquarters to meet the foster parents ... There was a bloke sat ... with a carrier bag full of toys... I was thinking he's come for contact ... Then in came maternal grandmother to collect travel warrants ... I said, "Can we sit somewhere else?" I was told, "No it will be fine." We were all sat in a line. As soon as the foster parents got to reception grandparents accosted them and said, "What's going on? Are they moving her?"

Given the adopters worked in the same town as the birth grandparents lived the adopters were now concerned it would be easy to find them.

The situation was exacerbated by the agency not informing the adopters of an extensive social media campaign by the maternal grandmother for the return of the child. B2F said:

I had one phone call from the Social Worker after we had found all this stuff on Facebook ... Her (the child) name was used ... They said under the Children Act the child is no longer protected ... (Name of adopters Social Worker) has supported us. (Name of adopters Social Worker) phoned me back and said, "The legal department is going to do something." ... Everything happened quickly but it was like: ... "We advise you to change her name" ... Suddenly we had to come up with a name ... Most parents have got nine months to think of a name.

Interestingly it was only after adopters B2 challenged such issues that plans for contact were changed to annual letter exchange with birth parents not including photographs of the child. Furthermore, while keeping the child's birth name is normally considered to be essential for the child's future identity, it is interesting this principle is compromised to accommodate practical needs. The long term impact of this approach has not been considered and requires further investigation.

Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal

4.27 Support from foster carers

All of the adopters valued the support, information, guidance and advice that foster carers provided. This was instrumental in helping adopters to develop a positive relationship with the child. Interestingly the adopters were reassured by foster carers being protective of the children. This may be because it indicated the child's ability to form attachments. However, adopters were very aware of the emotional impact of the child moving had on the foster carers and expressed some concern for the carers' welfare. B2F said:

On the morning we went to collect (name of child) she (foster mum) said to me, "Can we make this as quick as possible?" ... We loaded the car up ... She (foster mum) was really upset but she'd obviously done a lot of work with the child.

It is apparent that foster carers play a key role in supporting children and adopters during the whole process. It is not part of this study, but it is interesting that support for foster cares during such times was not mentioned by any of the professionals from the focus groups or in adoption literature on support.

4.28 Support from friends and family

All the adopters reported needing varying degrees of practical and emotional support post placement. The most important sources for such support were considered to be the adopters' families and friends. It is interesting that existing literature on adoption support (1.16 p44) does not discuss this any depth. The adopters from this study all gave examples of how their families and friends had unquestioningly welcomed and accepted the children and provided help. Adopters B2 explained they had found support from their neighbours invaluable. B2F said:

The second night she (child) got upset. She was in bits ... She threw the potty into the toilet ... She was trying to bite her fingers. All we could do was to wrap her up and we took her over the road because she is mad about animals and they (neighbours) have got some dogs. We are really lucky with the neighbours ... She loved them ... She was in her dressing gown ... She was petting the dogs she was okay then.

Under the circumstances this informal support was essential for the adopters. Had the adopters called the social care emergency duty service it may have raised questions about their ability as parents. Furthermore, if the adopters had suggested

this approach as a way of calming children down during their assessment, it could have raised concerns and required a risk assessment of the neighbours and their pets.

4.29 Support from agencies and professionals

In line with government policies and existing literature (1.16 p44) professionals from all the focus groups emphasized the importance of formal support for adopters. However, the value of support from family and friends was not mentioned. Early intervention was considered to be key to reducing the risk of placement disruption. Professionals were confident that most their adopters would contact their agencies if issues arose.

The groups of professionals commonly explained that on occasion they were surprised by adopters post the legal adoption. A professional from agency A said:

You think that you have had such a good relationship but as soon as there's something not going quite right you're the one they blame... Parenting brings out the best in people but also brings out the worst.

However, there appeared to be little question of whether the lack of trust and some poor practice demonstrated in the current process may prevent adopters from expressing their true feelings earlier for fear of not being able to adopt. While this is not discussed in existing studies the data from adopters suggests that their experiences of practice before and after a child is placed significantly influenced adopters' confidence and willingness to seek formal support. Where adoption Social Workers and agencies had developed a rapport and trusting relationship with adopters (B1, B2, C1, D2 and E5) the adopters were much more likely to seek and value formal support even if they had experienced some challenges during the journey. B1M said:

Our relationship with (name of Social Worker) has been challenged ... But that's not to say I wouldn't pick up the phone ... We're completely confident ... We don't feel we would be judged.

However, where this was not the case adopters questioned the ability of professionals and agencies to support them if needed. A2F said:

I know they keep going on: "We're here to help you, you know where we are." I don't have any faith in it. I don't think they're credible.

It is apparent that adopters' experiences with professionals from the earliest contact significantly influence their perceptions of the competence of adoption agencies, which in turn may impact on how they feel about seeking support should they need it at a later stage.

4.30 Summary

Nine key themes have been identified from this research including:

- Choosing adoption to start or extend a family
- Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption
- Inflexibility and the competing demands on time
- Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC
- Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process
- Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters
- The adopter and child synergy
- Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement
- Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal

Involuntary childlessness remains a key reason for people choosing to adopt. However, the data suggests that medical agencies do not consistently provide information about adoption as a possible means to become a parent. Indeed, individuals can be left unsupported if they choose not to pursue medical treatment. Significantly, once, potential adopters do contact adoption agencies, the quality of interactions with professionals can have a long-term impact on the experiences and perceptions of adopters. This can be a critical factor in enabling adopters to seek support after they have adopted a child. Furthermore, the findings suggest that support from foster carers as well as informal support from the adopters' friends and families is essential. However, this is not fully recognised by agencies and professionals who appear to predominately emphasise the importance of formal support.

Professional concerns about possible risks to children are wholly understandable. However, the findings indicate that the current approaches to risk assessment and risk management can undermine the trust between professionals and adopters. This can be counterproductive and may in fact increase the level of risk for all parties

concerned. Indeed, the findings suggest that concerns about possible future placement disruptions have led to the development of pre-adoption training that aims to provide ever increasing amounts of information about the challenges of caring for LAC. This appears to either lead to adopters disbelieving the information or withdrawing from the process. Furthermore, adopters' perceptions of the value of training appear to change with feelings of it not being valuable increasing over time.

Significantly, the findings evidence that power during the adoption process is relational and dynamic. The way this is managed by professionals and agencies can have a profound impact on adopters' willingness and ability to work in partnership during the assessment process and post adoption.

Changes imposed by the Government that aim to hasten adoptions may have undermined some key aspects of quality assurance process and can be detrimental for adopters and children. This requires further investigation.

Interestingly, while successive governments have claimed to support adoption, adopters still do not have equal employment rights as birth parents. Indeed, means tested adoption support allowances can lead to additional challenges. Such issues national policy issues need to be addressed.

The findings suggest that adopters can have access to considerable amounts of information throughout the process, the quality and consistency of this varies. Indeed, there are significant omissions throughout that not only limit adopters' abilities to make informed choices but can create additional challenges for adopters. Furthermore, a lack of partnership and rigid expectations about the timings of meetings and face to face contact can be detrimental for adopters and children. This requires further consideration.

The adoption process appears to pose additional challenges for applicants from BAME communities. This requires further investigation. Significantly, while successive governments have seen transracial adoption as a way of meeting the needs of children from BAME communities, the data indicates that physical similarity remains a key deciding factor when considering children. Furthermore, the findings raise significant questions about the ethics of the increasing use of commercial marketing techniques to find adopters for LAC.

The discussion in chapter 5 further considers the nine themes that have emerged from the research. The themes are grouped into three subject areas: Adoption, including becoming a parent, the child and challenges post placement. Process that considers information and formal training. Management that discusses risk, power, support and time constraints. The themes are considered in relation to some of the literature identified in chapter one as well as relevant policies and research published since 2012. Key findings are set out in tables at the end of each subject area.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses and discusses the significant aspects of the nine key themes referred to earlier (chapter 4) that have arisen from the research and are identified in figure 5.1 (p136). The chapter focuses specifically on issues that have not been considered in depth in existing research or that challenge present knowledge and practice.

The themes have been grouped into three subject areas:

Adoption including:

- Choosing adoption to start or extend a family
- The adopter and child synergy
- Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement

These relate directly to the desire to become parents and issues arising from caring for children.

Process including:

- Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption
- Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC

These relate to the process of that adopters' experience.

Management including:

- Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process
- Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters
- Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal
- Inflexibility and the competing demands on time

These impact on the adopters' experience throughout the process and are managed by adoption agencies and professionals. The themes are inter-related, hence there is a significant amount of overlap between them. The graph in figure 5.1 (p136) sets out the three subject areas and the related themes. It highlights the areas of overlap between them. The findings of the quantitative and qualitative chapters are integrated into these nine themes and will be compared with the findings of the

literature review. Furthermore, relevant new literature published since the completion of the literature review (post 2012) will be considered in light of the findings. A summary of key findings is presented at the end of each section in a table to highlight new findings, findings that challenge existing research and findings that support existing research.

Notably, in contrast to current research, texts, policies and legislation on adoption, reference is made to personal, cultural and structural factors that have a powerful impact on individual actions and behaviours (Thompson, 2012). Hofstede (2011, p3) defines culture as:

the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.

This definition is helpful in enabling an understanding of the influence that culture can have at conscious and unconscious levels. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that dominant cultures and ideologies set societal norms (Smith, 2008). These are unconsciously internalised by individuals and have a powerful impact on the person's attitudes, values and beliefs. Such beliefs can be reinforced at a structural level through policy and legislation (Thompson, 2012).

Themes graph

Inflexibility and the competing demands on time									
Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal & formal									
Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters									
Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process									
Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC									
Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption.									
Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement									
The adopter and child synergy									
Choosing adoption to start or extend a family									
Theme	Choosing adoption to start or extend a family	The adopter and child synergy	Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement	Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption.	Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC	Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process	Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters	Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: formal & informal	Inflexibility and the competing demands on time

Subject areas Adoption



Process



Management



Figure 5.1

Adoption

5.2 Choosing adoption to start or extend a family

Since the collection of the data for this study the DfE (2014a) has highlighted a need to better understand what motivates people to apply to adopt. The data from the questionnaires in part one (3.2 p71) and from the follow up interviews in part two (4.3 p94) reinforces Crawshaw & Balen's (2010) argument that the journey to adopt a child usually begins with the decision to start a family and parent a child rather than thoughts about adoption. This is also in line with Dance and Farmer's study (2014) that interviewed 27 approved adoptive parents after children had been matched with them and six months after the children had been placed. Indeed, except for adopter D2F all the other adopters that participated in part two of the study chose to adopt as a result of infertility. The decision to adopt for all the adopters came after significant periods of thought and consideration (4.3 p94). It is therefore surprising that

recommendations of studies such as Scott & Kindred (2013) suggest the commissioning of media planning agencies to encourage people who demonstrate altruistic behavior to apply to adopt and foster. However, it is important to note while Scott & Kindred (2013) utilized a mixed methods design, the paper does not give details of participants involved in the 18 face to face interviews. Scott & Kindred (2013) only state that 'hotspot' audiences were identified. It is therefore not possible to know how much serious consideration the participants had given to fostering or adoption, nor whether there was any difference in behaviours between those considering adoption or fostering. In the quantitative part, Scott & Kindred (2013) utilized an 80-question online survey that was undertaken by just under 5000 people. The significant number of questions included in the survey is contrary to good practice in developing questionnaires (White, 2009). It would be interesting to know how many participants fully completed the survey. However, this is not stated. While it is important to consider enablers and barriers to potential adoptive applicants from a range backgrounds and communities, the 11 demographic groups identified by Scott & Kindred (2013) as having an increased propensity to foster or adopt are very broad and do require further research. The groups identified include:

“People with personal experience of adoption or fostering in some form. Full-time carers. People working in the healthcare and not-for-profit sectors and those in higher managerial roles. People in full-time employment, students, volunteers and unemployed people. People aged 18-35. People in enduring relationships and civil partnerships. People who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. People who are part of religious communities, particularly those stating their religion as Buddhist, Hindu, Islam or Sikh. Across all religions, those people who were currently actively practicing their religion also had an increased propensity. People who are active in their local community. People living in London. People who are privately renting their home” (Scott & Kindred, 2013, p10).

Critically the only group Scott and Kindred (2013) appear to exclude are those in part time employment.

Notably the data from this investigation suggests that adoption panels can be more suspicious of adopters with higher managerial and professional careers as in the example given by B2 (4.18 p114). In contrast to Scott & Kindred (2013) the findings of this research (4.3 p94) indicate that information on adoption is not consistently provided to those that experience infertility. This may reduce the number of people applying to adopt. Furthermore, marketing strategies that seek to recruit individuals who have not contemplated adoption for some time may increase initial enquiries that will absorb agency resources, however, are unlikely to result in a significant increase in those progressing to being approved. It is therefore essential that consideration is given to enabling those who have seriously considered adoption to become adopters.

Successive governments (DfE, 2011a) continue to suggest that adoption offers an ideal solution for childless couples and gives individuals the opportunity to parent children who need loving homes. However, the findings of this study illustrated by B2F's comment (4.3 p94) suggest that there is a gap in provision for those who wish to become parents and choose not to pursue medical treatment either at all or any further in being provided with detailed, accurate and positive information about adoption by medical agencies (4.3 p94). Indeed, some medical professionals are described by adopters B2 (4.3 p94) as sales people in relation to IVF treatment. This has not previously been considered in other studies that have focused on adoption.

While the focus of this study is not infertility, the data from adopters (4.3 p94), who encountered medical professionals because of infertility, reaffirms the prominence of the medical model. Haegele & Hodge (2016) in their writing about disability discourse suggest that the medical model only focuses on the individual's medical issues and reinforces the need to find a cure. This ignores the fact that the treatment can expose individuals to a 'roller coaster ride' of emotions with feelings of elation that are followed quickly with despair (Cudmore, 2005, p302). B1F's comment (4.3 p94) suggests that this can leave individuals feeling they have little control over their lives and destiny (Schmidt, 2010) as well as having to cope with the additional stress and possible financial pressures due to the cost of IVF that can be £5000 or more per cycle if it is not available via the NHS (NHS.UK, 2017). Significantly those that choose not to seek treatment risk being further stigmatized as not willing to be cured,

isolated and receive little support medical professionals (4.3 p94). This may undermine potential adopters' confidence.

To date literature on infertility rarely mentions adoption as a positive option to parenthood (Goldberg, Downing, & Richardson, 2009) which is supported by the data from this study (4.3 p94). However, few texts on adoption consider the impact of infertility treatment in depth from an adopters' perspective (Crawshaw & Balen, 2010).

This research provides some understanding of the journey that individuals make from the medical diagnosis of infertility to deciding to adopt (4.3 p94). Evidentially the decision to adopt by those who experience involuntary childlessness is not automatic. This requires further investigation as some potential adopters may not come forward because of a lack of information and positive encouragement to consider adoption at a point that they feel low or even see themselves as failures.

