Making sense of adoption: Integration and differentiation from the perspective of adopted children in middle childhood

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1. Introduction

Globally, many thousands of children every year are adopted domestically or through international arrangements, and international policy emphasises that adoption practices must be guided by the child's best interests (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 21). In England and Wales where the current research was undertaken, the welfare of the adopted child throughout their life must be taken into account in any adoption proceedings, and children's rights to maintain their identity must be respected (Adoption and Children Act 2002; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 8). To ensure that adoption is in children's best interests, it is important to understand from children's point of view what impact adoption makes in terms of their experience of family membership and their sense of personal and family identity: a major aim of the research summarised in this paper was to allow children's voices to be heard in the policy and professional debates about to these matters.

Legally adoption in the UK makes a child irrevocably and permanently a member of their adoptive family but the success of adoption depends on these legal relationships being reflected in the psychological integration of the child into the adoptive family, indicated by rewarding relationships between parent and child, mutual feelings of family belonging, and a subjective sense of permanence. Family integration is the key initial task for adoptive parents and children (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). Children who will most easily integrate are those who are placed early and who have experienced few pre-placement adversities; the challenges of making new attachments can be much greater for children adopted from adverse backgrounds e.g. those who have been compulsorily removed from their birth parents because of concerns about abuse and neglect, or children in inter-country adoptions who have experienced poor quality institutional care (Dozier & Rutter, 2008).

For children who are older at placement an active process of becoming a family member is required: joining a new family may feel "hard to get used to" (adopted child in Dance & Rushton, 2005, p. 21) and "you both have to make the effort to know each other and feel comfortable about living with each other" (adopted child in Thomas, Beckford, Lowe, & Murch, 1999, p.60). For some late placed children, feelings about membership of their adoptive or permanent foster family can be intertwined with feelings about the birth family; some children may retain loyalties to their birth family and have only a qualified sense of belonging in their new home whilst others may express relief and happiness to be legally secure in their adoptive home (Biehal, Ellison, Baker, & Sinclair, 2010). Children who are older at placement and who have special needs (especially difficulties

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such as attachment problems that can make adoptive parent–child relationships strained may be particularly at risk of feeling insecure about their belonging in their permanent family (Biehal et al., 2010). Sociological and anthropological perspectives of kinship are also relevant to the issue of family integration. For example some authors have described how adoptive families must actively construct their sense of family in a social context where blood relationships are generally viewed as the basis of ‘real’ families, and the adoptive family is therefore viewed as ‘fictive’ (Howell, 2006; Jones & Hackett, 2011).

Adoptive families also need to tackle the issue of family differentiation especially as children approach school-age (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002); parents and children need to manage their feelings in relation to the child’s birth family, and the ways that they as an adoptive family are different from families founded on blood relationships. It is common for adopted children to think about their birth family, about the meaning of being adopted, and to ask ‘why’ they needed to be adopted (Juffer, 2006; Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). Regardless of what actual contact takes place between a child and their birth relatives, the birth parents often remain psychologically present to the child (Biehal et al., 2010). Brodzinsky (1990) argues that adoption is inherently stressful for adopted children and ambivalent feelings may emerge once the child is old enough to comprehend some of the implications of adoption: for example that they have not only gained a family, but lost a family; that being adopted makes them different from the majority of their peers; and that they do not have a biological relationship with their adoptive parent/s. Feelings of sadness, anxiety, rejection, anger, or the wish to have been born in the adoptive family may feature, these emerging in middle childhood as a consequence of advances in the child’s cognitive development (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984; Juffer & Tieman, 2005). A full understanding of adoption is often not achieved until adolescence (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). The key identity process of integrating one’s past, present and future can be difficult for adopted people because of discontinuities in their family experiences, information gaps in their personal biographies, and the need to manage being ‘different’ (Grotevant, 1997). Children adopted from difficult backgrounds face having to make sense of painful information about their own history, and about their birth parents (Neil, 2000). Children placed beyond infancy may have some memories of their past, but both their early age at removal and the traumatic nature of their experiences are likely to mean that memories may be suppressed, distorted or inaccurate (Courtney, 2000). Children in transcultural placements may face barriers in establishing a positive sense of ethnic identity (Thoburn, Norford, & Rashid, 2000).

