

Parenting under adversity: birth parents' accounts of inequality and adoption

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Abstract: This paper aims to highlight inequality in current UK adoption processes and procedures. Whilst inequality has been recognised in research around adoption, such inequality is often conceptualised on an individual basis, rather than locating the experience within wider social structures. Inequality within social structures plays a role in the process of the permanent removal of children to be adopted, and is worthy of further attention. The impact of adoption on birth parents is generally acknowledged, in research, policy and practice, yet the voices and experiences of birth parents often remain hidden. Findings from research which adopted a life history approach, where birth parents voices are kept central, highlight how birth parents may find that their adverse experiences are exacerbated by the adoption process, the emotional impact causing existing problems to increase, and through the impact of the adoption process on birth parent's socio-economic status. Alongside this, constructions of appropriate parenting and provision for children are influenced by ideals of motherhood and ideas about 'risk' to children. The paper contributes to the growing area of research which illuminates the intersection of poverty, deprivation and child protection services and the wider contemporaneous debate concerning adoption in the UK.

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1. Introduction

Adoption is an emotive issue, which captures the public imagination and draws out a strength of feeling. Often empathy is shown towards children who are abandoned, neglected, abused and need saving or 'rescuing' from 'bad' parents; the ideal of a warm, safe, stable family to protect a child is highly seductive. Warner (2015) states that the development of child protection and welfare policies takes place within an 'emotional climate'. The field of child welfare inequality adoption, as the most draconian form of intervention, is a case in point. In the year ending 31st March 2017, there were 72,760 children looked after in England, and 4,350 children adopted from care in England, a relatively small proportion of the looked after population (DfE 2017).

The number of children adopted from care has fluctuated over time, but has increased significantly since the 1980s and 1990s when around 2000 children were adopted from care each year (PIU 2000). This is in line with government policy which has aimed to increase the number of adoptions, and legislation designed to reduce delay and simplify the adoption process, through appointing advisors who promoted adoption, including Martin Narey, in addition to legislative changes (The Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Children and

Families Act 2014). Whilst the number of adoptions has doubled, attention also needs to be paid to the combined use of adoption and Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) (Bilson, 2017) to understand the growing extent of the permanent removal of children. 3,690 children were subject to SGOs in the year ending 31st March 2017, leading to a combined total of 26% of all children who ceased to be looked after (DfE 2017). This illustrates the emotive and political nature of adoption highlighted above.

How does adoption become the preferred choice of response by policy makers? Adoption has become seen as the answer to social problems, with families increasingly characterised as individually responsible for (social) problems. This ‘privatised’ solution to social problems ties in with neoliberal notions of individual responsibility (Kirton 2013:104). Adoption may be viewed as a form of ‘child rescue’ from poor families (Featherstone et al 2014; Gillies et al 2017). Definitions and current frameworks of understanding influence ideas about parental lack, what is deemed to be neglectful, harmful or putting children ‘at risk’. Current discourse on neglect focuses on individual pathology and ignores the complex interrelation between poverty and neglect (Gupta 2017). Bilson (2017) argues that ‘children’s services is increasingly investigative’ and increasingly separates children from parents; the increased use of adoption is part of ‘net widening’ and has not resulted in a reduction in the looked after children population. Whilst a ‘child rescue’ narrative fits modern political ideology, it is arguably enhanced by the historical legacy of children from poor families being adopted by middle class adopters in the 1950s (Kirton 2015, Dey 2005), and the role which adoption plays in regulating wider constructions of the ‘family’ and its role within the state (Lewis 2004, Logan 2013).

The long-standing mission to rescue the children of the poor has in recent years been given added impetus by the rise of neuroscience and accompanying theories. Neuro-scientific theories claim that trauma in early life, including trauma to the unborn foetus, impacts brain development (Wastell and White 2012). These claims are often used alongside attachment theory (Wastell and White 2012). The use of neuro-scientific theory has been cited in government documents, policies and professional guidance including ‘The Munro Review of Child Protection’ (Munro et al. 2011). However, the evidence base of neuro-science has been strongly critiqued, and has been illustrated to marginalise poorer parents (MacVarish, Lee and Lowe 2015, Wastell and White 2012).