Significantly, when individuals do eventually take the sizable step in deciding to find out about adoption, the quality of the information available can be misleading and confusing (4.5 p96). Furthermore, previous studies on adoption have not adequately considered the impact of the risk management culture (Smith, 2008) that appears to be prevalent. Professionals working with prospective adopters can be suspicious of applicants' motives due to an overwhelming focus on risk (4.14 p109). This can result in a lack of empathy and trust (4.3 p94). It is evident that adopters are expected to have come to terms with their inability to have a birth child before commencing their application to adopt (4.3 p94) due to professional fears of placements disrupting (4.14 p109) in the future. Furthermore, adoption agencies are required to meet rigid timescales (DfE, 2014b) during which adopters must be approved. These factors combined potentially create an atmosphere in which applicants who do express strong feelings of grief and loss due to infertility may be considered not ready to adopt (4.3 p94) and counselled out. Ironically this approach increases the risk of adopters not feeling able to talk openly about their own sense of grief and loss with Social Workers before a child is placed.

The data from the research evidences that adopters are acutely aware of the fact that the life changing decision of whether or not they can be parents are in the hands of strangers (4.15 p110). While existing literature accepts that the process is

necessarily intrusive (Lousada, 2000), current studies into adoption do not recognise that the right to privacy in family life and protection from unnecessary intrusion is deeply embedded in UK culture and enshrined in policy and legislation (Webb, 2006) such as the Children Act 1989 (Brammer, 2015). Hence, the fact that adopters find the requirement to discuss the most intimate of details with a Social Worker difficult (4.15 p107) is to be expected. However, this study suggests that a natural reluctance to share such detail can be interpreted by professionals as an intention to conceal information or deceive (4.14 p109). Unless Social Workers have developed key soft skills such as those described by B1M (4.17 p113) to build a rapport and promote trust such situations can quickly spiral downwards. The significance of this is not adequately recognised in existing research into adoption.

The matter may have been exacerbated by successive governments' policies to speed up the process (1.9 p24). Furthermore, inferences that local authority adoption services are inefficient (DfE, 2016a) do not recognise that local authority adoption agencies are part of children's Social Work services and are often 'starved of resources' (Banks, 2012, p142). The findings of this study provide evidence that there is a significant amount of good practice within local authority and voluntary adoption agencies (4.17 p113). However, current national policies (DfE, 2016a) risk undermining this as they favour services provided by voluntary adoption services (Familylawweek.co.uk, 2017) that are independent. Based on the writing of Alcock and May, (2014) who are renowned authors on social policy it is possible to see that this simplistic notion is in line with the principles of neoliberal anti-state ideology that has been widespread since the 1970s, but is not conducive to good practice. Furthermore, there has been no mention of the fact that voluntary adoption agencies rely on the fees that local authorities pay for placements to fund their services. At £27,000 for a placement for one child, voluntary adoption agencies charge more than double the £13,138 that local authorities charge each other for placements (BAAF, 2012b). Interestingly while there is an emphasis on giving adopters clear and accurate information (DfE, 2011e) to enable choice, the findings of this study (4.5 p96) suggest that applicants are not informed of the interagency fees that are applicable between agencies for placements. This is not considered by existing literature and requires further investigation.

Key finding: Choosing adoption to start or extend a family	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
Involuntary childlessness remains a key motivation to adopt			*
Adoption is not consistently discussed as a positive option for people wishing to have children by medical agencies.	*		
While there is a vast amount of information about adoption available, this can be misleading, conflicting and inaccurate for people considering adoption.		*	
Professionals can be suspicious of prospective adopters' motivations. Furthermore, can continually question the readiness to adopt following unsuccessful medical treatment to have a birth child. Combined these issues may prevent applicants exploring feelings of grief and loss.		*	

Table 5.1

5.3 The adopter and child synergy

Unsurprisingly the quantitative results (graph 3.3 p81) indicated that 96% of adopters wanted young children (birth to five years). Of those that were willing to consider older children it was largely due to the adopters own age and an acceptance that it was unlikely they would be chosen for a young healthy child (3.8 p80). Quinton (2012) who accepts that his text is not based on a comprehensive review of literature and is an opinion based piece suggests the need for careful matching of variables such as the child's needs and the adopters parenting capacity in a scientific manner to promote placement stability for the future. This also appears to be a commonly held belief in professional practice (4.19 p118). However, this approach does not recognise that dependent on the workers' approach, the assessment may not have identified the true parenting capacity of the adopters (4.16 p112).

The findings of this study suggest that a trusting partnership with adopters is essential (4.17 p113) as the ultimate decision must be led by the adopters (4.19 p118). However, the overwhelming focus by agencies on managing the risk of placement disruptions can undermine the trust of adopters (4.29 p130). Existing literature does not recognise such issues. This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter (5.8 p151).

Significantly, adopters' decisions about the child to adopt appear to be influenced by an emotional connection to specific children (4.19 p118). In Quinton's (2012) opinion physical similarity is no longer used by adoption agencies as a key factor to match children to adopters. However, adopters appear to consciously or unconsciously connect with children that have a very similar physical family likeness to the adopters or members of the adopters' family (4.19 p118). Current literature does not discuss this; however, it is an area that requires further research.

Interestingly, while the questionnaire (appendix A) in part one of study did not provide a spectrum of physical disabilities, 69% of adopters appeared associated physical disability (graph 3.7 p84) with the child continuing to be dependent on them throughout adulthood. This illustrates the impact of the stigma and negative societal attitudes associated with physical disability (Arbour, Latimer, Martin Ginis and Jung, 2007). Furthermore, it highlights the impact of powerful negative attitudes towards children who do not conform to societal norms of growing up to be completely independent (Green, 2006). This may discourage the adoption of such children. However, adopters' comments in part two of the study suggest that adopters' attention was drawn to profiles of children who appeared to be active and alert (4.19 p118). This reinforces the need for profiles of children to portray the child in a holistic manner and not simply focus on stigmatising labels and medical conditions (Cousins, 2005).

This study does not aim to discuss the ethical dilemmas of transracial adoption as these are considered in depth within existing literature such as Thoburn, Norford and Rashid, (2000) and Wainwright and Ridley (2012). However, the study challenges the policies of successive governments, including the current one, that continue to see transracial adoption as the solution for enabling more children from BAME communities to be placed for adoption (DfE, 2016a). The findings of this research (3.8 p80) suggest that race is an important consideration for adopters as it is in society. Indeed 66% of adopters (graph 3.6 p83) would not consider a child from a different race. This is not an indicator of individual prejudice but a desire like natural parents to have a child that physically resembles them and that wider society would not question. Furthermore, adopters expressed concerns for the welfare of children who may be transracially adopted particularly due to fears that the child may be bullied (3.8 p80) in wider society due to being physically different to the adoptive

family. It is interesting to note that while government policy continues to promote transracial adoption (DfE, 2016a) to address the stated issues of BAME children remaining in care, there has been a lack of focus on the need to recruit, assess and approve more adopters from BAME communities. Notably, the results of this study raise questions about the effectiveness of the adoption process for adopters from BAME communities (4.2 p92). Significantly from a total sample of sixty-six individual adopters from across five agencies only nine were from BAME groups (table 4.1 p93). None of these who agreed to participate in the second part went on to be approved. This phenomenon does require further investigation and understanding.

While government policies (DfE, 2014b) and legislation (HMSO, 2002) state that the welfare of the child is of paramount concern, the data from professionals from agencies A, B and D as well as adopters C1 (4.20 p120) suggests that children's feelings and self-worth can be brushed aside, in order to find adopters for them. The emphasis is on using commercial marketing techniques which objectify and commodify children (Higgins, & Smith, 2002). This is evident in existing policy and practice such as adoption activity days (4.20 p120) that use marketing techniques like those aimed at selling commodities as explained by C1M (4.20 p120). Indeed, Clifton and Neil (2013) argue that marketing should be a key part of an adoption agency's plan. However, Clifton and Neil's (2013) study is based on telephone interviews with 13 adoption managers and 12 marketing officers from 18 local authority adoption agencies and five voluntary adoption agencies. These participants are tasked with meeting performance targets of recruiting adopters and placing children. Indeed, one marketing officer from Clifton and Neil's (2013, p9) study commented that marketing an adoption agency was:

just like selling different brands of washing machine.

These approaches may compromise the welfare of individuals in favour of placing children quickly. Existing literature does not consider the impact of such processes that can dehumanise (Haslam, 2006) and the effect they may have on the long-term welfare of children and adopters. This requires further investigation.

Key finding: The adopter and child synergy	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
Professional try to match adopters and children based on variables. However, adopters connect to children based on physical likeness, adopters' feelings and emotions.		*	
Negative societal attitudes and perceptions of disability are persistent. Poor profiles of children and labelling reduces the chances of finding adopters.			*
While policy encourages transracial adoption, adopters recognise the challenges of this. Furthermore, similarity to the child is an important factor for Adopters.	*		
BAME adopters may face additional challenges throughout the process	*		
Some of the commercial marketing techniques used to find families for children can be contrary to the welfare of children	*		

Table 5.2

5.4 Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement

A significant amount of existing literature including renowned texts such as Quinton et al. (1998) and more recent texts including Selwyn, Wijesasa and Meakings (2014) discuss the challenges that adopters face because of their adopted children's needs and behaviours in depth. However, it is important to note that Selwyn, Wijesasa and Meakings' (2014) research is based on a sample of approved adopters who had legally adopted children between 2002 and 2004 from 13 local authorities.

Furthermore, out of the total sample of 390 adopters who were caring for a total of 689 children Selwyn, Wijesasa and Meakings (2014) selected 35 adopters whose children had left before they reached adulthood due to the adoptions disrupting and 35 whose children were still at home but were experiencing significant challenging behaviours. The findings are therefore based on historical case records and adopters' recollections. Significantly, comments from professionals (4.15 p110) indicate that existing research such as Selwyn, Wijesasa and Meakings (2014) informs current practice in adoption with an aim to identify a formula to predict the risk of placements disrupting.

The findings of this study suggest that the current adoption process can actively prevent adopters from talking openly about their feelings of the inability to have a

birth child (4.3 p94) and leave adopters to carry feelings of unresolved loss and shame. The study further highlights that national policies aimed at speeding up the adoption may be creating unforeseen legal uncertainties and complexities for adopters and adoption agencies (4.24 p 125). To date this has not been considered in any other research.

While the adoption training does appear to enable adopters to understand the value of post adoption contact (4.12 p106), examples such as that of B2 suggests poor planning and communication can create risks for the adopters and children (4.24 p125). Previous studies into adoption do not fully recognise that such issues not only create additional hurdles for adopters but may erode their energy and resilience that are necessary for the care of children. This is illustrated by the example given by adopter B2F (4.24 p125). Moreover, such experiences can undermine the adopters' trust in professionals and agencies as evidenced by the statement by A2F (4.29 p130) and may make adopters reluctant to engage with professionals if necessary in the future. This has not been considered by previous research.

Key finding: Formal impediments to the adopter and child relationship post placement	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
National policies aimed at speeding up the adoption process appear to be creating additional challenges for adopters after a child has been placed.	*		
Current approaches to predict risk of disruption can hinder open communication and increase risk.		*	
Poor information and communication can lead to significant additional stress and undermine the energy, trust and resilience of adopters.	*		

Table 5.3

Process

5.5 Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption

In line with the principles of the free market approach (Alcock & May, 2014) the current system of adoption allows prospective adopters to choose an adoption agency to assess and approve them. To facilitate adopters' choice, they are provided with considerable amounts of information (4.5 p96). Significantly, however, in making their decision about which agency to apply to the adopters from this study were not

aware of key information including that local authorities usually held responsibility for children in care and the interagency fee that applies when local authorities place children with adopters who are approved by another agency (4.5 p96). It is therefore not known if this may have impacted on adopters' decisions about which agency they chose. Ultimately this can impact on the children who are available for adoption that adopters are made aware of.

It is evident that the internet is a key source of information for prospective adopters (3.4 p73). However, the volume and conflicting information confuses and may deter rather than enable adopters (4.5 p96). While the Department for Education (2015) has recognised the need for adoption agencies to collaborate more, it does not address the fact that the current system of interagency fees (Selwyn et al. 2009) encourages competition between agencies for financial sustainability. Indeed, a further search by the researcher on 11 September 2016 using the term 'adoption' which was used by adopters A2, D2, and E5 in the same search engine found that the number of hits had risen (4.5 p96) from 220,000,000 in 2015 to 299,000,000 in 2016 suggesting the volume of information has increased, however, it does not appear to provide further clarity as it appears to be of the same nature as the previous search and in a similar order.

Post approval, it is evident that professionals and adopters share concerns about the quality of information about children (4.6 p98). Current literature (Thomas, 2013) recognises that inadequate information is shared about children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. However, the findings of this investigation from the experience of adopters A2, B1, B2 and D2 (4.23 p125) suggest that there are significant omissions in key basic information such as the existence of birth family members that can care for children, the legal status of children, children's names and important medical information. This may be a result of the volume of information that agencies have to manage, inadequate information management systems and poor communication between agencies, between the different departments within agencies and between professionals. It is significant to note that changes in legislation that have been introduced to speed up the adoption process (Norgrove, 2011) may have contributed to this by removing the adoption panel as a means of quality assuring information before a plan for adoption for children is agreed. Had this remained it may have prevented issues such as those experienced by adopter

D2 (4.6 p98). Such issues require further investigation as they can create risks for both adopters and children.

