

Eighth Giving Poverty a Voice Social Worker Training Programme Study Group

Tuesday 27 March 2018

Adoption, Social Work Practice and Ethics

Context

The eighth Giving Poverty a Voice Social Worker Training Programme Study Group aimed to **focus on and react to the recent release and findings of *The Role of the Social Worker in Adoption – Ethics and Human Rights: An Enquiry***, research released in January 2018 and commissioned by the British Association of Social Workers.

Capitalising on this work done by Professor Brid Featherstone, Professor Anna Gupta and Sue Mills, this study group looked to **examine the place of adoption within the context of wider social policies related to poverty and inequality** as well as **the tensions that exist between adoption and a social worker's code of ethics**.

A link to the enquiry report can be found at http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_55505-10.pdf

The Role of the Social Worker in Adoption – Ethics and Human Rights: An Enquiry

Commissioned by BASW, the enquiry was a **reaction to the feeling that ethical issues and human rights issues in social work are often overlooked**.

Over three hundred people from across the UK contributed to the enquiry, including social workers, birth families, adoptive parents, adopted people, academics, Cafcass children's guardians, judges and legal professionals.

The enquiry reached out to people through a questionnaire posted on the BASW website, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, focus groups and a number of seminars. The real purpose was to **bring together the different people involved in the adoption process and get them talking about their experiences and talking to each other**.

An adoptive parent said to a birth parent in one of the seminars, *"I thought you'd hate me."* And the birth parent said, *"Why would I hate you? I don't want to hate you. I'm trusting people like you to look after my child."*

So what are the key messages of the enquiry?

The need to see the quality of the relationship between families and social workers as crucial, particularly at a time when that relationship is constrained by the impact of austerity, fewer support services for families and less time to build relationships. The statement *"I am the social worker for the child"* also needs to be challenged as an unhelpful approach when children are not separate from their families.

The need for adoption to be discussed within the context of wider social policies such as austerity and its impact on support services. Paul Bywaters' research evidence shows that a child's chances of coming into contact with the care system are much greater if he or she lives in an area of social deprivation. Poverty is a key factor in that and means there also needs to be a focus on thinking about whose children are being adopted and on the early stages of the child protection system.

The need to consider adoption in relation to other permanent care options with an emphasis on its consequences for identity, the complexity of different relationships that abound, including half-families and step-families, and how through this lens a rethink of contact arrangements is needed.

And, finally, **the need to challenge myths**. Adoption is often presented as an all-encompassing solution, as part of a 'happy ever after' narrative, but happy ever after for whom? Birth parents, adopted people and adoptive parents all talked of their own individual, post-adoption struggles around issues of loss and grief, lack of support services and problems that do not go away once the system ceases to be involved in their lives.

Poverty and social work practice

The participants next turned their attention to the recommendations of the enquiry, the first of which states that, *“The use of adoption needs to be located and discussed in the context of wider social policies relating to poverty and inequality.”*

A family member outlined her experience of her poverty being ignored in a case conference.

I am Angela, a mum of seven kids and I live in east London. I have one daughter still at school and one at sixth form college. I try to do all the day-to-day things that parents do.

Two and a half years ago, in a case conference, the school complained that my daughters were being late for school and sometimes missing school altogether. It was because they had no zipcards, the bus pass for students here in London. This meant they could be thrown off the bus and the school complained about their poor attendance. I realised that we needed a plan to get their zipcards sorted out but it was not easy.

Firstly, you have to apply online but I had no computer at home and no way to get online. I had to ask for help.

Second, you also need an email address to apply online. We had to create an account for me because I didn't have one. I don't have a computer so I had never needed one.

Third, to apply for a zipcard, I needed the girls' birth certificates. And I needed passport sized photos too. We had lost the birth certificates a long time ago so we had to order them online and that cost money. And we didn't have any passport sized photos so we had to buy them as well.

So please do not tell me that education is free. I am a mum and I know that everything costs money but this was hard for me. At the time, we were in rent arrears and debt but once the zipcards arrived my daughters were able to travel on the bus and get to school on time. I was so happy.

Three weeks later, in the next case conference, the school said they were still concerned about my girls' attendance and punctuality. We asked about the last three weeks and the school said everything was fine. That was impact of having the zipcards.

My daughter was able to pass her exams and move to college where she is studying art. I am very proud of her and all my children.

A practitioner's perspective: *“Our assistant director put a blanket ban making any payments for parents' travel to and from contact, including final contact. If I paid for the parents' travel myself then I was in a bind because the system could not know that I had done that or I could potentially have become a hostile witness in court. So, as part of that system, I had to forego my deep commitment to honesty because what was ethically more important: that contact appointment or following the rules? I felt I was having to almost subvert the system and, as a social worker, you can feel very alone in that.”*

A parent's perspective: *“In ten years of dealing with social services, we have had five social workers who really cared. They were the ones who got my son respite care, helped buy a new carpet that was really needed, accompanied my son when he getting bullied at school. These things have helped keep my family together.”*

An academic's perspective: *“Actually challenging some of the approaches that lead to blaming the individual is within the remit and reach of individual social workers. One example we discussed was a parent being caught between two services when appointments clash; not going to a DWP appointment would mean sanctions but not attending a Looked After Child review would mean being criticised for not being there. A social worker just needs to ask and make enquiries, understand what is behind situations and not blame...”*

A More Open Model of Adoption

Reacting to the enquiry's third recommendation, "*The current model of adoption should be reviewed and the potential for a more open approach considered,*" the study group heard at length from a family member and his family's experience of trying to maintain contact with his adopted son.