Alongside and in tandem with underpinning ideas about children’s brain development are ideas about the risks which parents can pose to their children through the ‘risk’s which they expose them to when parents are experiencing domestic violence, mental health issues, substance misuse issues. The concept of the ‘toxic trio’ has been highly influential (Cleaver et al 1999; Brandon et al 2012) in professional circles, particularly in services which have a remit for the protection and support of children. Parents have been cast as a ‘risk’ to their children – sometimes not only the behaviour of parents but parents themselves. The individualised focus on risk factors serves to pathologise parental behaviour without acknowledging the impact of underlying structural issues. Featherstone et al (2017) argue that ‘the extent to which this underclass discourse has entered into the accounts from social workers about the families and communities with which they work [...] suggest that the profession itself has absorbed and now utilises wider social and political discourses about the failing poor and the toxicity of needs’ (Featherstone et al, 2017: 23)

Pressure on child welfare services has undoubtedly increased under austerity. Expenditure on family support services has been reduced, impacting on delivery of appropriate services (Webb

and Bywaters, 2018). At a time when child social care services have overspent their budgets by £816m in the past year, questions should be raised about the level of support available to birth parents prior to their children being removed (Observer 2018). Given this insight to policy and practice discourse it is not perhaps difficult to see why adoption of children becomes the solution – being claimed to be financially prudent, morally right and transformative for children (Narey, 2011). Whilst subsequent government published documents have perhaps been more measured than this 2011 report the government did appoint Martin Narey as an advisor.

The following section details the context in which adoption in England and Wales is taking place, before moving on to discuss the research study (REF FIRST AUTHOR) from which examples are drawn. What birth parents in the study had in common was the experience of adversity before, during and after their child(ren) were adopted. Throughout the paper attention is drawn to the ways in which constructions of appropriate parenting are influenced by ideals of motherhood and how ideas about current and future ‘risk’ to children impacts not only on decisions to intervene but on on-going relationships with children’s social care services. Inequality within social structures plays a role in the process of the removal of children and parental adversity maintains the likelihood that this becomes a permanent arrangement. By illuminating the intersection of poverty, deprivation and child protection services the adverse experiences of birth parents are shown to be exacerbated by the adoption process.

In England and Wales, adoption is legislated for under The Adoption and Children Act (2002). A child will initially be placed with adopters under a placement order. Once a child has been living with adopters for ten weeks, the adopters may apply for an adoption order. Adoption orders give parental responsibility to the adopters, extinguishing parental responsibility held by any other person. All legal ties between child and birth parent are severed, and adopted children are treated in law as if born to the adopters (The Adoption and Children Act 2002 s.67).

The process of adoption can be experienced as oppressive, with the rights of parents not upheld; parents can be left feeling vulnerable and powerless. This may be heightened by inequalities of class and gender (Clapton and Clifton, 2016; Neal and Lopez, 2016) and ethnicity (Gupta and Lloyd-Jones, 2016). Class inequality has always existed, the resources available to most birth parents in comparison to the overwhelmingly middle class adoptive parents differ vastly. Class may be closely tied with gender; there is a gendered nature to parenting, with differences between discourses around motherhood and fatherhood, with motherhood being aligned closely with concepts of femininity (Alldred 1996, Dominelli 2009, Phoenix and Woollett 1991). Notions of motherhood are therefore strongly associated with notions of morality and women’s identity, whilst it is acceptable for fathers to have greater emotional and physical distances from their children (Dominelli 2009, Gillies 2006). Within the ‘hierarchy of motherhood’ (DiLapi, 1989) motherhood is an expected identity but only in the ‘right’ social, economic and sexual circumstances (Letherby, 1994). The ideology of intensive motherhood deems that motherhood is child-centred, self-sacrificing involving constant emotion work (Hays, 1996). Moreover, mothers who undertake mothering practices in a way that society perceives as incorrect or undesirable are devalued (Gillies 2006). Traditional notions of motherhood are based on middle-class values, and working-class mothering practices may be overlooked or pathologised. Ideals of motherhood as intrinsic to concepts of femininity only serve where the mother is deemed to be deserving (Gilles 2006). The practices or behaviour of less advantaged parents can become subject to professional judgement or labelled as deviant from an expected norm.

The link between adoption and policy is also complicated by social work values and practices, and the legal system. Adoption may only be considered for children ‘where nothing else will do’ and court judgements stating this have had an impact on adoption figures, with the number of adoptions declining since they peaked in 2015 (Re B 2013:197). Nonetheless the prominence given to adoption by policy makers, alongside notions of idealised motherhood discussed above, may lead to social workers overlooking poverty as a factor within adoption:

‘With non-consensual adoption becoming a favoured social work intervention by policy makers the settlement between the family and the state becomes ever more complex. This is contested territory [...], however any analysis of social work with families must acknowledge the influence on practice of the development of political preference for permanent care outside the family for some children. The introduction of adoption targets (Adoption Scorecards, Department for Education, 2015) and ministerial pressure to rescue children from natural disaster (their families) (Gove, 2012) has led to criticism from the judiciary about the absence of rights to representation for families’ (Morris et al, 2015).

