The journey to adopt a child – A pilot mixed methods study of aspiring parents' perceptions of the adoption process

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Abstract

This research is part of a larger mixed methods study that aims to analyse adoptive parents' perceptions of the adoption process. The larger study seeks to follow a sample of adoptive families on their journey to adopt, from the point of their application to adopt being accepted by an adoption agency and up to a year of a child being placed with them. The findings of this study are based on a pilot study carried out in 2012. The study considered prospective adoptive families' (whose application to adopt had been formally accepted) motivation to adopt, their willingness to consider children with some typical needs of 'Looked After Children' and their perceptions of the assessment and preparation process in the early stages of their application. The data for this study was gathered from one statutory adoption agency and consisted of ten prospective adoptive families. Each prospective adoptive couple or single adopter completed a semi structured questionnaire. The main themes emerging from the survey indicated preferred sources of information that prospective adopters use before making their application, some of their anxieties before they come into contact with adoption agencies and the characteristics of the type of child they wish to adopt.

Introduction

Current Government policy is aimed at hastening the pace of all aspects of the adoption process. This is evident in the Government's Action Plan for Adoption (DfE, 2011a). The changes to date have to some extent been welcomed (DfE, 2011b). Indeed, there is significant evidence to suggest delays in decision making for 'Looked After Children' (LAC) (Children Act 1989, s22 HMSO 1989) can leave them facing adversity and instability for longer than necessary (Selwyn et al, 2006). This frequently has a long term detrimental impact on the welfare of children (Archer, 2001; Beek, 1999; Cairns, 2002; Fahlberg, 1991; Howe, et al, 1999; Howe 2005; Selwyn et al, 2006; Ward et al, 2012). However, the nature of some of the proposed changes has raised concerns amongst professionals (BASW, 2012). A significant concern is that these changes may increase placement "disruptions" (Ofsted, 2012a p3). The Action Plan for Adoption (DfE, 2011a), does recognise a need for further research into disruption rates and reasons for placement breakdown. However, it is important to recognise that the definition of disruptions in adoption is a matter of debate (Quinton et al, 1998; Schofield and Simmonds 2009). Furthermore, the measurement of placement success or failure is complex. A numerical count of the number of placements that breakdown before an adoption order (s46 Adoption and Children Act, 2002; HMS0, 2002) is made can only provide a blunt statistical measure (Quinton et al, 1998). It cannot provide insight into adoptive families' perceptions of success or failure of the placement or the adoption process. In order to understand the true impact of the adoption process and develop services to meet the needs of LAC and adoptive families, there is a need to objectively understand adopters' perceptions and experiences of the journey to adopt a child.

Very few previous studies have focused on aspects of the early part of the adoption process. Rushton and Monck (2009) considered the effectiveness of the adoption preparation process aimed at enabling adopters to successfully integrate their adopted children into their families and meet the child's needs. They found few studies have specifically focused on the preparation of adopters. Furthermore, those that had have primarily been descriptive (Rushton and Monck, 2009). Rushton and Monck's (2009) study relied on adoptive families' memories of the preparation process, due to the fact that the families included in the study had already been approved and had children placed with them. Based on their findings, Rushton and Monck (2009) suggested some changes to the content of the preparation training. The study gave some valuable insight into the challenges faced by adopters post placement. However, there is little evidence to suggest that changing the content of the training, based on adopters' memories of the process will have any impact on outcomes for other adoptive families. Especially as the data was collected at time when they were managing the challenges of caring for their adopted children

A survey by Adoption UK (2010a) focused on their members experiences of the recruitment, assessment and preparation process. This provided some insight and highlighted some of the challenges prospective adopters can face before their application to adopt is accepted. It indicated some good practice by adoption agencies. The study's suggested areas for improvement included the need to enhance the level of service to people when they initially approach an adoption agency. Its findings indicated that out of the total sample (N=179) in twenty three percent of cases it took over a year for some agencies to present the case to their Adoption Panel. Furthermore, in seventeen percent of cases it took between a year and eighteen months before the family was matched to a child following approval. This does highlight some of the significant delay that prospective adoptive families can face and may result in a reduction of the number of families available to adopt LAC. However, it is important to highlight that the study was based on an online survey of approved adoptive families. It does rely on adopters' recollections and memories of the process and their ability to reflect these using an online data collection tool. It is further important to recognise that internet based surveys do raise concerns about "sampling representativeness and validity of data" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011 p 285) as they can over or under represent certain sections of society based on age and gender. Furthermore, the journey to adopt is a very personal one. Each adoptive family's needs are different. The Adoption UK study (2010a) did not triangulate the data with information from the adoption agencies, hence, it is difficult to assess the validity of the reasons for any delay.