How successfully children are able to manage feelings associated with family differentiation is likely to be driven by both child and parent factors. Adverse early care can impact on children’s emotional competence — their understanding of emotion in the self and others, and the regulation and expression of emotions and emotionally derived behaviours (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). Adoptive parents however can offer reparative experiences, as children’s emotional competence is enhanced when parents respond sensitively and empathically to their child’s feelings, where they encourage appropriate levels of emotional display, promote conversations about feelings, and express emotions appropriately themselves (Eisenberg et al., 1998). Adoptive parents can help children think about and manage their feelings related to adoption through being ‘communicatively open’ — where parents are comfortable with their own feelings in relation to adoption, emotionally attuned to their child’s issues as an adopted individual, and empathic towards birth family members (Brodzinsky, 2005). Parental openness about adoption has been linked to better child emotional and behavioural development (Brodzinsky, 2006) and enhanced self esteem (Hawkins et al., 2008), children’s ease in talking about adoption (Freeark & Rosenblum, 2010) and narrative identity development in adopted young people (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Family conversations about adoption are influenced by both parents and children, and the balance as to who initiates and controls family communication moves from parent to child over time (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). The communicative openness of adoptive parents can be influenced by the type and level of contact they have with members of the child’s birth family, with greater structural openness (birth family contact) being associated with greater communicative openness (Brodzinsky, 2006; Neil, 2009).

Much of the available research exploring integration and differentiation in adoptive families has examined these issues from the point of view of adoptive parents. Our understanding of the perspectives of adoptees is largely based on studies of adopted adults, usually those relinquished for adoption in infancy, and more recently of inter-country adoptees. Some studies report data collected directly from children or adolescents in infant adoptions or intercountry adoptions, but qualitative data from children adopted from the care system is sparse with the notable exception of the studies by Thomas et al. (1999) and Dance and Rushton (2005), both of which focused on children placed for adoption over the age of five, Thoburn et al. (2000) which focused on children of minority ethnicity placed from care across the age range, and Biehal et al. (2010) which included interviews with children in long term foster homes and adoptive families. This paper uses qualitative data from interviews with 43 English domestic adoptees, placed (mostly from the care system) as babies, toddlers or pre-schoolers; they were interviewed in middle childhood. The goals of this paper are to explore and build understanding of how children experience being part of their adoptive family, and of how they make sense of the connection to their birth family, and their status as an adopted child.

2. The study

The children who took part in this study were adopted by the 62 families participating in the ‘Contact after Adoption’ study. This longitudinal prospective study began in 1996 and non-identifying baseline information was collected (via social worker completed questionnaires) on a complete cohort of children placed for adoption or adopted (when under the age of four) between 1996 and 1997 by 10 adoption agencies in England. The research reported in this paper was carried out between 2000 and 2004, and aimed primarily to examine the experiences of adoptive parents, birth relatives, and children where some form of contact with birth family members had been planned at the time of the child’s placement. Participants were recruited via the 10 original adoption agencies plus two further agencies who joined the study in 2001, and 38% of adoptive parents who were invited agreed to take part (full details are provided in Neil, 2009). This paper focuses just on interviews with the adopted children, exploring their feelings about adoption. Children’s experiences of contact are not discussed in this paper, but will be reported separately.

2.1. The sample

The 62 adoptive families had adopted 89 children, and parents were asked to consider passing on child invitation packs, including an audiotape, to their children. The issue of the informed consent of children was an important consideration, and ensuring that children were happy with participation was considered by the research team to be an ongoing process throughout the interview. The study was granted ethical approval by the university research ethics committee.

Forty-three children from 31 families were interviewed. Some adoptive parents chose not to invite the child, their reasons including believing the child would be upset, uninterested or unable to take part. Children who were interviewed did not differ significantly from children not interviewed on gender, age at placement, age at interview or time in placement. They were however significantly more likely to be having face-to-face birth family contact compared...
to those not interviewed, and their adoptive parents had significantly higher ‘adoption communication openness’ scores (see Neil, 2009 for a description of how this was rated). In other words, the child interview sample was biased towards children from families where there was greater structural and communicative openness.