Given this broad context, it is therefore a matter of debate as to whether adoption is a last resort or a first response, within a climate of austerity and a crisis of funding within children’s social care, juxtaposed with the judicial view that adoption should only be used as a last resort when all other options have been fully considered (Re B-S 2013). Yet where support services are increasingly scarce and poverty is not taken into account in decision-making, questions are raised as to whether it really is possible for adoption to be a last resort?

Impact on birth parents of adoption

The impact of adoption on birth parents is established in literature, including feelings of grief, loss and shame (Charlton et al. 1998, Memarnia et al. 2015, Neil et al. 2010, Smeeton and Boxhall 2011; Morriss, 2018). Despite this, there is evidence that birth parents voices continue to be dismissed (Garrett 2002, Kirton 2013). Research into birth parent’s experiences of adoption acknowledges that birth parents are affected by inequality (Charlton et al. 1998, Hill et al. 1992, Lucklock and Broadhurst 2013, Neil 2006). However, an emphasis on individual parenting factors within adoption literature means that structural factors are often disregarded. This is consistent with a neoliberal emphasis on the individual as responsible for social problems (Kirton 2013, Parton 2011). However, wider research into the looked after children population suggests that children in the most deprived centile are 11 times more likely to be looked after than children in the least deprived centile (Bywaters et al. 2017). Other researchers have also highlighted some of the structural inequalities apparent within adoption. Roberts et al. (2017) found that a quarter of birth mothers and a fifth of birth fathers were likely to have been in care themselves as children (Roberts et al. 2017). A review of the ethics of adoption highlighted how adoption should be considered within the wider social contexts of poverty and inequality (Featherstone et al. 2018).

However, poverty is often dismissed by social workers or regarded as too big to tackle; it is also so much a part of social work places of practice that it can become a ‘normative backdrop, something unremarkable and unremarked upon’ (Morris et al. 2018: 367). In recent research which highlights the relationship between children’s social work interventions and the influence of material circumstances it was argued that poverty has become invisible to practitioners (Featherstone et al, 2017). Whilst poverty, unemployment, poor housing, domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health issues were regarded as connected issues, ‘social workers rarely considered the root causes of family troubles and the role socio-economic hardships played in these’ (Morris et al, 2018:). It was noted that heavy caseloads,

tight timescales and budget cuts ‘undermined social workers’ attempts to engage with the roots of family troubles’. Importantly, child protection conference reports were ‘missing attention to the context of family suffering’ (p12). The outcome of this was that references made to ‘parenting capacity’ were often decontextualized from parents’ available resources. So alongside the interplay of gender and inequality as structuring forces children need to be saved from the consequences of inadequate parenting, particularly mothers, who are envisaged as a risky environment for their children by professionals who have been influenced by emerging ideas around neuroscience (Gillies, Edwards and Horsley, 2017).

This therefore raises questions about the experiences of birth mothers and birth fathers who have lost a child to adoption, and how adoption may impact upon their own sense of identity, self-worth and sense of place in the world. What follows is a further contribution to the wider contemporaneous debate that is taking place regarding inequality within adoption.

2. Results

Our focus here, through exploring the theme of parental adversity, is to highlight the ways in which child protection responses and services reflect and/or exacerbate inequality. The theme of ‘parental adversity’ is addressed through the sub themes which emerged from the data – 1) parenting under adversity before the child(ren) were removed, 2) parenting under scrutiny and 3) parenting after adoption.

Parenting under adversity: before child(ren’s) removal

The research data highlighted the ways in which birth parents struggled prior to their children being removed. Poverty was a factor for many birth parents, their day to day experience of parenting took place against a backdrop of poverty. Maggie describes some of the difficulties that poverty led to:

My children was always fed, um, it was me you know, to feed my children. I mean, at that time I’m um [my daughter] was still on milk as well as food, um but [my son] was on his 4 meals a day, and boy did he love his food (laughs). Um, er, but it was me at that time, to feed them I was starving some days some days I wouldn't eat for 2, 3, some weeks I wouldn't even eat for 2, 3 days just so I could make sure my kids was fed and there was electric in. And you know, it, it'd become a real struggle, um, and because I'd moved not only areas and then um got a job, got a part time job, obviously I was only entitled to so much in benefit, which all, which affected my housing benefit. Which at the time I was in a private renting he kicked, he then gave me my notice, um because it'd affected the amount of rent which is how I ended up having to move very quickly. He'd given me seven days to get out, um, and I had to accept and move into this attempt at a council house which, which was squalor at the time (Maggie)