This study is timely as it is taking place when the adoption systems and processes are undergoing significant change. The study is part of a larger mixed methods study (Creswell, 2009) that focuses on how the adoption process is experienced and perceived by prospective adoptive parents on their journey to adopt a child. This pilot study sought to capture prospective adoptive parents' views and feelings about the early part of the process, after their application to adopt had been formally accepted by an adoption agency, but before they had completed the adoption training. The study aimed to gather demographic data about adoptive applicants including their ages, marital status and ethnic background. Furthermore, the study sought to identify some of the reasons the participants had chosen to apply to adopt, the sources of information they had utilised prior to their application, their feelings about the process before they met with the agency and whether these had changed after the initial meeting. Finally the study considered participants' willingness to adopt children with some of the typical needs of LAC.

Method

This pilot study utilised a semi structured, paper based questionnaire to collect quantitative data and a limited amount of qualitative data from a small group of ten prospective adoptive families (see Table 1). This was based on a purposive sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011 p156) and only included prospective adoptive parents whose application to adopt had been accepted by the adoption agency. Where participants were part of a couple they were asked to complete a single questionnaire together. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and submitted directly to the researcher who is independent of the agency. The participants were in the early stage of the assessment and preparation process. They had not yet completed their training. This was considered important as the study aimed to capture the participants' perceptions of the initial stages of the process and their desires in relation to the type of child they wished to adopt in real time. This was different to other studies such as Adoption UK (2010a) and Rushton and Monck (2009) that were reliant on the reflections and memories of the participants.

All of the participants were from one Local Authority adoption agency in an inner city area from the north of England. The agency is one of five adoption agencies that responded to a request by the researcher following ethical approval to work in partnership to support the research. To maintain confidentiality specific statistics about the agency are not provided, however, the Local Authority has a higher rate of unemployment than in the region, significant levels of deprivation and over four hundred and sixty LAC. Furthermore, there is a smaller population of people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities than the average in England and Wales (ONS, 2011).

It is important to recognise that this is a very small sample. Great care is required in making generalisations. However, the sample did represent some of the general characteristics, typical of many prospective applicants in England, in terms of the number of applicants in a relationship and marital status (Adoption UK, 2010b). The sample only included a very small number of BME applicants. This may in part be due to the fact that the local population does have a smaller percentage of BME communities. However, it is also important to note that nationally the number of BME adoptive applicants is significantly lower compared to White British applicants. It is difficult to find national statistics on the number of adoptive applicants from BME communities. However, statistics indicate that only eight percent of adopters approved nationally by Local Authority and Voluntary Adoption Agencies between April 2011 and March 2012 were from BME backgrounds including Asian, Black, Mixed and Chinese origins (OFSTED, 2012b). Furthermore, this is one of the reasons that the current Government has legislated "*to reduce the number of adoptions delayed in order to achieve a perfect or near ethnic match between adoptive parents and the adoptive child*" (DfE, 2011a).

Results

The results from the pilot study are set out below. These results will inform the areas for further consideration in the larger mixed methods study. The demographic details of the sample are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of the Sample

Total number of questionnaire's completed	10
Total Number of Individuals	18
Number of Applicants in a relationship	16
Single applicants	2 (Both female)
White British	16
White "Other"	2 (1 couple)
Age in years	
31-40	44.5%
41-50	44.5%
21-30	11% (1 Couple)

Application to Adopt

Eighty per cent of the participants indicated that they had applied to adopt as a means of starting their families. Ten percent (one couple) had applied in order to extend their own family while the other ten percent (one couple) were second time adopters. The questionnaire did not specifically ask if the applicants had faced issues of infertility. This would have been insensitive on a questionnaire. However, infertility is likely to have been a key factor as participants had chosen adoption as a means to start or extend their family. This is not an unusual pattern as studies (Fratter et al, 1991; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Treacher and Katz, 2000; Valentine, 1988) have consistently found this.