Key finding: Finding out about adoption and the children placed for adoption	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
The current system of adoption is based on choice. However, key information is not available, hence does not support informed choice.	*		
The internet has enabled the provision of a vast amount of information, however, the quality can be lacking as it can be inaccurate and confusing.		*	
National changes to the quality assurance process i.e. the removal of the need for adoption panels to consider whether adoption is in the best interest of a child may have led to additional delay as well as distress for adopters	*		

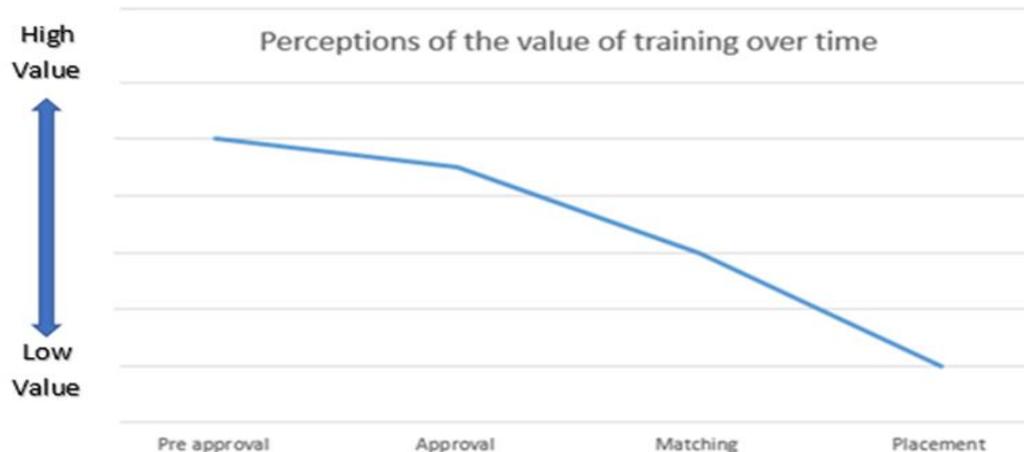
Table 5.4

5.6 Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC

The findings of this study highlight that the professionals who are expected to deliver the training have little support in developing their own understanding of the principles of adult learning and teaching (Rogers, 2007). Comments such as those from a participant in agency B (4.9 p103) were common and suggested the trainers relied on observing their peers synonymous with an apprentice approach before delivering the training. Furthermore, there appeared to be little appreciation of the impact of the anxieties of adopters who were being observed and assessed during the training as illustrated by the comment from adopter C2F (4.11 p106) that potentially blocked their ability to learn (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010). Comments from adopters such as A2F (4.9 p103) suggest the trainers selected aspects of the BAAF trainers guide but this approach did not enable learning. It has not been possible to access the guide (appendix L) to understand how it is intended to be used. During the research two of the adoption agencies that participated in this study did agree to make this available though, this did not happen in the end. However, it is evident that such issues have not previously been considered and require further research.

Rushton & Monck (2009a) highlight that there is very little research on pre-adoption training. Significantly the methodology of the research such as Rushton and Monck's (2009a) study tends to ask adopters about their experiences of the training several years after a child has been placed with them for some time. This approach suggests that the information from adopters is based on their recollections. In the opinion of Conway and Loveday (2015) who are renowned for their work on autobiographical memory, recollections become less clear and less focused with the passing of time. Furthermore, frequently these adopters may have experienced difficulties with the child's behaviour, hence, studies such as Rushton and Monck's (2009a) tend to suggest further input prior to approval to ensure adopters understand the true challenges that children can present and to manage issues that focus on the child such as anger, child development and attachment. However, due to the longitudinal nature of this study, the findings suggest that adopters' perceptions of the value of the training changes and depreciate over time. This is illustrated in graph 5.1 below.

5.7 Value of training



Graph 5.1

Dance and Farmer, (2014) who interviewed 27 adopters after they had been matched to children suggest that the majority felt they had learned a lot from the preparation training. However, the findings of this investigation that followed a sample of adopters from before they were approved and until after children had been placed indicate that in the early stages of the process, the training was considered to

be valuable by prospective adopters (3.6 p78). At the time of the first interview four adopters (B1, B2, C1 and D2) maintained that overall the training had been helpful. It helped them to realise that they were not alone and had enabled them to develop an understanding of the value of contact. Notably, by the time of the second interview participants commonly felt the training had been of little use. However, in contrast to existing studies the findings of this research (4.12 p106) highlight that adopters felt that the training had overwhelmingly focused on the challenges that children may present, but had not prepared them for the actual challenges they were facing including the adoption process, legal issues, competition with other adopters in finding a child and accessing universal services such as such as health care (4.23 p125).

It is not surprising that the findings suggest in the early stages of the application a significant number of prospective adopters can have a desire to rescue children from abusive and neglectful situations (graph 3.7 p84). However, this study suggests in response, agencies may overwhelmingly focus on the challenges that children may present and possible causes for these (4.11 p106). This approach may be fuelled by existing texts that suggest prospective adopters:

“do not receive sufficient information, training and support to understand and manage their children’s needs” (Livingston Smith, 2014 p185).

Significantly, Livingston Smith’s (2014) book is based on the opinions and experiences of staff from the Donaldson Adoption Institute based in the USA but published by BAAF for a UK audience. This book does not recognise the significant cultural and legal differences. However, the resulting impact of such suggestions on recipients of the training appears to be either disbelief, hence, dismissal of the information and/or significant levels of fear and anxiety that may lead to withdrawal from the process (4.12 p106). Furthermore, this may eventually result to a self-fulfilling prophecy as discussed in the literature review (1.7 p16). This is not considered in existing literature and suggests adopters need to be provided with a balance of information that presents some of the potential challenges of caring for LAC but also the positives of caring for children, as well as practical information about matters such as the legal process of adoption.

The professionals that participated in the study referred to the concept of training (4.10 p105) as a means of preparing adopters for the task of caring for children that

may be placed with them. Significantly, however, comments from adopters (4.10 p105), suggest that the current approach tries to train adopters to operate a child akin to a practical manual that might for example come with a computer.

Furthermore, the training predominately focuses on the extreme behaviours that some LAC may exhibit. This approach might reinforce stereotypes of LAC (Ofsted, 2009) as well as the fears and anxieties that some adopters have. Importantly the training appears to consciously or unconsciously question how adopters can grow to love such children. Yet, paradoxically the training tells adopters that they are only likely to get such damaged children. This approach is not surprising and may be reflective of the fact that successive governments have increasingly insisted that Social Work education utilises a training approach (Ring, 2014).

Recent developments such as the AdOpt parenting programme (Harold, Hampden-Thompson, Rodic, Sellers, Rudd, Rudd, 2017) may address some of the post adoption support needs of adopters who experience challenges in caring for children placed with them. However, it is important to note that AdOpt (Harold et al. 2017) has been developed from the USA based Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Trained and Supported (KEEP) programme (*Keeping Foster and Kinship Parents Trained and Supported (KEEP)*, no date) and does not recognise the importance or significance of cultural differences (Thompson, 2012). Furthermore, AdOpt (Harold et al. 2017) does not address the key issues raised in this study, including the challenges that adopters face that are not related to the child, nor of the risk of adopters either withdrawing from the process or rejecting unbalanced information that purely raises anxieties. Indeed AdOpt (Harold et al. 2017), reinforces the existing approach to training adopters. However, Hoverstadt, (2008) whose study relates to business and staff development argues that such approaches are narrow and do not support continual learning and adaptation to address complex matters. Indeed, the current approach to training adopters does not appear to adhere to the key principles of 'learner centred learning' (Rushton and Walker, 2015, p23). In Rushton and Walker's (2015) opinion that is supported by other renowned authors on teaching and learning such as Scales (2013) these principles include the need to facilitate learning, motivate and support, promote reflection, take account of the learners' prior experiences and abilities and encourage learners to be develop their own strategies to address problems. Working to such principles and encouraging

reflection (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010) may enable adopters to build on the strengths they have and could be more effective. This requires further investigation.

Key finding: Formal mechanisms to prepare adopters for the challenges of caring for LAC	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
The perceived value of pre-adoption training depreciates over time	*		
Pre-adoption training predominantly aims to inform adopters of the challenges of caring for LAC. However, the content and style appears to raise fears and anxieties instead of encouraging reflection and continual learning.	*		

Table 5.5

Management

5.8 Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process

Inevitably the process of adoption carries a level of risk for all parties including children, adopters, professionals and agencies due to concerns for safety and levels of uncertainty for the future. It is therefore not surprising that the findings of this study (figure 3.1 p75) indicate a significant amount of apprehension amongst adopters from the early stages of the process. While traditionally the term risk was neutral and suggested *'a weighing up of whether or not to take and action'* (Tulloch & Lupton, 2003 p17), in social work practice it is very closely associated with danger (Goddard et al. 1999) due to the impact of child death cases (Kemshall, 2002). There is an over whelming focus on *'prediction, control and culpability'* (Houston & Griffiths, 1999. p1). In doing so it also enables apportionment of blame at an individual level in the event of the assessment being inaccurate (Webb, 2006). In the adoption arena, comments such as those from agency A (4.14 p109) indicate that this may have led to a culture of distrust and suspicion of adopters' motives during the approval process. The experiences of adopters A2 and C2 (4.17 p113) suggest that, dependent on how this is managed by individual practitioners and agencies, it can expose adopters to a mechanistic assessment process that undermines adopters' confidence in professionals and agencies. Indeed, the findings (4.18 p114) suggest on occasion adoption panels do not trust the work of the assessing workers hence can subject adopters to a further assessment at the panel. Ironically, in the long term this may prevent adopters from seeking formal support (4.29 p130). Furthermore,

comments from some adopters (4.15 p110) suggest this approach can be easily manipulated and therefore may not reduce the risk of harm to children. To date this has not been considered in existing literature on adoption and requires further research.

Significantly the data from practitioners (4.15 p110), suggests that professionals can try to predict risk and future outcomes by applying simplistic formulas and variables. For example, the presence of birth children is considered a significant risk (4.14 p109). Studies such as Quinton et al. (1998) and Selwyn et al (2006) do suggest the presence of children already in the adoptive home can create an additional complicating factor when adopted children join such families. To address such issues the full involvement of children that are already present in the adoptive home is essential in the assessment process (Selwyn et al. 2006). This requires Social Workers to have effective skills of communication with children (Lefevre, Tanner & Luckock, 2008). However, there is no evidence to verify that the mere presence of a child already in the adoptive home on its own is a key risk factor to placement stability. Indeed, many sibling relationships are not harmonious and require managing (Thornton, 2008). The findings of this investigation suggest that further research is required in relation to the impact of placing children with adopters that have birth children, the possible dynamics this creates and strategies to manage such issues.

The findings further indicate that on occasion Social Workers lack confidence in their own skills and refer to experts such as psychologists (4.15 p110) to predict levels of risk. Moreover, the focus on risk prediction can become an obstacle to good practice such as developing a rapport and trust with adopters to enable them to share full and accurate information. In contrast examples such as those by adopters B1, B2, C1, D2 and E5 (4.17 p113) suggest that the ability to effectively plan, avoiding repetitive and random questions, good interpersonal skills of communication, respect, active listening and an understanding and application of relevant theories are essential in developing a long term trusting relationship with adopters.

Key finding: Risks and managing uncertainty in the adoption process	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
Existing approaches to risk assessment and management can be contrary to good practice. This can undermine the trust and rapport necessary for accurate assessment and positive partnership.	*		
Further research is required to understand the change in dynamics when a child is placed with adopters who have birth children.		*	

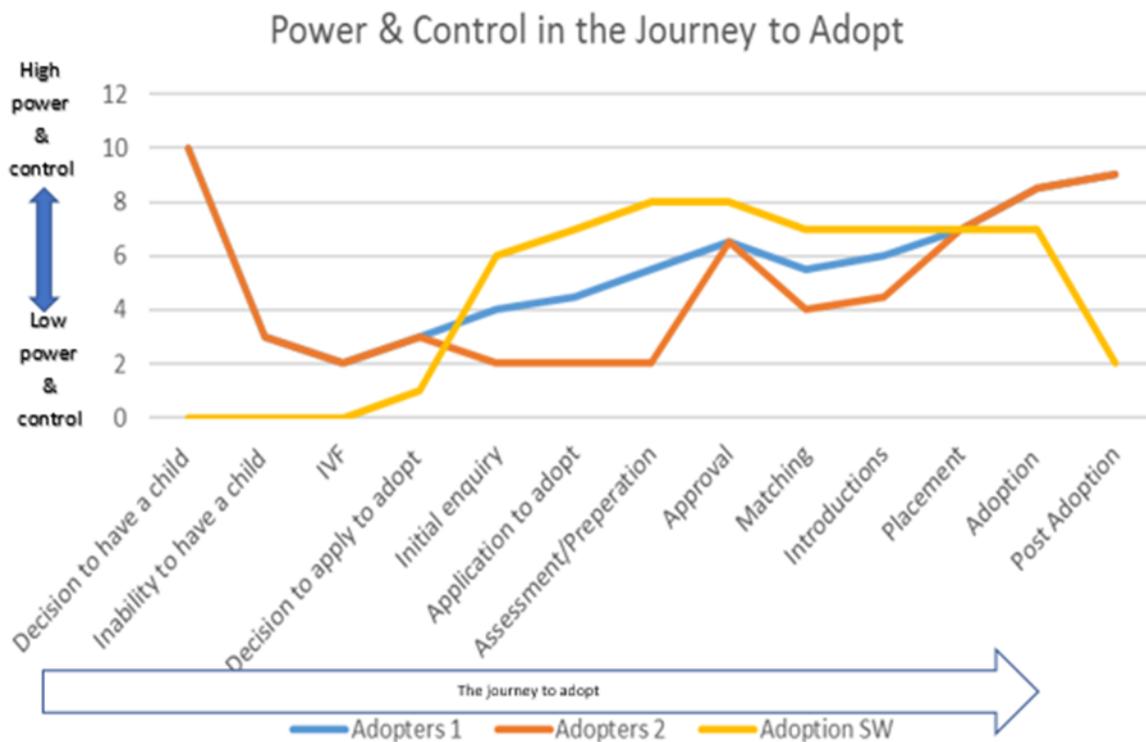
Table 5.6

5.9 Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters

Local authority children’s social services usually work with service users who experience long term powerlessness and rely on social care services because of factors such as poverty, abuse, exclusion and disadvantage (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006). Thus, professionals and agencies can be consciously or unconsciously used to exercising power over such individuals and families (Dominelli, 2002) to assess and manage risk (Smith, 2008). It must be recognised that many adoption Social Workers including those working for voluntary adoption agencies may have frequently worked as child protection workers before moving into adoption teams, hence display similar working practice. However, in contrast many adopters usually have control over their own lives (Fisher, 2003) and are considered to be part of normal society (Dominelli, 2002). It is only due to involuntary childlessness (4.3 p94) that many prospective adopters encounter Social Work services as service users. In such circumstances the culture of children’s social services (Thompson, 2012) that are also often poorly resourced (Banks, 2012) can be a shock for adopters who are frequently affluent and may be used to very different levels of services.

The findings of this project suggest that during the adoption process the adopters experienced varying degrees of powerlessness. However, following approval adopters increasingly regain control. Indeed, once the child is legally adopted, adopters do not have to have any contact with Social Workers or the adoption agency if they do not wish to. This is in line with Burck and Speed’s, (1995) study into gender, power and relationships, as the findings of this study (4.16 p112)

reinforce that power in adoption is dynamic and relational and not static. This is illustrated in graph 5.2 (p154) that compares the feelings of adopters in relation to power and control based on their experiences with professionals and agencies at the different points of the journey to adopt.



Graph 5.2. Power dynamics in adoption. (Adopters 1 – professional practice promoted partnership, trust and enabled adopters to gradually regain control over their lives. Adopters 2 – professional practice was rigid with low trust resulting in low confidence by adopters in professionals and agencies).