This extract illustrates how poverty impacted all areas of Maggie’s life. Managing poverty impacts on whether Maggie can eat, purchase electricity, afford the rent. Securing a part time job impacted on her benefit entitlement, which in turn led to a deficit in housing benefit and being evicted from a private rented property. Poverty created instability and poverty is gendered, women in the UK are slightly more likely to be living in poverty than men, measured on the usual household basis and female headed households are poorer than comparable male-headed households (DWP 2018). It is also known that mothers go without food or other necessities in order to protect children (ONS, 2018). A further example, provided by Lucy, illustrates how messy and complex life in poverty can be:

“but of course when you’ve got an influx of so many problems you know, you’ve got the health, you’ve got my housekeeping, not brilliant (laughs), you’ve got domestic violence, you’ve got you know gangs and crime (pause) that is a great number of things to deal with in one context.” (Lucy)

Here Lucy speaks of coping with health issues, money management on a low income, violence within the home and also in the locality. Managing poverty is a burden and can adversely impact on women’s health and levels of stress and anxiety. Poverty may exacerbate domestic abuse and violence by increasing or prolonging women’s exposure to it and by reducing their ability to flee (Family Welfare Association, 2008).

Gender could also contribute to adversity for birth mothers, and practical difficulties including childcare could make birth mothers’ day to day lived experiences difficult to manage. Mary had a series of difficult circumstances, and was living in privately rented accommodation with her partner and three children when she had to get part time work when her landlord suddenly increased the rent. Despite her partner remaining at home, she viewed childcare as her responsibility and described feeding her baby during her break, *“the youngest one I have to keep bottle feeding, I said, so is it ok if I have my break every 3 hours so I can go and feed her and come straight back?”* The discourse of the ‘good’, devoted, self-sacrificing mother holds strong, as Brown, Brady and Letherby have previously argued in their research with teenage mothers ‘a good mother is there for their child and does not relinquish responsibility by ‘dumping’ them on a child minder or nursery or, in some cases, the child’s father’ (2014:98).

Alongside additional caring responsibilities, there was also a gendered nature to adversity with 11 out of the 12 birth mothers reporting domestic violence and seven reporting rape or sexual abuse as either a child or an adult. Mothers described the complexity of their circumstances and the dilemmas presented when faced with the threat of ‘losing’ their child:

“Rather than social services saying either get out of this relationship or lose your kid, it’s not that easy, because they don’t know they could be in charge of the finances. So if you’ve been in that relationship, say, for 10 years and they’ve had control of that money you don’t know any more, it goes out your memory. It’s like, ‘oh how do I do this now’... you’ve gotta reprogramme yourself, and with them relationships it’s hard.” (Caroline)

Caroline suggests that the combination of poverty and domestic violence add complexity, leading to difficulties in ending the relationship. However, birth parents spoke of difficulty accessing courses and counselling in a timely manner. Physical violence was a daily reality for many birth mothers, with incidents similar to the one Sally describes a common occurrence: *“yes yes, so I mean it was just the fact that, um, when I was pregnant with the twins he’d actually thrown me across the room, um, dragged me by the hair basically, I was 2 months pregnant”* (Sally). This was particularly difficult for Sally to accept as whilst their children were later adopted she felt blamed as the mother, and this was reinforced when her partner was able to ‘keep’ younger half siblings with his new partner.

In some cases, mothers blamed themselves for their choice of partner, rather than blame the partner for the abuse and violence they had subjected them to:

“When I was 20 no, hold on 21, 22, silly cow me got married um to a nasty fellow didn't I, he mentally and sexually abused me for 18 months of our marriage.” (Diane)

Birth mothers therefore accepted dominant discourse around notions of femininity and motherhood. Mothers with vulnerabilities, such as mental health issues or learning difficulties, were sometimes with partners who either physically or sexually abused the children.

The above accounts speak of the challenges of mothering and raising children, it is difficult work. The already challenging role is made more difficult by financial hardship and poverty, leading to a need to juggle the limited resources at parents' disposal. The traditional division of labour, which leaves mothers responsible for childcare, also adds to the difficult job and overwhelming responsibility of mothers. Added to this can be experiences of violence, power and control from intimate partners, highlighted above. The discourse of 'good' motherhood which influences societal attitudes and the actions of social work professionals can lead mothers to be blamed for failing to protect their children in domestic violent relationships. Poverty and financial dependence influenced whether mothers could make a 'free' choice to leave or make substantial changes.