Of the interview sample, twenty-five were boys (58%) and 18 were girls. The children were aged between 5 and 13, although only one child was as young as five, and only two children were 12 or older. The mean age of children was 8.6 years (SD = 1.9). Three children had been relinquished for adoption by their teenage birth-mothers. Ten further children had been placed for adoption at the request of their birth parent(s), but in complex circumstances e.g. the parent/s had asked for the child to be taken into care because of difficulties they were experiencing in looking after him or her. The remainder of the children (n = 30, 70%) were adopted from the care system at the initiation of social services. The children’s age at placement ranged from one month to four years and ten months (Mean = 20.7 months, SD = 15.9), and 79% of children (n = 34) were under the age of three. The children had been living with their adoptive families for between 4 and 13 years, the average being 7.3 years (SD = 1.7). Sixty percent of children (n = 26) were reported by their social workers to have experienced abuse or neglect in their birth family.

Most of the children had been adopted by married couples and were living with both their parents. However, there were nine children who lived with just their adoptive mother; two with single mothers, five (from three families) whose adoptive fathers had died, and two siblings whose adoptive parents had divorced. Over half of the children (n = 26, 56%) had some face to face contact with a birth relative (usually a parent or grandparent). For the other 19 children, the contact plan was for agency mediated letter contact, usually with a birth relative (usually a parent or grandparent). The circles were as follows: (near the centre) a description of how this was rated). In other words, the child interview sample was biased towards children from families where there was greater structural and communicative openness.

2.2. The interviews

Most children were interviewed at home by themselves, but with their adoptive parent nearby. Some children chose to have their adoptive parent or sibling with them for support. The semi-structured interviews with children comprised of three main parts:

• After an initial warm up period where they were invited to make a poster about themselves using drawing, stickers and stampers, children were asked a series of ten questions from Brodzinsky’s ‘Understanding of adoption’ measure (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). The questions begin with establishing whether the child recognises adoption and birth as different pathways to parenthood. Further questions explore the child’s understanding of the nature of the adoption process, including the motivation of adoptive parents, the reasons why birth parents cannot keep the child, and the permanancy of adoption. Doll people were used to engage children in this questioning.

• Children were then asked a series of open ended questions, designed to elicit experiences and feelings, addressing the following topics: (a) your family you live with now (b) your birth family (c) talking about adoption (d) contact with your birth family.

• Children were presented with the ‘Feelings map’ exercise: a large laminated board on which was printed a series of differently coloured concentric circles representing different feelings about other people (adapted from a tool used by Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001). The circles were as follows: (near the centre) ‘really love’, ‘love’, ‘like’, ‘don’t like’, ‘really unhappy with’ (the outermost circle). The child chose a small doll to represent themselves and placed this doll in the centre of the circles. The child was then invited to choose more dolls to put on the map to show how they felt about people in their family, and to talk with the researcher about their choices. Children were initially left to define ‘family’ themselves, but if they did not spontaneously mention birth family members, they were asked if they wished to include their birth family (this was presented as optional).

2.3. Qualitative analysis of data

The whole of the child’s interview, including their answers to the ‘Understanding of adoption’ questions, and their dialogue with the researcher when using the ‘Feelings map’ was used to build an understanding of how children felt about adoption. Firstly each transcription was read through a number of times to ensure familiarity. Secondly, transcripts were coded using NVivo 9 to separate out what the child had said under each of the three following themes: feelings and views about their adoptive family; feelings and views about their birth family; feelings and views about what it is like to be an adopted child. Thirdly further coding was undertaken within this each of these three areas to identify the key themes and patterns in the data. Finally a case summary was written for each child. These case summaries were then compared to each other and were used to develop broad categories in terms of children’s feelings about adoption. In addition to the qualitative analysis described above, descriptive quantitative analysis was undertaken simply of where each child had placed their adoptive parents and birth parents on the ‘Feelings map’.