As indicated in the qualitative chapter the whole sample of adopters in part two of this study (table 4.1 p93) held professional/managerial jobs with significant responsibility, authority and power. Under ordinary circumstances they would have been able to challenge discriminatory practice. Thus, for illustrative purposes on the graph (5.2 p154) all the adopters have been allocated a nominal power rating of 10 at the point of their initial decision to have a child. Conversations with adopters (A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) suggested that the discovery they would not be able to have birth children left them feeling powerless and initially dependent on medical services. Interestingly even in the face of questionable medical practice such as the examples provided by adopters B1 and B2 (4.3 p94) they did not feel able to challenge this. Up

until the point that the adopters made the decision to apply to adopt Social Workers had little influence on the situation hence adoption Social Workers have been allocated a nominal power rating of 0 until the adopters decided to apply to adopt. However, from initial contact with the agencies it is evident that response from the agency and practice of individual Social Workers had a profound impact on the experiences of the adopters. In cases where practitioners worked transparently in partnership with adopters (graph 5.2 p154 Adopters 1) as in the case of B1, B2, C1, D2 and E5 the adopters felt increasingly prepared and enabled. Thus, they continued to trust the agency and the Social Worker even when the relationship was challenged at a later stage (4.17 p113). However, where this was not so as in the case of adopters A2 and C2 (graph 5.2 p154 Adopters 2) they continued to feel powerless. In the case of couple C2 this played a significant part in them withdrawing from the process in order to regain some control over their lives (4.17 p113). For adopters A2 following approval and the placement of the child they were increasingly reluctant to work with the agency (4.29 p130). It must therefore be recognised that poor practice that is contrary to the standards of proficiency for Social Workers (HCPC, 2012) in the early stages of the adoption process has significant implications for adopters' long term confidence in professionals and agencies.

Notably, however at the time of writing this study the DfE (2016b) had recommended that the responsibility for the regulation of the Social Work profession be removed from the HCPC in favour of a new regulatory body that would be directly accountable to the DfE and the DoH. If successful it could make the profession even more responsive to political pressure with less concern for ethical practice. Ironically, this may result in an increased risk of placements disrupting.

Significantly the power of the adoption panel was perceived very differently by individuals and agencies. Interestingly while adopters' attendance at adoption panel is not a requirement all the adopters believed it was (4.18 p114). Indeed, this is not clear in the information available for prospective adopters. Furthermore, individual Social Workers and agencies perceived and used the adoption panel for different means. Comments from professionals confirm that Social Workers are very aware of the power of panels. Notably, adopters A2's accounts suggest the panel can be used by assessing workers to illicit desired answers and exercise a degree of control over adopters (4.18 p114). At the same time the data from some professionals (4.18

p114) suggests panel be a means of sharing responsibility and blame in the event the assessment is inaccurate. However, the findings indicate that the information presented to panel may be misleading and based on a professional's opinion of what panel wants to hear (4.18 p114). Furthermore, data from some professionals (4.18 p114) and adopters (4.18 p114) suggests that panels can expose adopters to a further level of risk assessment due to a distrust of professionals as well as individual attitudes and values of panel members. Such power dynamics have not been considered in existing studies.

The recommendations of the Children and Social Work Bill (DfE, 2016b) suggest that adoption panels may no longer be required. The findings of this study suggest that the remit and purpose of adoption panels do need review. Indeed, adopters should not be exposed to additional levels of assessment based on individual panel members' attitudes and values as in the example given by adopters B2 (4.18 p114). However, if managed appropriately with a clear focus on quality assurance, ensuring fairness and equity as well as transparency panels can have a significant positive impact including ensuring agencies consider and share all relevant information in line with good practice. Removing them from the process altogether may result in additional long term challenges for adopters and children.

Key finding: Dynamic power relationships between professionals, agencies and adopters	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
Power in the context of adoption is dynamic and relational. The way this is managed can have a significant impact on adopters' ability and willingness to work with professionals during the process and after a child is placed. This can result in an increased risk of adoptions breaking down in the future.	*		
In addition to the stated purposes of the adoption panel it can be used covertly as means to exert control over adopters' responses and behaviours during the assessment process. Furthermore, adopters are not aware that attending panel is not a requirement.	*		

Table 5.7

5.10 Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal

Recent initiatives have led to additional funding for the provision of formal support services such as therapeutic input for adoptive families (Lewis & Ghate, 2015). While such support is essential for adopters caring for children in need of therapeutic services, the findings of this study (4.29 p130) suggest that the experiences of adopters with agencies and individual professionals prior to the placement of the child have a significant impact on adopters' willingness to request and confidence in formal post adoption services.

Significantly while the current adoption process requires an assessment of adopters' support networks (Beesley, 2010) this tends to be part of the assessment of risk. Information from all of the adopters in this study (4.28 p129) highlights the value of informal support from friends and family both pre and post the placement of children. Indeed, as in the example provided by B2F (4.28 p129) such support can prevent issues from spiralling downwards (Chavis, 2016) and can be more effective than formal interventions by agencies. It is therefore significant that existing research such as Bonin et al. (2013) does not recognise this and is an area that requires further research.

The data (4.27 p129) reinforces the value of information, advice, guidance and support from foster carers. Existing studies into adoption do not adequately recognise this. The experience of foster carers is not within the remit of this study; however, it is notable from comments such as those from B2 (4.27 p129) that the foster carers may themselves be left unsupported at highly emotional times such as when a child moves. This requires further investigation.

Key finding: Preferred types of support chosen by adopters: informal and formal	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
Adopters experiences with agencies from the earliest stage of the process impacts on their ability and willingness to seek formal support.	*		
The value of support from foster carers requires more recognition.		*	
Support from friends and families is essential in enabling adopters to meet the needs of children		*	

Table 5.8

5.11 Inflexibility and the competing demands on time

The findings of this study suggest that balancing competing pressures on time are a key challenge for adopters, Social Workers and agencies (4.7 p101). Significantly in some cases for example adopters A2 (4.7 p101) the lack of flexibility in the system and the agencies desire to test adopters' commitment to the process by requiring adopters be assessed and attend training during office hours, had a profound impact on the adopters' availability during the matching and the placement of the child.

Notably while successive governments have promoted the increasing use of adoption (DfE, 2016a), there is little recognition of the time implications before adopters are approved. This contrasts with the experiences of birth parents who are entitled to time off to attend maternity appointments before the birth of child during work time.

The data (4.7 p101) further indicates that the imposition of performance measures, (DfE, 2011a) have focused attention on speed rather than quality or enabling the adopters to prepare to meet the needs of children.

Key finding: Inflexibility and the competing demands on time	New	Challenges existing research	Supports existing research
The implementation of performance measures appears to have led to an overriding focus on meeting timescales rather than quality.			*
There is an inequality of provision for adopters in relation to entitlement of time off from prior to a child being placed in comparison to birth parents.	*		

Table 5.9

5.12 Summary

The findings suggest involuntary childlessness remains a key motivating factor for many adopters. However, medical agencies do not consistently support individuals faced with involuntary childlessness to consider adoption as a positive option.

Furthermore, prospective adopters can be faced with professional suspicion over their motivation and readiness to adopt especially if they have not completed any treatment for infertility. Indeed, the significant focus on risk and current approaches to risk assessment and management throughout the process may ironically lead to increased levels of risk for all parties concerned.

The findings suggest that professionals seek to match children with adopters in a formulaic manner. However, it is evident that adopters frequently base their decisions on their feelings and emotions. Furthermore, physical similarity is a key consideration for adopters. This indicates that the use of transracial adoption as means to place more BAME children for adoption is likely to have a very limited impact.

National policies aimed at speeding up the process and increasing adoptions may have led to additional challenges for adopters in the longer term. Furthermore, while the use of commercial marketing techniques to find adopters for children is increasing, this may be contrary to the long-term welfare of children.

While adopters appear to have access to vast amounts of information throughout the process, the quality can be inconsistent, including poor quality information with significant omissions. Such issues can create additional challenges for adopters

before and during the approval process as well as after a child has been matched and placed.

The perceived value that adopters attribute to the pre-adoption preparation appears to depreciate over time. Once a child is placed adopters commonly agreed that the input did not prepare them for the practical and legal challenges they faced. Indeed, the preparation appears to adhere to the principles of training but does not appear to encourage reflection and ongoing learning.

Significantly, power within the context of adoption is dynamic and relational. Crucially, the development of rapport and a trusting relationship with adopters in the early stages of the process is essential to working in partnership after a child has been placed.

This chapter has identified several areas where more research is recommended and this will be considered further in chapter six.

Chapter 6 Conclusion & Dissemination

6.1 Introduction

In concluding the study this chapter revisits the aim and objectives of the study and illustrates how these have been achieved. Significant findings that contribute new knowledge or challenge existing research are summarised, furthermore recommendations from the study are set out. Finally, the chapter explains the dissemination strategy to share the findings and recommendations to support practice.

6.2 Aim of the study

To compare the experiences and perceptions of prospective parents on their journey to adopt a child with those of Social Workers and social work managers.

The mixed methods study design (figure 2.1, p54) distinguishes it from many other existing studies into adoption. The data for the study was collected over a period of two years between 2012 and 2014. In the first part of the study a random sample of adopters from five adoption agencies were asked to complete a questionnaire (appendix A) while they were still in the early stages of the adoption process after their application had been accepted by an adoption agency. It was initially envisaged that a purposeful sample based on diversity would be identified from the adopters who agreed to participate in the second stage of the study, however, this was not possible for several reasons (chapter 4) including some prospective adopters withdrawing from the process and changes in circumstances for other adopters. Those that did respond and could participate were interviewed by the researcher face to face either just before or soon after they had been approved (appendix B) and again after a child had had been matched and/or placed with them (appendix C). The data was triangulated by the third part of the study that involved focus group interviews (appendix D) with professionals involved in the adoption process. This has enabled a depth of understanding of how adopters' experiences, perceptions and feelings develop and change over time from applying to adopt up until a child is placed.

6.3 Objectives of the study

The study had four objectives:

- 1. To explore adopters' experiences and perceptions of the adoption assessment, preparation and approval process in enabling them to meet the needs of 'Looked After Children'.**

The study considered participants' views and beliefs about the existing adoption process. The methodology enabled the researcher to trace and understand how these changed over time. The findings from part one of the study informed the development of the data collection tool for part two (appendix B & C). The data from adopters was triangulated with data from professionals involved in the adoption process through small focus group interviews using semi structured interviews in part three (appendix D). This enabled an analysis of the effectiveness of the adoption process in enabling adopters to meet the needs of LAC.

The findings of the study raise several questions and challenge existing knowledge and practice. These are considered later in this chapter (6.7 - 6.13 p168).

- 2. To identify what factors adopters' consider most important in supporting them at the different stages of adoption.**

The study has considered key issues in relation to adoption support. The evidence (5.10 p149) highlights the significance of support from foster carers, adopters' friends and families as well as formal support. Notably, the findings suggest that the nature of the interaction between the assessing Social Worker and the agency with the adopters in the early stage of the process may have a significant impact on adopters' ability and willingness to seek support at later stages (5.9 p153).

- 3. To include a representative sample of prospective adoptive families.**

While the study hoped to include a representative sample of prospective adoptive families this has not been fully possible as the BAME adopters that initially agreed to participate in the second part of the study withdrew from the adoption process. The findings (5.3 p136) of the study suggest prospective adopters from BAME groups may face additional barriers to adoption.

- 4. To compare adopters' experiences and perceptions with the experiences and perceptions of adoption Social Workers and social work managers.**

The methodology of the study has enabled triangulation of the data from four focus groups of professionals (2.9 p61) that included adoption Social Workers with data from adopters. This is considered throughout the findings (chapter 4) and the discussion (chapter 5).

6.4 Key findings

In contrast to existing research and texts on adoption this study acknowledges the impact of broader factors such as cultural and structural factors individual actions and behaviours. Significantly despite changes to adoption legislation and policy over the past 20 years the findings of this study are in line with Burck and Speed's (1995) study into gender, power and relationships and suggest that power within the adoption process is dynamic and relational. As a result, individual medical and social care practitioner's styles, attitudes and values, as well as agency cultures and structures and local and national policies and legislation (Thompson, 2012) have a significant impact on the adopters' experiences. The findings of this research highlights that this appears to influence adopters' willingness and ability to engage with the adoption process and may even impact on adopters accessing adoption support if required after a child has been placed. This is a new and significant finding as part of this doctoral level study and has not been considered previously.

It is evident that the decision to adopt begins with the motivation to have a child (Crawshaw & Balen, 2010). The decision to adopt for the sample of adopters from part two of this study came after extensive periods of time during which adopters contemplated whether to apply to adopt. However, interestingly, when eventually deciding to find out about adoption the findings suggest that some adopters were faced with large amounts of confusing and conflicting information. Crucially, the findings suggest that this may deter some prospective adopters or encourage applicants to consider international adoption. Indeed, the quality of information provided to adopters is an ongoing theme that presents challenges for adopters throughout the journey to adopt and after children have been placed. This is exacerbated due to competition between adoption agencies to recruit adopters. It is notable that the sample of adopters were not aware of financial arrangements such as the interagency fee or that local authorities held responsibility for LAC. This may have had an impact on the adopters' choice of agencies had this been explicit at the time of their application.

Significantly, there appears to be a gap in information within medical agencies for individuals who experience infertility. Adoption appears to be rarely mentioned as a positive alternative. Instead the medical model that is prominent and reinforces the

need to cure individuals (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This has not been explored by existing studies but is an important finding of this research and requires further investigation.

The investigation highlights a culture of risk management within the adoption process that is prominent in Social Work practice (Smith, 2008). The professionals suspicion of applicants' motives and readiness to adopt can impact on the response that prospective adopters receive from adoption agencies. Indeed, the findings suggest that existing research and the need to reduce the risk of placements disrupting have increasingly encouraged professionals and agencies to try predict future outcomes. As a result, practitioners and agencies continue to seek to develop an elusive formula to enable accurate risk prediction. There is little evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach. However, this study indicates that such an approach may in fact reduce adopter's confidence in the professionals and agencies. Furthermore, it may deter adopters from openly exploring and discussing their feelings of loss and grief due to the experience of infertility. Significantly successive government policies (DfE, 2016) and the increasing use of performance measures risk undermining good practice that is required to address such issues.

The study provides some evidence that the role of adoption panels to consider whether plans for adoption are in the best interest were key in the quality assurance process. The removal of this requirement appears to have been counterproductive and may result in children remaining in care unnecessarily. It can also lead to unnecessary emotional distress as well as practical difficulties for adopters. To date there has been little analysis of the impact of this change and requires further investigation.

In contrast to existing studies the findings of this study illuminate how the power of the adoption panel can be perceived and used for a range of purposes. This includes the possibility of assessing Social Workers eliciting desired responses from adopters that are not necessarily accurate. At the same time practitioners and agencies prefer to share the responsibility for the quality of the assessment and the outcome of placements with the adoption panel. Interestingly, due to a lack of confidence in the assessment as well as individual panel members experience, attitudes and values the findings suggests that panels can expose adopters to an additional level of risk

assessment. This approach can undermine the relationship between the agency and the adopters. This is a new and important finding of this study.