Parenting under scrutiny: adversity exacerbated

When the above problems existed prior to coming to the attention of children's services they were often exacerbated once parents became involved in child protection processes and procedures. A number of expectations were placed upon parents, at a time when they were under additional emotional trauma from the removal and loss of their children. Schofield et al. (2011) found that parents own problems were often exacerbated once their children entered care, and that was also the case with the birth parents within our research. For instance, Jane described how she 'hit the bottle' after her daughter was adopted and it took nine years to stop drinking. 'Good' mothers and fathers model good behaviour and socialise children into good citizens. The value placed on what is deemed to be good parenting underpins social policy targeted towards parents. Mothers especially were aware that their actions were judged. Birth parents reported difficulties in balancing competing needs and priorities, as meeting the expectations of the courts in terms of parenting capacity and undertaking assessments could lead to birth parents struggling with poverty and an inability to provide for their child financially:

“It's not like I can look to go to work yet because of the contact three times a week, I'm at counselling in a, on one day a week, and social services, the assessments etcetera I, I, there just ain't enough hours in the day like, else I would be at work now, um, just so I could make things financially more stable and better for me.” (Maggie)

Whilst paid work may be the ideal, demonstrating responsibility towards providing for a child, this example speaks to the impossibility of paid work when so much time is already committed to maintaining contact with her child, participating in counselling sessions and being available for social service assessments. Paid work also becomes more difficult because of the stigma and social sanction attached to perceived parental failure. Lucy, who has a conviction for child cruelty, is unable to achieve paid work in the area in which she qualified due to the conviction. She focuses on the consequences of the actions of Social services and the police:

“I can't get a job now, all my jobs were vocational, all my qualifications were vocational ones for caring you know, and for child care, elderly, vulnerable people. Now, I've always got that

question mark against me because of that conviction, which no, and I always say to them did you ever think when you did all this, when you sat there doing all these things, did you ever think of the long term effect? You want me to go out and get a job? How can I go out and get a job? My qualifications are all null and void I have to go back to university or college or do some other kind of qualification and I'm like nearly 40." (Lucy)

The adversity already experienced was often exacerbated by the expectations attached to parenting at a distance. Colin, a birth father, told of the extraordinary effort he made in order to go to meetings with children's social services or to have contact with his child:

"I went to every meeting I never missed any, I even walked to them and I walked ten mile to get to a meeting (pause) so, and they can just say, oh well I was half way I was half way across {the town} going to my one of them, and they said 'oh didn't you get my message' I said no how can I you not send me a message or phone call me cos I phoned up to say that I'm on my way, 'oh it's been cancelled'" (Colin)

Financial pressures meant that parents had to make choices and what could be regarded as sacrifices, to do the right thing. Meetings were not always close by and parents were not always informed if appointments were cancelled. The casual tone and late notification of cancellation of the meeting are more hurtful than the distance walked as to parents it signifies a lack of respect by social work professionals for the effort that they are making to stay close to their child.

Expectations and assumptions made relating to attendance at meetings or courses was a feature in the accounts of a number of parents. Nina was 21 when she had her son, she was a care leaver, and recognised that she needed support with parenting skills. She describes how she missed attendance at a parenting course because of the actions of the social worker that she had asked for help:

"I was asking for support from social services, the support I was asking for was to get me on parenting courses while I was in and out there fighting for my son. They got me on the waiting list but because ... the second social worker that was involved missed the deadline of the waiting list, so I lost out on it. And they kept trying to say "no you was on the parenting course but you couldn't be bothered to turn up apparently", "don't think so" I said, because every time I kept phoning the children's centre they kept telling me that I wasn't, my name weren't even down, and the social worker actually came out and admitted to not putting me on the, er, waiting list." (Nina)

For Nina this example relayed was about so much more than a missed opportunity to attend a course. She needs to demonstrate that she is 'fighting' for her son and this inaction meant that she 'lost out' on the chance to gain support and make changes that might have kept him in her care. She was taking all action possible within her control, chasing the children's centre to find out if she had moved up the waiting list, but her account was disbelieved and she was told that her name was not on the list or an assumption made that she had not attended as she 'couldn't be bothered to turn up'. Nina is well aware of how she as a mother will then be perceived by professionals who are making decisions about her abilities. Alongside the timescales of the court process, difficulty in accessing required support and fraught relationships with social workers led to a number of birth parents feeling that they were 'set up to fail' and that an outcome of adoption was inevitable. In another example, Melissa was encouraged to access support but was not able to access support or certain courses until her first son was adopted:

“they wanted us to access this support but we weren't able to until he was officially adopted, so I told the judge, and I told [my MP] that how can we rectify what needs to be rectified... you know what, if you want us to do something but we can't do it until he's adopted, so we're basically set up to fail as far as I'm concerned.” (Melissa)

This seems logical, that support should come before the adoption and that without support the parents will not be able to demonstrate that they are willing to make changes. Melissa tried to contest her son's adoption but was unsuccessful. However, she was pregnant with her second son at the time she contested her first son's adoption, and was successful in keeping her younger son in her care under a Supervision Order. Melissa attributed this to being proactive and accessing a range of support including domestic violence programmes and counselling. However for Melissa the difficulty in accessing this support prior to her first son's adoption meant that she was not able to demonstrate sufficient change to contest the plan for his adoption.