Applicants had used a range of sources of information before deciding to apply to adopt. Despite the significant amount of coverage in the press and the television about adoption at the time the study was conducted, the two sources of information predominately used by participants in order to find out information were the internet (sixty percent) and friends (sixty percent). The questionnaire did not request information about specific internet sites used, hence it was difficult to assess the accuracy of the information they had received before their application.

Ninety per cent of the participants were aware of the fact that they would have to go through an assessment and preparation process from before they applied to adopt. Qualitative comments suggest that while applicants understood the need for this, there was a degree of anxiety about it. Given the life changing nature of the adoption process (Fahlberg, 1991; Quinton et al, 1998; Schofield and Simmonds, 2009; Treacher, et al 2000; Valentine, 1988), participants' anxieties are understandable. Furthermore, emotionally charged media headlines such as *"Adoption is a trial by fire. Can't we please think of the children?"* (Poulton, 2012) are not unusual and are likely raise anxieties. Heightening the fears of prospective adopters has the potential to cause barriers to communication (Gilbert, 2009) in the process of assessment and preparation for adoption. This has the potential to create additional vulnerabilities for children, adopters and professionals. It is difficult to gain a depth of understanding of this phenomenon using a questionnaire, but it is an area that requires further exploration. Reassuringly in this study, after having met a social worker from the adoption team for the first time seventy of applicants felt more at ease and were able to discuss questions and concerns with the professional freely and openly. A further 20% felt they were able to discuss such issues to some extent. Ten percent (one couple) did not respond to the question.
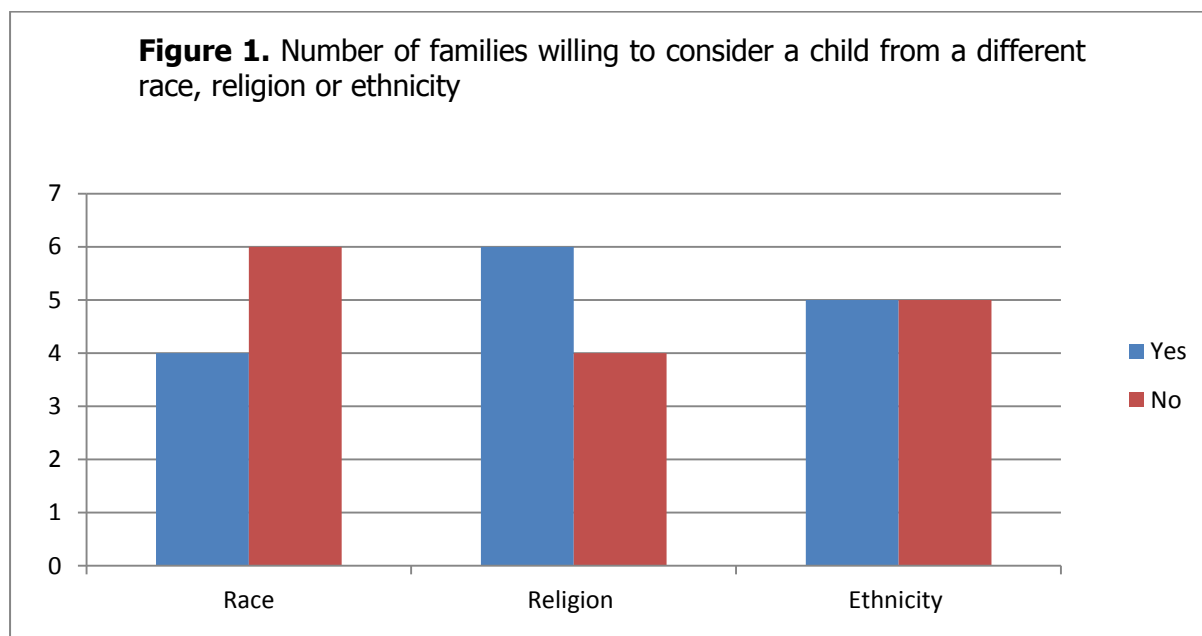
Age of Children