Current national adoption policy considers trans-racial adoption as a means to placing more children from BAME communities (DfE, 2016a). However, the findings of this study indicate that generally adopters want children that will physically and emotionally fit into their family. This is not an indication of individual prejudice or discrimination but a desire like most natural parents. Moreover, adopters expressed concerns for welfare of children who may be exposed to bullying by wider society for being different. The findings of this research further suggest that prospective adopters from BAME groups may face additional barriers to adoption. Significantly, none of the adopters from BAME communities who initially agreed to participate in the qualitative part of the study went on to be approved. Combined these two factors raise questions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of existing policy and practice in relation to children and adopters from BAME communities. This is a significant finding of this doctoral study and requires further research.

Interestingly, existing studies such as Rushton and Monck, (2009a) focus on the need of adoption training to increase the focus on challenges that adopted children may present and strategies to manage behaviour. However, the findings of this investigation suggest that the current approach to preparing adopters may not adhere to the principles of learner centred learning (Rushton and Walker, 2015). Furthermore, the current approach may be counterproductive as it can result in adopters dismissing the information or fearing worst case scenarios hence withdrawing from the process. Indeed, the findings indicate that the perceived value of training appears to depreciate overtime (5.7 p148). Current adoption training does not prepare adopters for practical matters including legal challenges. Indeed, practical issues such as registering a child with a doctor or school, poor quality information, a breakdown in communication between professionals and agencies as well as a lack of support from employers can erode the energy and resilience of adopters. This can lead to vulnerabilities for children and adopters.

There is an ongoing emphasis that the welfare of children should be at the heart of adoption policy and practice (DfE, 2016a). However, the findings of this research suggest that existing policies and professional practice fall short of this principle.

Indeed, marketing techniques such as adoption activity days (5.3 p141) that are akin to selling commodities appear to be utilized to place children for adoption quickly. However, there appears to be little consideration of the potential long term detrimental impact on the emotional welfare children. Surprisingly to date there has been little research into the impact that marketing has on children's emotional well-being and requires further investigation.

In contrast to existing literature this study explicitly recognises that there must be a true partnership with adopters in identifying the child that will eventually be matched. The findings of this investigation suggest adopters appear to connect with children at an emotional level. Conscious and unconscious factors appear to impact on adopters' decision. This is an important finding that, existing research and practice does not appear to acknowledge.

While this study recognises the importance of formal support, notably adopters' willingness and ability to seek such support in a timely manner may be influenced by their experiences of practice and policies they encounter prior to approval. Furthermore, the findings of the research suggest informal support from friends, family and foster carers is vital in enabling adopters to care for children. Existing studies do not fully recognise this. Significantly support from employers throughout the process is crucial in enabling adopters to be approved and to meet the needs of children. However, there appears to be a disparity between provision for birth parents and adopters. This is a new and significant finding that has resulted from this investigation.

6.5 Self reflection

The research has been conducted in line with the ethical approval set out in chapter two (2.10 p62). As stated earlier (2.11 p63) as qualified, registered and experienced Social Worker the researcher is committed to the professional standards of social work, (HCPC, 2012) and anti-oppressive practice (Clifford & Burke, 2009). Having the knowledge and skills as an experienced and competent Social Worker enabled participants to meaningfully engage with the research. Indeed, the ability to understand complex matters and an explicit commitment to professional integrity was essential to developing a rapport and trust with participants (Froggett, Ramvi, &

Davies, 2015). Effective skills of communication, observation, active listening, and intuition enabled participants to share sensitive and personal information openly (Trevithick, 2005). Furthermore, the ability to ask open questions in a sensitive manner, clarifying matters, summarising, receiving feedback, probing deeper, prompting and allowing silence was essential to access the rich data (Trevithick, 2005).

While the researcher used his social work skills as described above, it was essential to distinguish between the role of a researcher and a Social Worker. This did present an ethical and ontological challenge as on occasion it was apparent some of the practices described earlier (5.9 p153) were contrary to the standards expected of Social Workers (HCPC, 2012). However, as a researcher it would have been inappropriate to offer professional advice and support. To address this dilemma where it was apparent individuals had experienced difficulties or required support the researcher sensitively encouraged participants to discuss matters with their approving agency. Where this was not appropriate participants were informed of the advice and support available from BAAF. This was in line with the ethical approval described earlier (2.10 p62).

6.6 Limitations of the research

As with all research the study does have some limitations. The sample size is relatively small, however, this is not uncommon in qualitative research (Silverman, 2014). Indeed, due to the resource intensive nature of qualitative research, small sample sizes allow the data to be collected, transcribed and analysed appropriately (Richards, 2015). This is important for validity and authenticity purposes (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, 2015).

While, the intention was to include a sample of adopters based on diversity, disappointingly this has not been possible for reasons explained in chapter 4 (4.2 p92). Indeed, except for adopter D2, the sample does predominately represent white, heterosexual couples in managerial and professional occupations who had applied to adopt due to infertility related issues. Additional questions about sexuality and health needs on the questionnaire (appendix A) may have enabled the identification of more diversity in the sample, however, the request for this type of

personal data on a questionnaire would have been overly intrusive and inappropriate.

It was only possible to interview adopters C2 before they were approved to adopt as they withdrew from the process. They did not feel able to engage with the study any further. Furthermore, at the time of the second face to face interview with the adopters, adopter D2 did not have a child placed. However, both interviews (C2 & D2) provided very valuable information about the adoption process, hence the data has been included.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to interview professionals from agency C. This was due to changes in the management and the structure of agency. However, the involvement of agency C was helpful as it enabled adopters C1 and C2 to participate. The information from these interviews was very insightful.

Taking these factors into consideration, care is required in generalising (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011) the findings. However, it is important to note that the sample is representative of a significant part of the adopter population (Jennings et al. 2014). Further research is required to analyse and understand the adoption journeys of same sex couples, Gay and Lesbian individuals, single adopters, people with disabilities and BAME adopters.

6.7 Recommendations

The study has identified two types of recommendations. These are recommendations for changes to existing processes and areas that require further research.

The recommendations for changes to existing processes include information, risk management, pre adoption training, support and policy. Areas that require further research include a need to better understand the process that adopters undergo from the medical diagnosis of infertility to deciding to adopt. To explore any additional challenges that adopters from BAME communities may face. The impact of policies such as separating siblings to achieve speedier placements. The consequences of using commercial marketing techniques on the welfare of children. The future role and operation of Adoption Panels. To develop alternative measures

to understand the true impact on children as a result of being in care. A better understanding of the long-term impact of placement disruptions. Research to support the emotional welfare of foster carers during the matching and placement process.

Recommendations for changes to the adoption process

6.8 Information

The quality of information provided to adopters is a running theme of this study. Effective interagency and inter professional work is required to ensure good quality information is made available to potential and approved adopters throughout the process. There appears to be a gap in provision for those who choose not to pursue medical treatment or stop medical treatment for infertility. Action is required to ensure consistent, detailed, accurate and positive information about adoption is made available by government departments, medical agencies and adoption agencies. Furthermore, opportunities must be provided for individuals and couples to discuss adoption as one of the positive options to parent a child.

While the new requirement for regionalisation of adoption (DfE, 2015) encourages adoption agencies to work together, the current system also encourages competition. The internet has become a key tool for agencies to provide information, as well as being the prominent source of information for prospective adopters. This has resulted in vast amounts and confusing information, aimed at prospective adopters, being available on the internet. However, currently this does not support prospective adopters to make informed choices. Indeed, it may deter people from applying to adopt or consider international adoption as they may not be aware of alternative options. Agencies need to work together to ensure prospective adopters are provided with accurate information, including issues such as the interagency fee and which agencies hold responsibility for children in care that enables them to easily contact relevant professionals. Professionals need to be very aware that making first contact with the agency is a significant step for most applicants. Indeed, if they are enquiring because of infertility applicants may be in a vulnerable state and require support. Professionals responding to such enquirers need to have developed sophisticated skills of active listening and be able to respond in a manner

that values, nurtures and supports applicants to make informed choices based on accurate and balanced information.

A review is required of the current systems of information management and quality assurance as well as inter professional and interagency communication.

Furthermore, professionals and agencies need to reflect on current expectations about contact that are not in line with developments in social media. This is to ensure post approval adopters are provided with up to date and accurate information about children including medical needs, the legal situation and any contentious issues in relation to contact that may jeopardize the welfare of the child and adopters.

6.9 Risk management

The need to assess risk of harm to children is essential. Furthermore, professional and agencies concerns for placement stability is understandable. However, effective risk management systems need to inspire trust (Webb, 2006) and enable adopters to engage with the assessment process openly without fear of unfair judgement and blame (Smith, 2008). The findings of this study suggest that a trusting relationship that is based on partnership with adopters is essential to managing risk. Good people skills including active listening, empathy, transparency, clarity, planning and a depth of understanding of human development theory are essential. Adoption agencies need to ensure such skills are valued and that assessing Social Workers have developed such skills to a sophisticated level.

The expectation that adopters who have experienced infertility will have fully come to terms with their inability to have a birth child before commencing their application to adopt is unrealistic. The adoption process needs to enable applicants to openly express and discuss their feelings. Doing so is much more likely to enable the identification of potential risks and vulnerabilities.

Adoption inevitably will mean the need for adopters to balance childcare with work commitments. In many cases this may also mean a reduction in income as adopters change their working patterns to care for the children. While it is important that such issues are considered as part of the assessment, it must be recognised that most birth parents face very similar challenges. Indeed, like many birth parents, this sample of adopters had given the matter serious consideration. However, the

ongoing and persistent requirement for adopters to prove beyond doubt they can manage can undermine trust and exacerbate feelings of inequality for adopters.

Existing practice in relation to matching children with adopters requires review. Social workers and agencies play an important part in enabling adopters to identify the child they eventually adopt. However, it is essential that adopters are enabled to lead on this and are supported by agencies. The current overwhelming focus by agencies on managing the risk of placement disruptions and the need for agencies to prioritise placing children that they are responsible for in order to meet performance targets and achieve budgetary savings can undermine the trust of adopters. The investigation further suggests that where there is a lack of partnership and rigid expectations in relation to practical matters such as timings of meetings and face to face contact it can be detrimental for adopters and children. This requires further consideration.

6.10 Pre adoption training

The content and style of delivery of preadoption training requires review. The current approach appears to be narrow in focus and provides information to prospective adopters about a range of worse case scenarios in relation to children's past experiences, needs and behaviours. The professionals who are expected to deliver the training require support in developing their own understanding of the principles of adult learning and teaching (Rogers, 2007). To prepare adopters effectively, the principles of teaching adults (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010) must be applied.

The training needs to provide balanced information including about practical issues such as legal matters in a safe atmosphere (Rogers, 2007). Reflection and building on the skills and strengths (Crichton & Gil, 2015) of adopters is essential to enable individuals to develop their strategies to manage the needs of children.

6.11 Support

As discussed in the literature review (1.16 p44) there is a considerable focus on the need to provide adopters with formal post adoption support. However, there is little recognition of the value of social support (Chavis, 2016) from friends, family as well as from foster carers. Indeed, as in the example provided by B2F (4.28 p129) such

support can prevent issues from spiralling downwards and can be more effective than formal interventions by agencies.

While a significant amount of additional investment is being made for the provision of formal support (DfE, 2016a), it is essential that the adoption process inspires trust and partnership throughout the process to inspire confidence in adopters to seek formal support when it is required.

The current systems for the provision of financial support including means testing and reimbursement of expenses requires review. The expectation for adopters to pay up front and then claim back for expenses such as traveling and equipment can put unnecessary financial pressures on adopters and add to anxieties at a time when they may already be feeling vulnerable. Furthermore, the current means tested system based on adopters' income rather than children's needs can result in the need to complete additional paperwork, reinforce feelings of unfairness, disappointment and for some additional financial worries. This requires consideration.

6.12 Policy

The significant focus by successive governments to speed (DfE, 2016a) up the adoption risks undermining good practice. A policy review is required to ensure the adoption process progresses at a pace that meets the individual needs of adopters and children.

The findings of the study suggest that national policies aimed at speeding up the adoption process may have led to unforeseen legal complexities for some adopters. Indeed, such issues not only create additional hurdles for adopters but can erode their energy and resilience and may have a detrimental impact due to the additional stress. The reinstatement of the adoption panel as a means of quality assuring information before a plan for adoption for children is agreed may be beneficial.

A review of existing policy and legislation in relation to employment to ensure adopters enjoy provision and protection that is consistent with birth parents is required.

6.13 Recommendations for further research

This study provides some understanding of the journey that individuals undergo from the medical diagnosis of infertility to deciding to adopt (4.3 p94). Evidentially the decision to adopt is not automatic. Further research is required to provide an understanding of this process as well as the needs of the individuals concerned. Moreover, further research into how such individuals perceive the adoption process and professionals may enable a deeper understanding of how to encourage and enable more people to adopt.

Successive government policy on transracial (DfE, 2016a) adoption may mask the true challenges for children and adopters from BAME communities (4.2 p92). The results of this study raise questions about the effectiveness of the adoption process for adopters from BAME communities. This requires further exploration in order to develop practice and ensure more adoptive families are available for children from BAME communities.

The literature review (1.9 p24) indicates that government policy (DfE, 2011a) promotes the separation of siblings in order to support speedier placements. More research is required on the impact of this policy on the wellbeing of children and their families. Furthermore, the separation may result in additional challenges for adopters caring for the sibling placed for adoption as well as the foster carers who might have care of the child that is not placed for adoption. This requires further investigation.

Marketing techniques such as adoption activity days are a relatively new development. Currently there is little research on the impact of attending such events on the emotional welfare of children and adopters (4.20 p120). This requires further investigation in a timely manner.

While pre adoption training is a key part of the approval process, the findings of this research indicate that the current approaches to the training require review. It is essential that the training provides balanced information about the challenges and positives of adopting LAC. It is evident that the training must include further information about practical and legal matters. Furthermore, agencies need to ensure that the professionals who are expected to deliver the training are effectively supported to understand the principles of adult learning to ensure that the training

supports reflection and development. It is important that training does not lead to high levels of anxiety that adopters are currently expected to manage by themselves and may result in withdrawing from the process or dismissal of the information.

Adoption Panels have an important role in relation to the approval of adopters and matching of children. Indeed, there is some evidence that removing the need for considering plans for adoption for children may have resulted in additional challenges for children and adopters such as in the case of adopter D2 (4.6 p98). However, the study suggests that the power dynamics that surround Adoption Panel as well as the information that adopters have about the panel and the remit of the panel require further research.