My son, L, was adopted about five years ago.

At Christmas, a social worker told us that there had been a problem with letterbox contact. She said that the adoptive family had not had the right address to send things to and it became clear that the address we had been sending letters to had not been working either. It looks like we have written three letters for him and my son has never received any of them.

After Christmas, I rang the adoption helpline. I explained the situation to them and they said they would ring me back. It took two months to get an appointment to speak to someone.

When we met a social worker from the post adoption services team, she told me that it took her half a day to sort our case out. Why had nobody been able to do that before? Why had nobody in the past five years contacted us to ask why letters were not being received, to ask if something was wrong?

It is mucking about with parents' and children's lives. This is why the system fails children and parents.

Writing a letter to your child who has been adopted is the hardest thing you can ever do. It's not easy writing a letter to a child you're never going to see again. You don't know what their likes are, what their interests are, how they are getting on at school. It's wrong. Birth parents should be informed about their child on a regular basis.

I can understand where some birth parents are coming from when they don't want to have letterbox contact with their children because it is out of order what some adoptive parents want. You have to address the letter to the adoptive parents? The adoptive parents don't want you to write, "*Love Mum and Dad*"? Is the letterbox contact system there to guarantee letters to the adoptive parents or to the child?

So the system needs to change.

In cases where there is no physical or sexual abuse, there should be open adoption. It is more upsetting to struggle to write a letter than it is seeing a child. I would like to hear from my son what he has done in school yesterday, not wait one year for a letter to tell me.

Social services say that the needs of the child come first. So, when they are old enough, give children the choice if they want to see their birth parents. As a parent who loves their child you could respect your child's wishes.

Or make it a legal decision and let the judge make the decision. They are trusted enough by the system to decide not give the kid back!

Lastly, where is the post-adoption support? Social workers should be offering support to help parents write letters because not everyone is involved with local organisations that can give that kind of support. Sending parents a bit of paper with do's and don't's is not enough. What if parents cannot read and write and have no family or friends network around them? Who is going to help them write that letter?

Once a child is in the system, whether adopted or fostered, they need contact with their parents and support. If a child doesn't get a letter, they are going to grow up thinking they did something wrong. The system cannot leave children thinking like this.

Small discussion groups then debated what a more open model of adoption may look like and raised a number of key themes that lie at the heart of people's own experiences and their hopes for reform of the system.

A number of parents made clear their desire for **an independent person to support the family** through different stages of the process, a role that would include being present in meetings with professionals, supporting families to engage with the system, explain things that the family don't understand and be someone the family can turn to. One professional noted the similarity of this role to an independent advocate as seen in adult social care.

A parent's perspective: *"You would like someone else there as well. You don't always understand what is going on. If you kick off in meetings with social services, it is held against you so you need someone there to support you, to tell you to calm down and not do something stupid, whether you are going to meetings, going to court, even going to the doctor with them."*

Pursuing a more open model of adoption would also require **a cultural and societal shift** towards a system where adoption is clearly a matter of last resort and not pushed by arbitrary timetables, where alternative solutions such as mentoring as explored and where post-adoption contact is seen as normal. How far is this possible in a risk-averse system that blames individual social workers for failure? And what is the role for social workers in making such change happen?

A practitioner's perspective: *"The burden of proof should be on me, as a social worker, to say that I have evidence from the police, for example, that contact presents a risk to the child and to their placement or would be unsafe... I have worked with many parents where they are clearly no risk whatsoever. And I had one case in particular where I was pushing for an open adoption, the mum was, the adopter was; it was the adoption team and their manager who weren't."*

One group also highlighted how the political system and the adoption process together reflect **the gross inequalities that exist in society** in terms of poverty, shame, blame and the impact of the media.

A parent's perspective: *"I think one of the things that is very significant in the UK is the whole class system. In Victorian times, when adoption was first conceived, it was to take poor, abandoned children and give them to people who could afford to raise them and afford to educate them. It was a kind of social cleansing but without any meanness involved. What is difficult now is that it is still thought that as long as a child has moved up in life and out of poverty then it is still a solution in itself..."*

Finally, participants raised the thorny issue of **the rights and status of siblings in families touched by adoption** and child protection processes. Much like their parents, brothers and sisters are left to negotiate differing, and often unequal, rights with regard to contact at the same time as they have to deal with multiple identities and a multiplicity of relationships.

An academic's perspective: *"I am a passionate social worker but I still we can always do things differently and I would like social workers to really, really explain and be questioned on why birth parents cannot sign a letter as mum and dad. Children live in separated families and manage all these mums and dads all the time. Why can't adopted children have different mums and dads?"*

This question of sibling rights also underlined the need for children to know and understand where they came from. One mother argued simply that this meant better family support at an early stage was essential, as was a more open model of adoption when it was deemed necessary.

A parent's perspective: *"You don't adopt a child because you want a child; you adopt a child because you want a child to have a good life. And that should include knowing their original culture and class..."*