From the sample of the ten prospective adoptive families, five had a clear wish to adopt a child aged two or under. The other five were willing to consider a child up to the age of five,

but had a clear preference for a younger child. A single applicant had selected the three to five age range, however, in the qualitative comment had stated she had done so as she was a single applicant and felt the need to be "realistic". This suggested ideally she would have liked a much younger child but did not feel this was possible as she was a single adopter.

Race, Religion and Ethnicity of Children

The question of whether or not applicants were willing to consider adopting a child from a different race, religion or ethnicity did provide some interesting information. 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). The statistical data for this is shown in Figure 1. The qualitative comments reflected a very natural desire to adopt a child that resembled the applicants as it would be easier to integrate the child into the adoptive family and community. The qualitative comments further demonstrated participants' awareness of children's needs, a sincere desire to meet these needs and not to add to the adversity that children may have already suffered or could face in the future.

Figure 1. Number of families willing to consider a child from a different race, religion or ethnicity

Needs of 'Looked After Children'

In light of the aims of the follow up study, it was important to capture in the early stage of the participants' journey to adopt, their willingness to consider adopting a child with some of the typical needs of LAC. Evidence from research (BAAF, 2006; DoH, 1999; Fahlberg, 1988; 1991; Howe et al, 1999; 2005; Quinton et al, 1998; Schofield and Simmonds, 2009) and experience in practice was used to compile short list of typical needs of LAC. Participants were asked to answer yes, no or maybe to the question, whether they would be willing to consider adopting a child with the needs? The data from this is set out in Figure 2. The data does indicate some interesting trends that are considered in the later discussion.

Figure 2. Number of families willing to consider children with specific needs
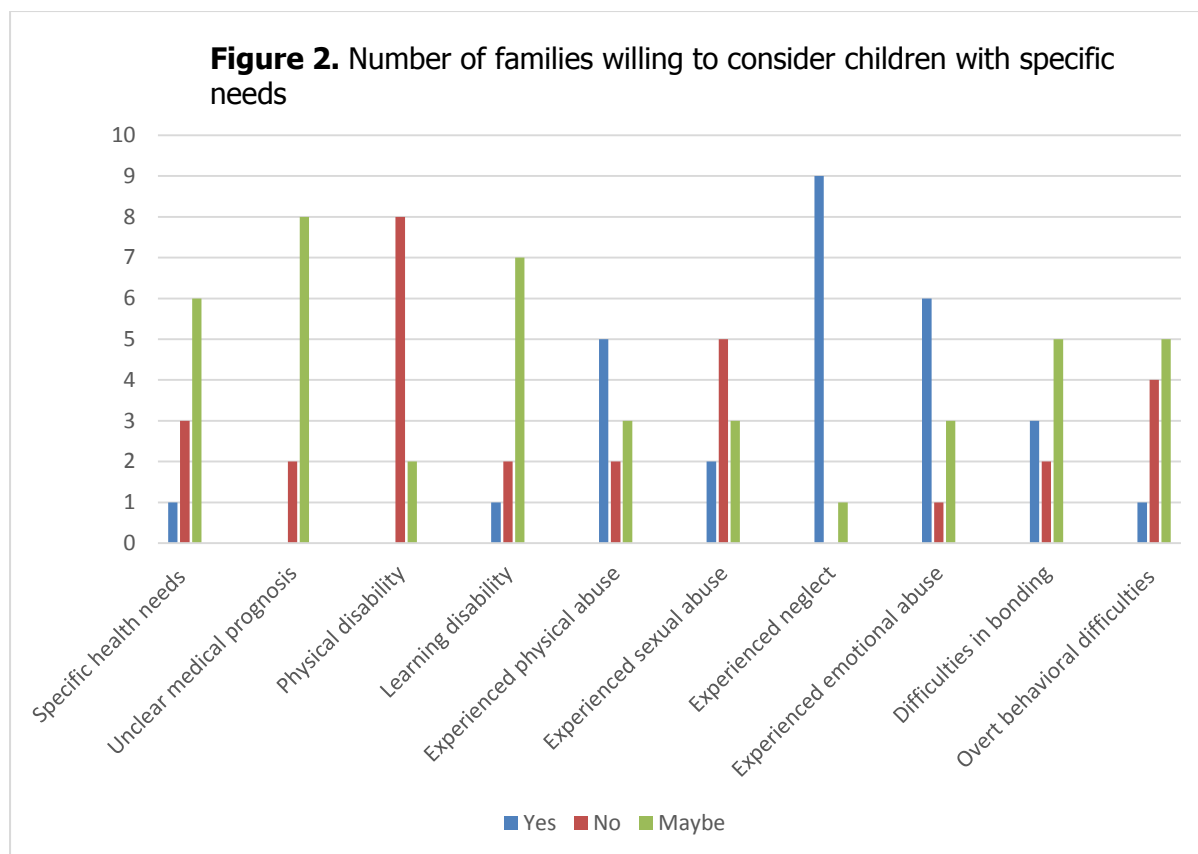
Physical Disability