This literature review (chapter 1) highlights that currently the quality of care services is measured by outcomes, including; education, health, wellbeing, teenage pregnancy, delinquency and employment for LAC, compared with children who were adopted at an early age or with the general child population that have not necessarily experienced similar adversity. Such studies (Selwyn & Quinton, 2004; SCIE, 2004; Selwyn et al. 2006) do provide some insight and are used to justify changes to the care system. However, based on the methodology of such research it is difficult to assess whether the outcomes for LAC are a result of being in care or due to adversity they may have experienced prior to entering care. A more accurate measure would be to compare outcomes of LAC with their peers who have faced similar adversity but not entered the care system. One approach could be a comparison of outcomes for a sample LAC with a sample of children who have met the criteria of being 'in need' (Children Act 1989, s17, HMSO, 1989) where other variables such as age, ability, race, family income and reason for referral are similar but the children have not entered care. A longitudinal mixed methods research design may enable a depth of insight.

The findings of this investigation indicate professionals and adoption agencies have significant concerns about the risk of placement disruptions (see glossary). Indeed, this is a powerful driving force behind the current focus on risk (chapters 4 & 5). Studies such as Selwyn, Wijesasa and Meakings, (2014) provide insight into the challenges of caring for a child from care and possible variables that may lead to disruption. However, further research is required on whether factors such as the

presence of birth children in the adoptive family necessarily increases the level of risk or other issues such as the ability to effectively manage the changing dynamics within the family are more significant. Furthermore, the long-term impact of placements disrupting on the wellbeing of children and adopters as well as their reflections after the placement ends is worthy of further investigation.

Governments, agencies and professionals must explicitly recognise that foster carers play a key role in supporting children and adopters throughout the adoption process. Further, research is required to understand the support needs of foster carers to enable their effective participation in the process as well as support their emotional and physical wellbeing during the matching and placement process.

6.14 Dissemination strategy

Given the professional nature of this doctoral programme the findings of the study have been disseminated on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, there is plan for dissemination going forward. The dissemination that has already occurred has been listed below:

The findings and analysis of the pilot study were presented at the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Branch practice seminar at lunch time on 11 June 2013. This was held at the University of Derby and was considered appropriate as these events are attended by Social Workers and managers including professionals who work in the field of adoption as well as academic staff and students studying professional programmes including Social Work. An invite was extended to the five adoption agencies who supported the study. A repeat of this session was held in the evening on 11 July 2013 at the request of the regional chair of BASW. Staff and managers from two of the adoption agencies that participated in the study and one other adoption agency that was not part of the study attended. The feedback suggested that the event was very informative and supported the development of practice.

Following the completion of part one of the study the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Leeds Branch requested that the researcher facilitate a professional seminar at a Branch meeting. This was delivered on 26 September 2013 and was well received.

On 25 June 2014 the researcher facilitated a seminar at Staffordshire University. This was attended by Social Work and Health professionals as well as academic staff and students.

An article titled: *The journey to adopt a child – A pilot mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process* (Jakhara, 2014) was submitted to the Journal of New Writing in Health and Social Care. This was published in November 2014. This was considered appropriate as the journal is accessed by academics, students and professionals working in the fields of health and social care.

At the request of the Principal Social Worker for Staffordshire County Council a workshop was delivered by the researcher at the Midlands Regional Adoption Learning event on 31 October 2015. This was attended by professionals and senior managers from local authority and voluntary adoption agencies from across the Midlands region. The presentation included a consideration of existing approaches to pre adoption training in the context of the findings of this doctoral research. Recommendations were made that adoption agencies need to reconsider their approaches to ensure adopters are provided with a balance of information. Furthermore, agencies need to effectively support the trainers to deliver training in a manner conducive to promote adult learning and reflection.

BASW has expressed an interest in further seminars by the researcher following completion of the study. Furthermore, the researcher will facilitate a seminar for the childhood research cluster at the University of Derby in June 2017.

Going forward following the completion of the programme the researcher is planning to write a book that will illustrate the different journeys to adopt highlighting the challenges and the positive practice. Discussions are planned with Sage publications due to the significant experience of publishing texts aimed at social work practitioners. In addition, the research has highlighted some key findings that have implications for practice. As such two journal articles are planned for submission to the Journal of social work published by Sage Journals as this is accessed by the wider social work profession. One of the articles will focus on power dynamics and approaches to risk management within the adoption process. The other will consider

marketing approaches used to place children in care for adoption. Two further articles will be submitted to *Adoption Quarterly* published by Taylor and Francis Online due to its specific focus on adoption. This is an international multidisciplinary journal. One article will consider current approaches to pre-adoption preparation training. The other will focus on adoption support.

Discussions with publishers during the early stages of the study suggested that there would be interest in a book from the study. This will be discussed further following the completion of the programme.

6.15 Summary

The aim of this study was to consider the experiences and perceptions of prospective parents on their journey to adopt a child. This was achieved using a mixed methods study design. Several key findings have emerged including:

- The impact of wider cultural and structural factors on actions and behaviours in adoption practice.
- The relational power dynamics that are present throughout the adoption process.
- The quality of information available to adopters and the impact of this.
- The gap in provision within medical agencies to support those faced with involuntary childlessness to consider adoption as an option to parent.
- The factors that adopters consider when identifying a child.
- The impact of current approaches to marketing children to identify adopters.
- Adopters' experiences of pre-adoption training and the perceived value of adoption support.

As a result of the findings recommendations have been made. These include a review of the information that is currently provided to adopters and the way this is done. The importance of risk management is recognised however, the study reinforces the need for good practice that conforms to professional codes. The study makes key recommendations for the improvement of pre adoption preparation and for the recognition of informal support from foster carers as well as adopters' families

and friends. The study also highlights issues that need consideration at a policy level and makes recommendations for further research.

In conclusion, the aim and objectives of the study have been fully met. The methodology for the collection of data of this study distinguishes it from previous studies into the phenomenon of the adoption of children.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Adoption: Exploring prospective adoptive parents' perceptions of the adoption process and preparation.

Questionnaire Phase 1

1. About you

Applicant 1	Applicant 2
Your Age (please circle) Under 20 21-30 31-40 41-50 50+	Your Age (please circle) Under 20 21-30 31-40 41-50 50+
Your Gender Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/>	Your Gender Female <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/>
Primary Language spoken at Home	Primary Language spoken at Home
Which of the following describes your Ethnic origin (please circle)? White A British B Irish C Any other White background Mixed D White and Black Caribbean E White and Black African F White and Asian G Any other mixed background Asian or Asian British H Indian J Pakistani K Bangladeshi L Any other Asian background Black or Black British M Caribbean N African P Any other Black background Other Ethnic Groups R Chinese S Any other ethnic group	Which of the following describes your Ethnic origin (please circle)? White A British B Irish C Any other White background Mixed D White and Black Caribbean E White and Black African F White and Asian G Any other mixed background Asian or Asian British H Indian J Pakistani K Bangladeshi L Any other Asian background Black or Black British M Caribbean N African P Any other Black background Other Ethnic Groups R Chinese S Any other ethnic group

Please answer the rest of the questions jointly.

2. Why have you decided to apply to adopt (please circle the reason that applies)?

- To start a family
- To extend my existing family
- I/we have already adopted a child/ren this is a second application
- Other Reasons (please provide brief details if you feel able to)

3. Why did you choose to apply to this agency?

- This is my Local Authority
- Recommended to me/us by someone else
- I/We have worked with this agency in the past
- Other (please give a brief comment if you feel able to)

4. Before you made contact with the agency what were your main sources of information about adoption (circle all that apply)

- Personal experience Family Friends TV/Newspapers Internet
- Other (please state)

5. Were you aware that you would need to be assessed?

- Yes No

6. Were you aware that a Social Worker would carry out the assessment?

- Yes No

7. Before you met your Social Worker for the first time how did you feel about being assessed to adopt?

8. Has this changed?

9. Do you feel you have been able to discuss issues with your social worker freely and openly?

- Yes completely To some extent No not at all

10. What has made you feel this way?

11. Part of the adoption preparation process requires you to attend adoption training. Has this been discussed with you?

Yes

No

12. How do you feel about attending the training?

13. Do you receive any support in relation to your application to adopt?

Formal support (e.g. employer, the adoption agency, other agencies)

Informal Support (e.g. family, friends, neighbours)

The characteristics of the child/children you would ideally like to adopt

14. What is the age range of the child/children you want to adopt (please circle)?

Birth – 2

3 – 5

6 – 9

10+

Why is this?

15. How many children do you like to adopt? (please circle): 1 2 3 4 5

Please give reasons

16. Do you want to adopt a (please tick):

Girl Boy Either

Is there any reasons for this?

17. Would you consider adopting a child whose race, religion or ethnicity is different from your own?

Race Yes No

Religion Yes No

Ethnicity Yes No

Please provide an explanation?

18. From the criteria below please circle to indicate if you would consider adopting a child with some of the following characteristics (please circle)

Child with specific health needs (e.g insulin dependence)	Yes	No	Maybe
A child with an unclear/unknown medical prognosis	Yes	No	Maybe
A child with a physical disability	Yes	No	Maybe
A child with a learning disability	Yes	No	Maybe
A child who has experienced physical abuse	Yes	No	Maybe
A child who has experienced sexual abuse	Yes	No	Maybe
A child who has experienced neglect	Yes	No	Maybe
A child who has experienced emotional abuse	Yes	No	Maybe
A child who may have difficulties in bonding with you easily	Yes	No	Maybe
A child with overt behavioral difficulties	Yes	No	Maybe

A child who may have face to face contact with siblings
Maybe
after adoption

Yes No

A child who may have face to face contact with birth
parents after adoption

Yes No Maybe

A child who may have face to face contact with extended
Maybe
family (e.g grandparents, uncles, aunts) after adoption

Yes No

19. Have the issues outlined above in question 18 been discussed with you by your social worker?

Yes No

20. What questions have been answered?

21. What questions remain unanswered?

Appendix A1

Information for Participants

Exploring prospective adoptive parents' perceptions of the adoption application, assessment and preparation process

Thank you for taking time to read this information. My name is Mohammed Jakhara. I am a qualified and registered Social Worker and have over twelve years of experience in the field of Adoption as a Social Worker, Manager and Chair of an Adoption Panel. I currently work for the University of Derby and am studying towards an award of Doctor of Practice in Health & Social Care (Social Work) at the University.

Your adoption agency has agreed to work with me in conducting a piece of research that aims to provide a further insight into how adoption processes are perceived and experienced by adoptive parents. Ultimately this study aims to inform professionals to enable and encourage positive developments of the adoption service for both adoptive parents and the children you seek to adopt.

The study is designed to take place over a period of time to explore your perceptions and experiences of the adoption process. Furthermore, the study aims to consider how these perceptions and experiences' develop and change over time. Therefore, your involvement in the study is highly valued.

If you agree to participate in the study it has been agreed the information you provide will be solely for the purposes of this research. The first stage of the study involves completing the attached questionnaire. The completion of the questionnaire is on a voluntary basis. While I would highly value your support, your decision to participate or not will not have any impact on your assessment for adoption.

You can complete the questionnaire anonymously if you wish to, however, at the end of the questionnaire you will find an 'opt in form'. The form has been included in order to allow the study to explore how your perceptions and experiences of the adoption process develop and change over a period of up to two years and to consider how services can be developed I would be very grateful if you would consider participating in the whole study. However, even if you do not feel able to do this I would still value your completing this questionnaire.

It has been agreed that your adoption agency will be informed of you agreement to participate. However, with the exception of safeguarding issues it has been further agreed that your adoption agency will only receive overall themes from the whole group of participants and findings from the study. No individual identifiable information will be shared without your consent.

Mohammed Jakhara
CQSW, PQSW, BA (Hons), MBA

01332 594007
m.jakhara@derby.ac.uk

Exploring prospective adoptive parents' perceptions of the adoption application, assessment and preparation process

Opt in Form

The proposed project is going to continue over the next two years. This will take the form of three individual interviews. Your agreement to continue would be most helpful.

The next phase includes a total of three 1½ hour interviews at a place of your choice. The interviews will be spread out over the next two years. The first interview would be after your pre approval adoption training, the second would be up to six months after a child has been placed with you and the third would be up to a year after a child has been placed with you. If you feel able to commit to the next phase, please read the statements below and provide your contact details.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any stage up until the data is being analysed. This will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while the information gained during the project may be published, I will not be identified and my personal comments will remain confidential.
- I understand that the data will be stored electronically and will be password protected; hard copies will be stored in locked filing cabinets.
- I understand I may contact the researcher if I require further information about the research.

Signed

Date.....

Signed.....

Print Name(s)

.....
.....

Telephone Number(s)

Home.....

Mobile.....

Email:

Appendix B

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process

Phase 2 Semi Structured Interview Schedule

Thank you for your time and participation in the study. Your involvement is valuable. The findings of the overall study will be used to make recommendations to develop and enhance future practice.

Application

1. When starting the process of adoption what type of child or children did you think you would like to adopt?

Why was this?

Has this changed?

2. How did you identify information to start the process?

How easy and useful was the information?

What additional information would have been useful?

Where do you think that information should be?

Why did you choose to apply to (name of agency)?

3. Can you tell me one thing that you found easy and one thing that you found difficult when initially applying to the adoption agency?

4. I note that on your questionnaire that you felt (state from questionnaire Q7 & Q8) (please see appendix H) can you talk to me about that?

Has that changed? If so how?

Preparation

5. Can you describe your experience of the adoption training?

Why is this?

6. What aspects of the training were particularly helpful?

7. What could have been done differently?

8. Were any issues not included in the training that you feel should have been?

9. Were your family/friends offered any preparation training?

Do you know if they found that useful?

Assessment

10. How did you feel about the assessment / homestudy process?

11. What has made you feel this way?

12. Who did you discuss this with?

Did you talk to your social worker about this?

13. Were you prepared for the panel/approval process?

14. How well prepared did you feel for the approval/panel process?

Approval

15. Did you attend the Panel?

If you did what was your experience like?

If you did not would you have liked to?

How did you get feedback from the Panel on the day and how were you informed of the formal decision?

Support

16. Who has supported you in this process?

17. Which parts of the process have they supported you with?

18. How and when have you felt in need of most support?

19. Would you like to make any further comments about any aspect of the assessment, preparation and approval process?

If you have any questions or queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix B1

Information for Participants

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process.

Thank you for indicating your willingness to participate in this longitudinal study. The study is designed to take place over a period of time to explore your perceptions and experiences of the adoption process. Furthermore, the study aims to consider how these perceptions and experiences' develop and change over time. Therefore, your involvement in the study is highly valued.

The information that you provided in phase one was very helpful and has been used to develop the questions for the next stages. This second stage of study is aimed at gathering information about your experiences and feelings towards the adoption process so far as well as understanding your aspirations for the future. This stage will include a discussion with me and will take approximately 1 ½ hours. During this time I will take notes and record the conversation in order to accurately record the discussion. If you do not feel able to answer any of the questions or wish to end the discussion early please inform me. All of the data will be held on a password protected computer or locked in a filing cabinet. All of the information in the subsequent reports will presented anonymously.