Social workers were also active in offering a range of support, however. Katie told how her social worker made suggestions which she felt could help, but Katie felt unable to accept:

“She said we can get, you need to do a CBT or we'll get you a mother and baby unit but I said no I wanted to stay with her dad cos I couldn't leave [my partner], I wanted to, but I felt like he controlled me.” (Katie)

Poor living conditions and financial worries can lead to emotional and psychological distress. Another mother told of the practical support that she had from Children's Social Services in addressing housing debt:

“Because I owed the council money from my property with [my son], um, um, social, social workers kind of got that writ off like, and let me reapply for another council house.” (Shannon)

Shannon was placed in a mother and baby foster placement when she had her son, to assess her parenting capacity, as her daughter had been adopted a number of years previously. She had been living in a flat that she described as unsuitable for a baby due to damp, and therefore 'had to give that up'. She was supported by social workers to apply for new housing. However, whilst Shannon described how she was lucky to get a nice house, her choices were constrained and she was forced to accept the house she was offered as “because it's on an emergency band it's a case of, well if you refuse like, they'll think, well obviously we'll end up homeless.”

Melissa, whilst living in a council property and being unemployed at the time of interview, had been in education to degree level and had previously held full time employment posts. However, Melissa felt that this was viewed negatively by the social worker:

“Even in court she said to the judge, oh Melissa's got a [subject] degree and she thinks she's better than anyone, and then I looked at my solicitor and my barrister at the time like to say, you know, just because I've got a [subject] degree or whatever doesn't mean I'm better than anyone, and I can't believe she said that officially in court.”

Melissa's comments reflect how an increase in economic capital, in the form of educational qualifications which led to a permanent job, did not equate to an increase in cultural and symbolic capital in the eyes of her social worker. Melissa may have been able to display more

of the 'right' sort of capital or positive indicators yet still she was found wanting, pointing to the intersection of class and gender as structuring forces in the lives of birth mothers.

In summary, there are a number of ways in which adversity was exacerbated by interaction with children's services for these birth mothers. Some wanted to work but regular appointments or contact arrangements meant that it was not possible and would be too inconvenient. Others who wanted to work were affected by the outcome of their child protection case being a criminal conviction and whilst this parent appeared to blame children's social care she does make the point that she cannot go back to the work that she has previously done over a number of years. Others who requested support with their parenting, as they recognised some inadequacies and felt the risk of having their child removed if they did not improve in their parenting, found that support was not forthcoming. The reasons for this were that it did not materialise as promised, or in a timely manner, they were accused of not accepting the support offered or forced to accept inappropriate forms of support. Others did not feel that they could accept the support or the support was being offered in a way that did not make sense – after the adoption of a child rather than before. This raises questions as to what support there actually is for parents struggling with poverty and adversity? Particularly once the court process has started. And what are the consequences, real or felt, when support is not accessed or taken up?

Parenting after adoption: adversity continued

Adoption is not a one off event that stops at the point of the adoption order, but has a lifelong impact on all members of the adoption triangle. Similar to previous studies, birth parents reported ongoing loss and trauma after the adoption of their child (Clifton 2012, Memarnia et al. 2015).

Likewise, the adversity experienced by birth parents did not stop once their children were adopted. Letterbox contact often served to highlight inequality between adopters and birth parents. Colin described health issues and mental health difficulties, in addition to a history of long term unemployment and living in poverty. He was worried that poverty may impact his daughter's opinion of him if she did have contact in the future:

“it's not a matter of them being well off, right I know that her financial needs isn't going to be a problem, but I know her security's not going to be a problem, I know her education's not going to be a problem, I know she her upbringings going to be pretty, er, I'd say the borderline to upper class, which I don't mind. But she's going to be along the, the, lines of upper class whereas she's going to see her dad on the poverty line which I think would be a drastic shock, and maybe be off putting if she ever wanted to see me.”
(Colin)

Colin feared that class differences between himself and the adopters would negatively impact on his daughter's opinion of him. However, other parents were grateful that these opportunities were provided and seemed accepting of the class inequalities and their own situations:

“and look at them now they go to America every year they're having holidays and they're having a good life I couldn't give them this they're safe and that's all I want them to be safe and well [my daughter's] a dancer she does tap and ballet and she goes to brownies she's a swimmer so they look after them I couldn't've done that” (Katie)

Katie acknowledged that she would not be in a position to provide for her children in the same

way that the adopters could. Parents internalise discourses and policy drivers that imply that they are failed, a threat to their children's future development and success in life. This is not perhaps surprising as birth parents whose children have been adopted are criticised, looked down upon and demonised by wider society. The economic and social insecurity which pre-dates their involvement with child protection services leads them to disbelieve that they could provide the necessary support. The narrative presented is that clearly, anyone can see, that their children are better off with their new adoptive families.

However, even after having a child adopted a number of birth parents were successful in parenting further children. These birth parents were parenting despite adversity, as often factors including poverty etc. had not changed. These parents also faced specific challenges in parenting after adoption. They lived under constant fear that their child may be removed; Shannon spoke about how she was referred to children's services due to her extended family temporarily moving in with her, due to concerns about a family member's mental health. She therefore had to get her family members to move out or risk losing her son. She described how *"it was the worst feeling ever to know that I'd worked so hard and come so far, then they get back involved. I was just like no, I can't lose him."* For birth parents who have a child living at home after adoption, that threat of removal is always present. Many parents are understandably afraid to use their voice and question social services. Claire and Anthony describe this:

"It's just more listening to social services than anything." (Anthony)

"You may not agree with it but you just have to bow down, if you wanna keep your kids, that's what you gotta do." (Claire)

Lisa Morriss recognises this state of being:

'[...] women who have had their children removed exist in a state of haunted motherhood, suspended in the shadowlands where the living and the invisible coexist, and temporality is both disrupted and merged...their children are there and yet not there; they are living and yet out of reach and invisible. Furthermore, the mothers are silenced by shame and the justifiable fear of future children also being removed through the Family Court system' (Morriss, 2018: 828)

The above examples demonstrate the ways in which normative discourses of 'good' motherhood impact on the lived maternal experience, whether birth mothers have their children living with them or living separately.

3. Discussion

The punitive policy approach of adoption from care has not been experienced equally across social class, gender and race divides. The social conditions which foster unsafe environments in increasingly unequal societies (Parton 2014) are not addressed whilst the current focus of policy is on protecting children from their poor parents. The dominant neo-liberal discourse implies that child neglect is a result of parental pathology and individual blame, obscuring structural inequalities and the poverty in which many vulnerable families live (Gupta, 2017). Deprivation, poverty and parents' previous trauma are over-looked in favour of explanations which focus on individual deficits. The paper argues that birth parents experience a significant amount of adversity prior to their children being removed. Poverty, and associated factors including housing issues, lack of basic amenities such as food and electricity, are a daily reality for a number of birth parents. Poverty impacts all areas of parents lives, with adversity often

having a gendered nature, birth mothers experience high levels of domestic and sexual violence. Such social stressors play a role in contributing to creating a space where there is potential for neglect, abuse or other forms of maltreatment. This is not to say that poverty is directly correlated to maltreatment or that all parents in poverty will neglect their children (Featherstone et al 2016 call this a reductive argument).

Timing is crucial in cases of child welfare and protection. There are various ways that time exerts pressure; in terms of the pressure to intervene early to prevent harm, or permanently damaging harm; in terms of pressure to meet system deadlines; in terms of little time to work with families and offer support. As stated above, under the Children and Families Act 2014 a 26 week maximum time limit for a case to be concluded was introduced in England and Wales. This limited timeframe impacts on parents who are trying to demonstrate that they have made changes or met conditions set by the Local Authority and may then influence whether their children remain with them, are returned to their care or are permanently removed. Increasingly the first three years of a child's life are regarded as crucial. Influenced by the discourse of neuroscience, or more particularly, populist versions of neuroscience, professionals claim that the first three years are the optimal time for brain development; parents (mothers) become positioned as supportive of this development or potentially harmful. (Narey, 2011; DfE 2012). The short timescales allow less opportunity for change and for proper representation; what are the pathways taken and how do the outcomes vary? Parental rights and needs are often disregarded, seen as less important, unable to be supported, as the 'best interests of the child' are the domain of children's social workers. Parents experience the pressure to change, to engage with social workers and other professionals, to comply with conditions which are set, to show willing, to listen and to follow advice yet the limited time of 26 weeks in which to make any changes, often with limited support, is felt to be almost impossible to overcome. Parents wanted to use the court process to make changes necessary for their children to return to their care, and often used language of 'fighting' and 'battles' to describe this time. However, they also reported that any support they were receiving stopped once their children were removed and the focus moved to assessments of their parenting capacities.