Eighty per cent of participants' indicated they would not be willing to consider a child with physical disabilities. The remaining twenty percent felt they may be able to. No participants answered yes to this question. The question intentionally did not highlight the range of physical disabilities children may have in order to ascertain participants' initial reactions to the term.

Neglect, Physical and Emotional Abuse

Figure 2 indicates that very high percentages of participants' felt they would be or maybe willing to consider adopting children who had experienced neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and children who had difficulties in bonding. On statistical level, this can suggest an ideal position for LAC in need of adoption. In 2011, eighty two point eight percent of children in England who became subject of a child protection plan, did so as a result of neglect, emotional abuse and physical abuse (DfE, 2011c).

Difficulties in Bonding and Overt Behavioural Difficulties

In comparison to neglect, physical and sexual abuse, the number of families willing to consider children with difficulties in bonding and overt behavioural difficulties reduced significantly. Three families felt that they would consider children with difficulties in bonding, two said they would not and five said they may be willing to consider such children. Only one family felt they would consider a child with overt behavioural difficulties, four said they would not and five said they may consider such children.

Discussion

The results of the study are based on a small sample of prospective adoptive families, hence, care is required in making generalisations. Some of the results reflect experience in practice and are supported by previous studies mentioned earlier. Participation in this study was an opportunity for this sample of prospective adopters to give an account of their experiences, wishes and feelings about adoption, independently of their agency. The findings of this pilot study give an insight into prospective adopters' perceptions of the early stages of the adoption process. Furthermore, they raise a number of issues. While these issues require further exploration, the findings to date do inform practice and can be used to further develop services to enhance provision for LAC and adoptive families.

Motivation to Adopt

The findings suggest that this sample of prospective adopters' motivation to adopt was in line with the motivation to adopt of families throughout history (Kadushin, 1970; Rosenthal, 1993; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Sawbridge and Carrillne; 1976; Stubbs, 1987; Treacher and Katz, 2000), the main reason being to start a family. The upper age considered by participants was five years with a clear preference of under two if at all possible. Furthermore, participants expressed a wish to adopt children who had experienced as little trauma as possible. This is not unusual as adopters generally want to integrate a child into their family (Fahlberg, 1991). This does reinforce the fact that there is a divergence between the ages and needs of children that participants of this sample wished to adopt compared to the ages and needs of many LAC in England. In 2010, fifty five percent of LAC were aged five to fifteen years and twenty one percent were over sixteen. Only six percent of LAC were aged under a year and eighteen percent were aged one to four years (Adoption UK, 2010). These figures included children who may have been in care temporarily or whose care plans may not have been finalised. Hence, not all would have had a plan for adoption. However, it is important to note that the needs and characteristics of LAC now, are significantly different to the majority of children placed for adoption before 1970, who were more likely to have been very young, healthy, white children (Rosenthal 1993; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Sawbridge and Carrillne, 1976; Stubbs, 1987).