Your adoption agency is aware that we are having this discussion. However, with the exception of safeguarding issues it has been agreed that your adoption agency will only receive overall themes from the whole group of participants and findings from the study. No individual identifiable information will be shared without your consent.

Your participation in the study is valuable. If you agree to participate I would be very grateful if you would read and sign the attached participant consent form.

Mohammed Jakhara
CQSW, PQSW, BA (Hons), MBA

01332 594007
m.jakhara@derby.ac.uk
Appendix B1

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process.

Participant Consent Form

I confirm that I have received information about the above study and agree to participate in the study.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any stage up until the data is being analysed. This will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while the information gained during the project may be published, I will not be identified.
- I understand that the data will be stored electronically and will be password protected; hard copies will be stored in locked filing cabinets.
- I understand I may contact the researcher if I require further information about the research.
- I understand that the overall themes and recommendations from the study will be shared with my adoption agency.

Signed

Date.....

Signed.....

Print Name(s)

.....
.....

Telephone Number(s)

Home.....

Mobile.....

Email:

The proposed project is going to continue over an 18 month period. This will take the form of up to three interviews at a venue of your choice. The first interview takes place normally before a child is placed. The second interview would be up to six months after a child has been placed with you and the third would usually be up to a year after a child has been placed with you. The second and third interviews will be about your experience of being an adoptive parent

Appendix C

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process

Semi Structured Interview Schedule

Thank you for your time and participation in the study. Your involvement is valuable. The findings of the overall study will be used to make recommendations to develop and enhance future practice.

The child

1. Could you tell me about the child / children that has/have been placed with you?

Is this the right match for you?

What has made you feel this way?

2. How did you find out about the child/children prior to the placement?

How easy to understand and useful was the information?

3. Was there any further information that you would have liked to have received?

Matching

4. Can you tell me one thing that you found easy and one thing that you found difficult about the matching process?

Introductions

5. Can you tell me one thing that you found helpful and one thing that you found challenging about the introductions process?

What has made you feel this way?

Did you talk to your social worker about this?

6. Did you feel prepared did you feel for the placement?

Placement

7. Since the child has been placed with you can you tell me one thing you have found particularly rewarding and one thing that you have found difficult?

Why is this?

8. Reflecting back on the preparation training that you attended; can you tell me has this been useful to you?

9. Are there any other issues that you feel should have been covered?

Why is this?

Contact

10. Is there any planned contact between your child/children and their birth family?

How do you feel about this?

Support

11. Have you been supported since the child/children have been placed?

12. What sort of support have they provided?

13. How and when have you felt in need of most support?

14. Was this support available?

Adoption

15. What stage has the adoption process reached?

Do you feel ready and prepared to apply to the court to adopt?

Why is this?

16. Would you like to make any further comments about any aspect of the process?

If you have any questions or queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Appendix C1

Information for Participants

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process.

Thank you for indicating your willingness to participate in the third stage of this longitudinal study. The study is designed to take place over a period of time to explore your perceptions and experiences of the adoption process. Furthermore, the study aims to consider how these perceptions and experiences' develop and change over time. Therefore, your involvement in the study is highly valued.

The information that you provided in phases one and two was very helpful. This third stage of study is aimed at gathering information about your experiences and feelings towards the adoption matching and placement process as well as understanding your aspirations for the future. This stage will include a discussion with me and will take approximately 1 ½ hours. During this time I will take notes and record the conversation in order to accurately record the discussion. If you do not feel able to answer any of the questions or wish to end the discussion early please inform me. All of the data will be held on a password protected computer or locked in a filing cabinet. All of the information in the subsequent reports will presented anonymously.

Your adoption agency is aware that we are having this discussion. However, with the exception of safeguarding issues it has been agreed that your adoption agency will only receive overall themes from the whole group of participants and findings from the study. No individual identifiable information will be shared without your consent.

Your participation in the study is valuable. If you agree to participate I would be very grateful if you would read and sign the attached participant consent form.

Mohammed Jakhara
CQSW, PQSW, BA (Hons), MBA

01332 594007
m.jakhara@derby.ac.uk

Appendix C1

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process.

Participant Consent Form

I confirm that I have received information about the above study and agree to participate in the study.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any stage up until the data is being analysed. This will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while the information gained during the project may be published, I will not be identified.
- I understand that the data will be stored electronically and will be password protected; hard copies will be stored in locked filing cabinets.
- I understand I may contact the researcher if I require further information about the research.
- I understand that the overall themes and recommendations from the study will be shared with my adoption agency.

Signed

Date.....

Signed.....

Print Name(s)

.....

.....

Telephone Number(s)

Home.....

Mobile.....

Email:

The proposed project is going to continue over an 18 month period. This may involve one further interview at a venue of your choice. The interview would normally take place up to twelve months after your child has been with you and will continue to focus on your on-going experience of being an adoptive parent.

Appendix D

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process

Discussion Guide for Professionals

1. As a professional what is the purpose of adoption?
2. When prospective adopters apply to your agency what do you think they get that they may not get from other agencies?

Assessment

3. What is your role in the selection of prospective adopters?
4. How useful is the tool you use in the assessment of adopters?
5. What pressures if any do you feel when assessing prospective adopters?
6. How is risk managed in the process? (Prompt: Are there any other areas where this is assessed? How do you gain this information?)
7. How does that impact on your relationship with the applicants?
8. If you have to turn an application down, how you manage that?

Training of Adoptive Parents

9. What informs the training? (Prompts: What in your opinion are the most important areas to cover? Do you feel there are any areas that should be covered that aren't or any areas that are covered that could be left out?)
10. What training have you had to prepare you for the role of training prospective adoptive parents?

11. How useful has this been?

12. Is anybody else involved in this training process? If so who? (Are other Professionals, Foster Carers or Adopters involved if so how and at what points?)

Adoption Panel

13. What are the 3 most important pieces of information to give adopters prior to Adoption Panel?

14. What do you feel is important to include in the Prospective Adopters Report?

15. What is your perception of the Adoption Panel's role?

16. How easy is it to manage the recommendations that Panel make?

Matching

17. What do you see as your role in the matching process?

18. How do Adoption Activity days fit into the matching process?

19. What role do foster carers have in this process of matching?

Support

20. What role do you have with adopters post Adoption?

21. Are you ever surprised at the end of the process?

22. What is the expectation of the agency for continued contact with adoptive families post adoption? (How well are these taken up?)

Appendix D1

Information for Professional Participants

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process.

Thank you for indicating your willingness to participate in this longitudinal study. The study is designed to take place over a period of time to explore Adopters perceptions and experiences of the adoption process. Furthermore, the study aims to consider how these perceptions and experiences' develop and change over time. Therefore, your involvement in the study is highly valued.

This study is aimed at gathering information about your experiences and feelings towards the adoption process. It will include a group discussion with you and your colleagues from your agency and will take approximately 1 ½ hours. During this time I will take notes and record the conversation in order to accurately capture the discussion. If you do not feel able to answer any of the questions or wish to end the discussion early please inform me. All of the data will be held on a password protected computer or locked in a filing cabinet. All of the information in the subsequent reports will presented anonymously.

Your agency is aware that we are having this discussion. However, with the exception of safeguarding issues it has been agreed that your adoption agency will only receive overall themes from the whole group of participants and findings from the study. No individual identifiable information will be shared without your consent.

Your participation in the study is valuable. If you agree to participate I would be very grateful if you would read and sign the attached participant consent form.

Mohammed Jakhara
CQSW, PQSW, BA (Hons), MBA

Appendix D1

The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents’ perceptions of the adoption process.

Professional Participant Consent Form

I confirm that I have received information about the above study and agree to participate in the study.

- I understand that I may withdraw from the project at any stage up until the data is collected. This will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while the information gained during the project may be published, I will not be identified.
- I understand that the data will be stored electronically and will be password protected; hard copies will be stored in locked filing cabinets
- I understand I may contact the researcher if I require further information about the research.
- I understand that the overall themes and recommendations from the study will be shared with my adoption agency.
- I understand the discussion is confidential and should not be discussed outside of the group.

Signed

Date.....

Print Name

.....
.....

Telephone Number

Office

Mobile.....

Email:



UNIVERSITY
of DERBY

Appendix E1

Approval Letter

Date: 22nd May 2012

Name: Mohammed Jakhara

Dear Mohammed,

Re: Application for ethical approval for study 'Exploring prospective adoptive parents' perceptions of the adoption application, assessment and preparation process'

Thank you for submitting your application for the above mentioned study which was considered by the Nursing and Allied Health Professionals Research Ethics Committee on 11th May 2012.

Your study has been **approved** and you are able to proceed.

Please note, if any change to the study described in the application or to the supporting documentation is necessary, you are required to make a resubmission to the Nursing and Allied Health Professionals Research Ethics Committee

Yours sincerely

Wendy Wesson

Joint Chair

Nursing and Allied Health Professionals Research Ethics Committee



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of DERBY

Appendix E2

Approval Letter

Date: Thursday 28 March 2013

Name: Mohammed Jakhara

Dear Mohammed

Project Title: The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process

Thank you for submitting your application to the School of Health Research Ethics Committee.

Your study has been approved via Chair's Action and you are now able to proceed.

If any change to the study described in the application or to the supporting documentation is necessary you are required to make a resubmission to the School of Health Research Ethics Committee.

All the best.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Susan Hogan

(Chair, School of Health REC)



UNIVERSITY
of DERBY

Appendix E3

Approval Letter

Date: Thursday 7 November 2013

Name: Mohammed Jakhara

Dear Mohammed

Topic: The Journey to Adopt a Child – A mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process

Phase 3

Thank you for submitting your application to the School of Health Research Ethics Committee.

Your study has been approved by the Committee and you are now able to proceed.

If any change to the study described in the application or to the supporting documentation is necessary you are required to make a resubmission to the School of Health Research Ethics Committee.

Also, can you please confirm when your study is completed for our records.

All the best.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lorraine Henshaw".

Lorraine Henshaw

(Chair, School of Health REC)

Appendix F

Hi Mohammed

I hope you are well and that you have had a positive response from the panel. I apologise for taking so long to respond but work has been extremely hectic – we are working on Saturdays too at present!

I was very impressed with the papers you sent to me. I suppose my only concern would be that you may be ready to undertake this at the same time as the Government introduces significant changes to the way in which adopters are prepared and assessed. This in itself would be very interesting but I have a sense of unease from agencies who are being currently given the message that the process has to change, but little information about the detail. This could lead to a more generally problematic experience for adopters as I am sure there will be teething problems. However, you could argue that this is an extremely timely piece of research, to see whether the changes have a positive impact.

I am sure that you have some partner agencies in mind, but if you would like to recruit any, bear in mind that I am still secretary to the Midlands Family Placement Group and we have both voluntary and LA adoption agencies as our members.

I look forward to hearing from you

Nicky Probert

Trainer/Child Placement Consultant

BAAF Midlands

Dolphin House

52 Coventry Road,

Birmingham,

B10 0RX

Telephone: 0121 753 2001

From: mohammed jakhara

Sent: 10 May 2012 18:13

To: Nicky Probert

Subject: Re: Research

Hi Nicky

thank you for your prompt response. I have attached the draft research ethics form (it has been submitted but i am waiting for a response from the panel). I have also attached the draft questionnaire for the first phase of the research and i have attached a document that gives an overview of the study. I would welcome comments when you have a few moments

Best wishes

Mohammed

On Thu, May 10, 2012 at 9:29 AM, Nicky Probert > wrote:

Hi Mohammed

Yes please do send it through – it is all very pertinent given the Government’s current concerns re adoption

Regards

Nicky Probert

Trainer/Child Placement Consultant

BAAF Midlands

Dolphin House

52 Coventry Road,

Birmingham,

B10 0RX

Telephone: 0121 753 2001

From: mohammed jakhara [mailto:

Sent: 10 May 2012 07:41

To: Nicky Probert

Subject: Research

Hi Nicky

I hope you are well. Sorry I have not been in touch for some time. I have been caught up with all the changes happening in higher education. I just wanted to touch base and let you know I am continuing with my research. I have submitted a research ethics form for the first stage of my research. Would it be ok to send you th proposal to give you the context of the actual study and the questionnaire I have designed that is aimed at considering adoptive applicants views and perceptions?

I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes

Mohammed

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Appendix G

Dear

RE: Researching Adopters perspectives of their Journey to Adopt

My Name is Mohammed Jakhara. I am currently undertaking a piece of research as part of a supervised Professional Doctorate Award in Health and Social Care (Social Work) at the University of Derby. The focus of the research is to consider adoptive parents journeys through the process of adoption. The proposed research project is a longitudinal study designed to be carried out in a number of stages from the point of prospective adopters' application to adopt being accepted and up to one year of a child being placed with them. As this research is part of a Professional Award the aim is to identify areas of good practice and key themes that can inform service development.

I would like to reassure you that the project is subject to the University's Research Ethics process. The first stage of the project has now been approved by the University's Research Ethics Committee. I would like to further reassure you that while I am currently employed as a senior manager at the University of Derby I do have significant professional experience in the field of adoption as a Social Worker and Adoption Service Manager. Moreover, I have maintained links with practice through my current role the Chair of an Adoption Panel.

I am writing to you to ask if ***** as an Adoption Agency would consider participating in the research as one of up to four Agencies. If **** is interested in supporting the research I will provide the Research Ethics information and details of the study so that it can be scrutinised through the ***** Ethics process.

To date two adoption Agencies have agreed to participate in the project, furthermore, the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) are aware of the project.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely

Mohammed Jakhara

Appendix H

Copy of Phase 1 analysis charts (Filters) - Excel

Mohammed Jakhara

Before you met your Social Worker for the first time how did you feel about being assessed to adopt?