Such tight decision making timescales constrain social workers in their ability to engage with the complexities of family poverty and child protection conference reports miss 'attention to the context of family suffering (Morris, 2018:367)'. Without accounting for the socio-economic circumstances under which parents are caring for their children it is likely that the parental behaviours become the focus and that parents are regarded as responsible for any shortfall or not meeting expected standards of care. Poverty, in the research of Morris et al, was not identified or described as a risk factor for children; instead, parental behaviour was pathologised. The birth parents in this current study also describe poverty and difficulty in providing the basics for their children. This has relevance for all categories of child in need and child protection but it is particularly salient in the case of adoption as parental ties become severed.

Parenting takes place under scrutiny when birth parents are involved in the court process, their adversity is often exacerbated, existing problems such as use of alcohol or drugs may increase, they feel additional pressures of court and assessments and contact which make paid work not possible to manage. A further strain is experienced when any support to parents which is being received appears to stop once the court/assessment process starts. Support seems to occur before the child is removed but at a time when parents do not perhaps realise the seriousness of the situation.

Despite adversity some parents can overcome some of the challenges. Parents who continue to parent subsequent children after others were adopted have usually made changes but still face poverty and adversity; in addition, they have a constant fear of their child(ren) being removed, sometimes leading to a fear of accessing support in case this is viewed as a weakness. The shame and stigma of having a child(ren) removed and adopted is felt, lived, and evident in the actions of the parents in this research. There are a range of issues which they have not revealed or spoken about to the social workers that were involved in the removal of their children. As Hyslop and Keddell argue:

‘The emotive discourse of risk and abuse, and the associated need to protect vulnerable children, carries immense tautological authority which can serve to camouflage the ideological dimensions of contemporary child protection’ (Hyslop and Keddell, 2018: 4).

Whilst birth parents’ experiences of grief, loss and shame relating to their parenting skills and capacity (or lack of) and losing care of their child have been acknowledged (Charlton et al. 1998, Memarnia et al. 2015, Neil et al. 2010, Smeeton and Boxhall 2011) the underlying role that poverty and adversity play in such feelings has so far been less of a focus. The influence of social structures in adoption needs further exploration. Gupta (2017) describes poverty in children and families social work as the ‘elephant in the room’; it is not openly acknowledged and yet plays a very large contributory factor. Whilst there often are negative consequences to socio-economic disadvantage these are not inevitable, support which originates from poverty awareness – practical, material, emotional - can ameliorate some of the more extreme consequences. This paper points to the need for further research into the lived experiences of birth parents.

4. Materials and Methods

The empirical study from which the data is drawn adopted a life history approach to data gathering, which helped to ensure that birth parents voices were kept central and allowed for exploration of the interaction between an individual’s story and their historical, temporal and social context, thus turning the life story into a life history (Giele and Elder Jr 1998, Goodson and Sikes 2001, Tierney 2000). Life history methods explore how a life has been socially constructed, and may also be viewed themselves as social constructions, located within historical circumstances (Goodson and Sikes 2001). A life history approach can be a suitable method to use with groups whose voices have traditionally been silenced (Letherby 2003), such as birth mothers and fathers.

Parent participants were predominantly accessed through voluntary agencies in England and Wales, including adoption agencies and family support agencies, with one participant being accessed through snowball sampling. Unstructured life history interviews were undertaken with 12 birth mothers and two birth fathers, one birth mother identified as British Asian and the remaining participants as White British. Parents (although not all) used creative techniques including the creation of a timeline, or the use of photographs for elicitation. Timelines have been found to be useful in life history methodology, as a way to scaffold the history, enhance participant reflexivity and identify important turning points and events from the participant’s perspective (Bagnoli 2009, Clandinin and Connelley 1998). Photographs were participant led and served as a memory trigger (Clandinin and Connelley 1998), two participants shared life story books that they had previously created. The creative methods were regarded as tools, they were not used with every participant as the research was collaborative and some participants chose not to use the creative methods.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and the data was analysed thematically, which allowed for both within and across case analysis (Braun and Clarke 2013, Riessman 2008). The transcripts were first read as a whole, before using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to code and organise the data. This method of analysis was therefore beneficial in developing themes and helping to identify key features to add to the developed conceptual framework. Ethical approval was obtained from ANONYMOUS University and participating agencies, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. A number of common themes emerged, one of which is the focus of this paper.

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