Race, Religion and Ethnicity

Participants appear to have responded very openly and honestly about their willingness to adopt children from different racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The results suggest a natural desire to adopt a child that physically resembles the adoptive family. Whether or not participants were willing to consider children from different racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds, they expressed concerns about meeting the needs of the children rather than rejecting children based on these factors. Furthermore, particularly in relation to race, many recognised issues of discrimination in society and did not wish to expose their adopted child to any further trauma or bullying as a result of being physically different to the adoptive family. A comment from one of applicants highlights a typical concern of participants if they were to adopt a child from a different racial origin:

> "*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 un-fair to add any further ammunition that may be used against them*".

One particular worry that participants expressed, (including those that were willing to adopt a child from a different racial, religious and ethnic background) was that once a child

started school other children would notice the differences. This may lead to the child being bullied in addition to the other challenges they may be facing.

In contrast to this, current Government policy aims to tackle the additional delay that BME LAC face (DfE, 2011a) in comparison to their White British counterparts, by reducing the attention that to Local Authorities can pay to matching children with families on the grounds of Race, Ethnicity and Religion (DfE, 2011a p21.) The findings of this pilot study suggest a more complex issue. This sample of participants had an understanding of the needs of children and some of the challenges of transracial adoption. These challenges are highlighted by Thoburn, Norford and Rashid (2000). If the findings are replicated in the larger study it would indicate that the current Government plans to speed up the adoption process for BME children are unlikely to have a significant impact. Moreover, this approach may create longer term challenges for children and their adoptive families. A proactive approach would be to increase the focus on the need for more BME adopters in addition to the recent increased focus on adoption in general. Evidence (Ridley, Wainwright and Davda 2010) suggests that projects that have specifically focused on recruiting more BME adopters have been successful.

It is beyond the remit of this study to debate the merits or shortfalls of transracial adoption. However, it is evident from the findings that to address some of the very real concerns expressed by participants, further consideration needs to be given to developing services for families that do adopt children from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds to their own. This is essential to ensure adoptive families are supported to address the additional challenges they will face. Such an approach would be reassuring for prospective families but would require resourcing. However, support for such an approach is questionable under a climate of economic austerity. Even if it were supported, it would require clear and transparent aims. Furthermore, careful working with the mass media would be necessary to avoid a backlash against perceived political correctness which often undermines such initiatives.

Needs of 'Looked After Children'

This part of the study was aimed at capturing participants' willingness to consider adopting children with some of the needs typical of LAC (BAAF 2006; DoH 1999; Fahlberg, 1988, 1991; Howe, 1999; 2005; Quinton, et al 1998; Schofield and Simmonds, 2009), at an early stage of the assessment and preparation process. The main study aims to compare the type of children participants wish to adopt in the early stages of the process to the type of child they eventually adopt. This will enable an analysis of how participants' perceptions of these needs develop over time and consider the effectiveness of the adoption process in enabling adopters to manage the needs of their adopted child. The data in Figure 2 highlights several key issues.

Physical Disability

The term physical disability does appear to be automatically be perceived by participants' as meaning high levels of need. Experience from practice suggests a more detailed question that highlighted the whole spectrum of physical disabilities may have had very different results. Barg, et al (2010) state that stigma towards children with physical disabilities continues in society and is pervasive. However, targeting people's perceptions of disability can be very effective. Those children who are perceived as being inactive tend to perceived as less competent. However, children with physical disabilities who are perceived to be active can be seen as even more competent than able bodied children and elicit more feelings of warmth.

This indicates the need for accurate information about disability from the earliest stage of the adoption process for prospective adopters. Furthermore, it confirms a need for clear and in-depth information about individual LAC needs. Current practice and the National Minimum Standards (DfE, 2011d) require a Child Permanence Report (CPR) to be written for every LAC where adoption is the plan. The CPR is a key document that is used in finding an adoptive family for LAC. Experience in practice highlights that the quality of CPR's varies, however, the findings of this study suggest that inaccurate or inappropriately presented information about a child's disability could have a profound impact on finding families for LAC with disabilities.