Q7	Co	Before you met your Social Worker for the first time how did you feel about being assessed to adopt?	Has anything Changed	Analysis	Key words -	occurrence	Key Words +
A1	Apprehensive		Only Just Started so a little early to say	Feelings about te process indicate that 18 out 35 people who commenst suggested used terms from a little nervous to terrified to discuss their feelings about the assessment. Those t			
A2	Fine		Yes		Apprehensive	4	Fine
A3	We Understood it was part of the process		No		Anxious	1	Understood
A4	Anxious as to what it involves yet keen to get on with it		Not had meeting yet		Nerve Racking	1	keen
A5	Necessary before being considered for adoption		No		Nervous	8	Confident
A6	Necessary		No		Like a Goldfish in a bowl	1	Happy
A7	Fine		No		Not Happy	1	Accepted
A8	Fine we realised it was part and parcel of the process		No		Not Looking forward to it	1	Excited
A9	I new it was necessary but I was still nervous				Necessary evil	1	ok
A10					Scared	2	Required
B1	Confident & Happy		Not at all		Terrified	1	Perfect sense
B2	Not lookingforward to it. Feel like a goldfish in a bowl. We understand the rationale but appreciate it is a necessary evil		Not yet. But we are right at the beginning		Unsure	2	Necessary
B3	Nervous about getting through the next stage		Not had another visit as social worker not allocated as yet		Not good enough	1	Good Idea
B4	Scared & Terrified		Yes certainly. I am much more relaxed and informed about the whole process		Concerned	1	Looking Forward to it
B5	Nervous, not sure what would be asked, fear of being considered not good enough		No		Intrusion	2	
B6	Accepted it as part of the process		No		Trepidatious	1	
B7	Apprehensive at first but over all excited by the prospect		We now feel more comfortable and reassured		Unknown	1	
B8	Scared, nervous bt also excited about the process		A little		Frustrated	1	
B9	Happy but unsure of what would be asked		Yes		Daunted	1	
B10	Slightly concerned about intrusion into our privacy but understood why		No		Invaded	1	
B11	Nervous and a little unsure of what questions were going to be asked		Feel a lot happier of what to expect and what happens next		Long Gruelling Ordeal	1	
B12	Apprehensive		No				
B13	Trepidatious						

Demographics Application Child type Qual Comms Q2 Q3 Q7&8 Q9&10 Q11 & 12 Q14 Q15 Q16 Q17 Q19, 20 & 21

Appendix I

Doct Analysis (NVivo 11).nvp - NVivo Pro

FILE HOME CREATE DATA ANALYZE QUERY EXPLORE LAYOUT VIEW

Workspace Item Edit Paste Copy Merge Format Paragraph Styles Editing Proofing

Look for: power Search In: Nodes Find Now Clear Advanced Find

Nodes	Name	Sources	References
+	Culture	5	10
	Activity Days	6	20
	Commercial	6	17
	Proff Purpose	4	12
	Speed	13	33
+	Power	12	70
	Attachment	12	24
	Child Development	9	21
	Communication	4	10
	Enabling process	6	21
	Inequality	8	62
	Infertility	8	31
	Information	13	125
	Legal	6	19
	Parenting	5	12
	Placement	5	13
	Proff Info	4	5
	Proff Power	3	11
+	Risk Management	13	89
	Assessment	9	102
	Contact	6	6
	Fear	7	18
	Introductions	6	28
	Proff Assessment	4	45
	Proff Infertility	1	1
	Proff Risk	6	30
	Training	12	101
+	Trust	10	50
	Proff Value	4	23
	Professionalism	11	89
	Support	15	53

B1 22 11 13 Phase 3 B2 Phase 3 A2 Phase 3

Click to edit

C: (name of child) has been with us since September, two days after her first birthday. We are about 7 ½ weeks in so in theory we can submit the formal paperwork after 10 weeks. We have already filled it in and I just waiting for the day we can submit it. Because the sooner we can submit it and legally have her as our child the better. It has been an interesting few months but we don't regret any off it. There have been some interesting challenges but it's all been good.

MJ: I'm glad to hear that it all been going really well for you.

C: She is an absolute angel.

I enters the room with the child.

C/D: This is (name of child)

MJ: Hello. She has a very natural reaction of hesitation when she sees a stranger.

C: Yes all the alert signs are very positive. She recognises faces and smiles and if she doesn't recognise you

I: She frowns at you.

C: She was friendly but takes time which is healthy. She knows who her mum is.

MJ: (name of child) has just woken up so you just carry on as you need to. I've just got some more questions if that's okay

I: Yes

C: Absolutely.

MJ: I know you are busy so I'll try not to take too much of your time. The research is continuing and this is the second stage of got a few more questions if that's okay?

I: Yes no problem go for it.

MJ: You have already told me a little bit about (name of child). So what made her the right child for you?

C: We'll tell you the story. We are not renowned for our patients. We got the approval from our agencies panel in April and we had a request from our social worker to give it three months to see if anything came through within borough. And if nothing came through within that time she completely understood if we wanted to look outside of the borough. We left it for about four or five weeks, no sign of

In: Nodes Code At: Enter node name (CTRL+Q)

MJ 45 Items 18:57 10/03/2017

Appendix J

Sample of researchers notes and thoughts during analysis

28 6 13

Is looking for variables that lead to disruption one of the causes of the distrust between professionals and adopters? There do not appear to be any hard variables that can be created into a formula, each one is down to interpretation. Therefore is this search for variables a futile exercise that causes barriers?

Should we be looking at what we as professionals can do to reduce risk by building rapport and ensuring the experience is positive.

First contact and early relationship appears to have a significant impact on how adopters feel about the SW and the agency in the long term. Even where the relation becomes fraught later, if the adopters trust the SW and have a positive start to the relationship they are still more confident in the SW and much more willing to forgive, move forward and willing to seek support and advice where necessary. Where the relationship is not good to start, even with a lot of work to recover, the trust goes and adopters not willing to trust at later stage. Therefore less likely to seek support.

Placing across borders. If this is about the right child and right parent then you should be able to match any child. However, are there barriers to doing this. How do performance indicators and score cards impact on LA's willing to place from other agencies. E.g if you approve a very desirable family would you place a child from another agency, how will this impact on the score cards. Is this one of the perverse performance indicators that is causing the same issues that National Government is trying to tackle but causing at the same time?

29 6 13

There is currently a lot of criticism of what is or is not included in training. However the info I am getting tend to be more about who delivers it, style rather than content.

Input from foster carers seems very helpful. Input from adopters less so.

There is a need for true partnership between foster carers, adopters who come to deliver sessions at training. Tokenism gives way to poor experiences for both the carer/ trainer and the participant e.g Couple B1 who spoke about an adopter in distress at the training while talking about her experience

Relationship between SW and Adopters – early relationship and style counts. Currently a lot of focus on traits of adopters, very much focuses on weaknesses and how to fix. Should it focus on the relationship. Early impact is important. Seems to be a process like Batari's box going on between adopters and carers

Service user care involvement model is important. Use the ladder of involvement but also your own model from MBA

11 7 13

Ethnicity defined as communal characteristics: lingual, regional, religious which are seen to be the basis of distinct identity. (Thompson 2012 p77) Or Hofstede's definition of culture as a collective programming of the mind. This is interesting. Most focus on race but in terms of meeting children's needs it is ethnicity that matters more?? Example of computers between apple and windows or the colour of the pc?? While Ethnicity only implies difference the

dominant notion that SW's face is that of deficit in minority communities. The current Gov policies follow this. They can't look after children so lets not look for more BME adopters let white families do it instead??

1.08.13. Interview with C1. From listening to the couple Adoption activity days appear cold and sales like. Social workers appear to be acting like high pressure sales people in a car lot. This appears to be evidence of the market driven model taking over as agencies try to survive and social worker appear to be advocating for their child but as a result are competing with each other. Where does this leave the child? Where children attend what damage does it do to them? What happens to the emotions of the children who are 'left on the shelf at that end of day'? Who licks up the pieces? Is it left to the foster carers? If so can F/C's provide this support? What if they are stretched or have limited understanding. The experience appears to desensitise carers and social workers. Appears like the old days of choosing a child from an orphanage. What has happened to the democratic model and protecting children? What happened to the Child being at the centre of the process? Read up more about adoption activity days.

3.08.13. Typing A1intview it is apparent that SW wanted very prescriptive info e.g on how much coupled spend on clothing rather than the overall issue of how do they manage money. Is this a result of ongoing development of tick boxed check sheets by agencies and professionals to try to cover issues but it misses the point?

07.08.13

Interesting to note that at the meeting at BAAF during consultation about APR I asked if adopters had been consulted about the paperwork. The author found this novel. It was apparent that adoptive parents do not appear to feature in practice agencies in the earliest stage as they should. Should service users and carers be involved in every stage of the process including design, assessment and delivery of services. I.e a do with approach rather than a do for. Are practitioners good at talking about empowerment but do not understand it?

The other useful discussion was about ethnicity. Because I raised it I was immediately seen as the expert was this because of embarrassment or a real lack of knowledge. All I was saying was ask for the info you want. The info wanted was about race not ethnicity so ask the right question.

1.09.13

While listening to interview of couple A2 F mentions the same issue that C1 had raised in the ability to read social workers when they hit a buzz word or area which is what the sw seems to be looking for. From experience you know you can do that in any interview when panels start to write they are interested.

Adopters seem to be able to tell when other adopters and adopted people are involved in a tokenistic manner. Simply having them there without qualifications and full partnership is not enough and cannot be justified.

Panel appears to be being used as tool for leverage which build up barriers and gives impression that social worker has to battle with the panel on behalf of the couple rather than the social worker is part of the same agency and ultimately its about getting the right people. There does not appear to be enough personal responsibility for the assessment which in self lack emotional intelligence and

turns into a tick box exercise. This is a vicious circle as it does not answer panel's questions and leads to more questions which builds into mistrust. How do you focus on building more responsibility into the social worker who at the moment just seem themselves as doing a job for panel and manager s but not taking any responsibility?

Even after months of being assessed by the social worker ND still refers to the SW as a "stranger"

Appendix K

Sample Notes and Thoughts from professional interviews

5.10.14 Workload pressure. LA has to focus on family fining as well as assessing.

Risk assessment includes the impact of child might have on adopters psychological well-being. However social workers do not have any depth of understanding of this yet making decisions.

Risk is high on the agenda. There is very little trust in the system. This seems to be largely around high-profile cases and political pressure. Manager states "don't ever believe anyone". Large focus on evidence based practice but how do you analyse the evidence??

This all evidences a significant stress between the relationship of adopters and professionals. Professionals do not trust prospective adoptive parents. Adoptive parents are often vulnerable because of infertility and reliance on social workers to provide support. There is a model here.

An overstretched, under resourced service that operates on a model of high risk and lack of trust is expected to serve people who are possibly at their most vulnerable time in their life. This sets the dynamics of the future whereby adopters have learned not to trust. Post approval and post placement the system depends on trust. Adopters are expected to ask for support and help from agencies and professionals who they no longer trust.

Professionals seem to be unaware of the impact of this approach is having on adopters. (See question six .11)

Professionals believe that adopters have a relaxed and understanding relationship with their workers. This is not what the study showing. The study includes people were very open and considered to be very good adopters who still do not have this level of trust that the professionals believe they do.

Risk v Trust

Panel is used as the ultimate tool to deter people from continuing see question 8 bullet point 2.

Training nationally does not focus on practical care. Why do adopters not have access to the same training provided to new birth parents prior to the adoption?

Professionals believe that people need to stay in touch and access the training that the agency offers on ongoing basis post-placement e.g. issues about how to tell a child of the abuse they may have suffered. However this is unlikely to happen given the lack of trust between both parties.

19.10.14

see question 13 of Agency A interview. Adopters seem to find waiting for the adoption panel traumatic. How much of this does correlate to the reported incidents

by adopters that panel is used as a “stick” to get information and make adopters comply with perceived requirements of the panel?

Workers seem to imply panel have particular expectations to adopters. Where do they get this from a visit from the panel or is it from their reading and understanding of research. For example several adopters reported they were expected to take at least 12 months off work. Panel do not set this requirement is this to do with the theory on attachment?

Note that the information from these interviews is skewed as the workers involved all the ones who wish to co-operate. The issues may arise with workers who are defensive and therefore would not want to be involved in research anyway. Agency A sees interview involved staff that are experienced, cooperative and transparent with their practice.

Note Foster carers have not been involved in this research and therefore the information is not triangulated with them this could be an additional piece of research for the future.

20.10.14

Agency D interview. Question 7 bullet point 7. The child’s voice is crucial especially the child of the family. Where children are fully involved in the process it appears much more effective. This correlates with adopters C1. Yet children seem to be involved in a tokenistic manner. The skills of play etc are not apparent in the process. The process is seen as very serious there is little room for fun or plan which would make applicants and their children much more at ease.

Q13: Again panel seen as all powerful by staff as making decisions yet staff do not seem to recognise that their info and work guides panel recommendations.

Q13 last bullet point focuses on discrimination around religion. You have experienced that at another panel used to advise where the Chair had particular assumptions about a religion that the Chair thought she knew about. This reinforces the issue about a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing.

Q16. This is interesting because one of the key issues that the research that is relied upon continually suggests is about poor information provided to adopters. This is also now resulting in litigation and is one of the key issues that agencies that take children from other agencies regularly complain about. Often due to pressure of work or lack of experience or competence information is missed out or not checked by the member of staff or their manager and ends up at panel with missing information or inaccurate information. This often leaves panels in a difficult position of having to address issues in the match itself. This is done was best intention to provide a good service to adoptive families and to aim to support the placement. Yet discussing this with a voluntary agency this is seen as very difficult and almost seen as the panel causing difficulties. Yet I am sure that if children were placed with poor information the same agency that took the child would be the first to complain about the lack of information or inaccurate information which is an ongoing trend.

Appendix L

From: List for Ills
Sent: 29 March 2017 15:24
To: Mohammed Jakhara <>
Subject: RE: Inter Library Loan KK31038

Hello Mohammed

Thank you for coming to the office this afternoon. Please see below a list of databases used to try to locate a lending copy of the book:

OCLC WorldCat (<https://www.worldcat.org/>)

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M25 (<http://www.search25.ac.uk/pazpar2/inform25>)

Amazon UK (https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=9781910039120)

I'm sorry we could not satisfy your request for this title.

Best regards

Deborah

Deborah Bamford

Library Acquisitions Assistant, Inter Library Loans
Learning Enhancement Division
University of Derby
LG06, The Library
Kedleston Road
Derby
DE22 1GB
T: 01332 591210 E: ills@derby.ac.uk Fax: 01332 597773
www.derby.ac.uk/le

From: List for Ills
Sent: 29 March 2017 09:10
To: Mohammed Jakhara <M.Jakhara@derby.ac.uk>
Subject: Inter Library Loan KK31038

Dear Mohammed

Thank you for submitting your Inter Library Loan request for the following:

Elaine Dibben Eileen Fursland and Nicky Probert. Preparing to Adopt England 2014 - Trainer's Guide (British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), 2014) ISBN: 9781910039120

Unfortunately, this item is unobtainable from our sources.

I'm sorry we cannot help you on this occasion.

Regards

Deborah

Deborah Bamford

Library Acquisitions Assistant, Inter Library Loans

Learning Enhancement Division

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From: List for Ills <ills@derby.ac.uk>
Date: 3 April 2017 15:22:02 BST
To: Mohammed Jakhara <M.Jakhara@derby.ac.uk>
Subject: Inter Library Loan KK31039

Dear Mohammed

Further to your request for the following title, the British Library, Oxford, Trinity College Dublin and the National Library of Scotland have declined to lend their copies, although they would be available to consult on their premises.

Author/s: Shah, Shaila

Title: Preparing to adopt: a training pack for preparation groups. Applicant's workbook

Details: London: British Association for Adoption & Fostering, 2014

ISBN: 9781910039151

I'm sorry we cannot help you on this occasion.

Best regards,

Deborah

Deborah Bamford

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