The Government drive to speed up the adoption process (DfE, 2011a) has resulted in significant changes to the quality assurance processes for CPRs. The adoption Panel used to be the ultimate mechanism for quality assuring CPRs and could continually monitor these by requesting updates and amendments before or after a recommendation that a child should be placed for adoption was made. The requirement for adoption Panels to consider whether a child should be placed for adoption was removed following the recommendations of the Family Justice Review (Norgrove, 2011). As a result individual Agency Decision Makers (ADM) (DfE, 2011e p27) now ultimately have to decide whether or not a child should be placed for adoption (DfE, 2011a), without the benefit of previous scrutiny of the CPR and advice from the adoption Panel. While ADM's are committed to positive outcomes for LAC, whether they have the time to quality assure each CPR and monitor them is questionable, given in this context, ADMs are senior strategic managers in Local Authority Children's departments with significant competing demands on their time.

Neglect, Physical, Emotional Abuse, Difficulties in Bonding and Overt Behavioural Difficulties

The data from the study raises questions about participants understanding of the challenges of adopting children with such experiences is likely to bring. It is natural for most human adults to feel the need to rescue children that have suffered hurt and trauma. Their aim is to love the child and repair the damage. However, evidence from research (DoH, 1999; Fahlberg, 1988, 1991; Hanna, et al, 2011; Howe et al, 1999; Howe, 2005; Hughes, 2006, 2009, 2012; Quinton, et al, 1998;) and experience from practice is clear that children who have suffered such abuse have a range of complex emotional, physical and behavioural needs. In practice, many adoptive families face significant challenges in coping with and managing these needs on a day to day basis (Fahlberg, 1988, 1991; Hanna, et al, 2011; Hughes, 2006, 2009, 2012; Quinton, et al 1998).

The data does suggest that participants disassociated children's potential behaviours from children's experiences and needs. This is highlighted by the significant disparity between the number of participants who were willing to consider adopting children who had experienced physical and emotional abuse and neglect to the number of participants who were willing to consider adopting children who had overt behavioural difficulties. It is evident from previous studies mentioned above, that children who have experienced trauma and abuse often can present significant overt behavioural difficulties and or have unresolved concealed emotional needs. A lack of recognition of this is likely to increase the range of difficulties experienced by adoptive families including the risk of a placement breakdown. Therefore, there is a significant emphasis on the adoption preparation process to enable adopters to develop a true understanding of LAC needs.

However, many adopters original motivation to adopt can be due to issues of infertility (Kadushin; 1970; Rosenthal, 1993; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Sawbridge and Carrillne, 1976; Stubbs, 1987; Treacher and Katz, 2000). It is therefore not unusual for individuals in this situation to be still going through the grieving process (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2005). In such a situation it is essential that the adoption preparation process enables adopters to

understand and accept the challenges that adoption will bring. The next stages of the study seek to assess the effectiveness of the process in enabling participants in making this transition and the long term sustainability of the learning from the training.

Conclusion

Given the life changing nature of the adoption process, prospective adopters' anxieties before, during and after the adoption assessment and approval process are understandable. It is evident that the social workers for participants of this study were able to develop a rapport with them and developed a positive relationship very quickly. However, the impact of inaccurate and alarming media coverage has on the number of individuals who choose not to even apply to adopt as a result has to be questioned. Furthermore, the impact this has on the on-going relationship between prospective adopters and agencies and the potential barriers to communication this can cause is a matter for further consideration.

The matters discussed do raise a number of issues in relation to the preparation and approval process. The findings of this study evidence participants' perception in relation to the type of child they wish to adopt are understandably different to the needs of LAC. This places an enormous emphasis on the adoption preparation process to enable adopters to understand the true needs of LAC in order to meet and manage them after a child is placed. However, currently there is considerable focus on recruitment of adoptive families and increasing the pace of the approval process (DfE, 2011a). To support this performance measures (DfE, 2011d) are in place to encourage adoption agencies hasten the pace of approval. The aim to avoid unnecessary delay is understandable as this can be detrimental for children and adopters. However, a balance clearly needs to be achieved in order to enable adopters to develop a depth of understanding of the needs of children. At the same time adopters need support to manage their own anxieties and needs.

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