3. Findings

3.1. Integrating into the adoptive family: Just being, or becoming a family member

Although most children did not understand how adoption legally secured their adoptive family membership, almost all felt fully and happily integrated into their adoptive family. Children used positive words to describe their adoptive parents such as “lovely”, “nice”, “kind”, “friendly” and words such as “happy”, “good”, “fun”, and “nice” to describe how being adopted felt. Many children referred to being both cared for and cared about by their adoptive parents e.g. “It’s just they care for me in every way”, “they think I am nice, and they just love me”. Children who elaborated on why being adopted felt good generally emphasised family membership e.g. “because you have to stay with the people forever and ever”, “getting a new family”. Most children seemed to just have a sense of always being in the adoptive family. Several children argued that being adopted was “normal” or “no different” especially as they could not remember anything else e.g. one girl said “because I was only a baby when I was adopted so I didn’t mind because it felt like I only had one family anyway”. Family integration was not viewed as either a difficult or deliberate process. Children who took their membership of the adoptive family for granted in this way often felt free to criticise their adoptive parents, usually complaining about rules or having to do chores e.g. “she’s strict… I don’t like it when they are telling us off”. These complaints about their parents seemed to exemplify the normal ups and downs of family life, and were balanced with positive comments.

For some children who were older at placement (in general three years older or more), memories of living elsewhere were retained, and children described more of an active process of becoming a part of their adoptive family. For example one child said “I am actually feeling that I am actually part of this family and I am not adopted, I am beginning to actually fit in and everything.” Some children remembered their transition to their adoptive family as a stressful or exciting time. About a quarter of children favourably compared the whole of the child’s interview, including their answers to the ‘Understanding of adoption’ questions, and their dialogue with the researcher when using the ‘Feelings map’ was used to build an understanding of how children felt about adoption. Firstly each transcription was read through a number of times to ensure familiarity. Secondly, transcripts were coded using NVivo 9 to separate out what the child had said under each of the three following themes: feelings and views about their adoptive family; feelings and views about their birth family; feelings and views about what it is like to be an adopted child. Thirdly further coding was undertaken within this each of these three areas to identify the key themes and patterns in the data. Finally a case summary was written for each child. These case summaries were then compared to each other and were used to develop broad categories in terms of children’s feelings about adoption. In addition to the qualitative analysis described above, descriptive quantitative analysis was undertaken simply of where each child had placed their adoptive parents and birth parents on the ‘Feelings map’. 

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than what it could have been”. There were a small number of children who idealised their adoptive families, as if insisting on their integration into the adoptive family and denying any connection to the birth family. For example, one boy described his adoptive parents as his “proper mum and dad”, and said that “everything” about his adoptive parents was good. In contrast he said about his birth mother “she doesn’t like me and I don’t like her.” These children all had some memories of not being in the adoptive family, and seemed at pains to emphasise their desire for adoptive family membership and belonging. For example, one girl insisted that she was going to stay with her adoptive parents forever, even when she grew up. She wanted to adopt a baby herself, and bring it up with her adoptive mother. Another girl seemed keen to emphasise how her relationships in her adoptive family were definitely ‘real’: “they have not pretended that they love me, they do actually”.

There were two children who seemed quite unhappy in their adoptive families, and both suggested a lack of permanent integration when they talked about wanting to leave home as soon as they were sixteen. In both these cases, the boys’ accounts of unhappy times in the adoptive family were matched by the accounts of their adoptive parents who described difficulties in managing the child’s serious emotional and behavioural problems. Neither of these boys was wholly negative about their adoptive parents however, and both used the ‘feelings map’ to indicate that they loved their adoptive parents.

Where children placed their birth parents and their adoptive parents on the ‘feelings map’ is reported in Table 1 and this shows that the overwhelming majority of children put their adoptive parents close to them and expressed positive feelings about them, again suggesting that children had successfully integrated into their adoptive families.

3.2. Integrating into the adoptive family: Views about adoptive parents’ motivations

The majority of children were able to identify one or more reasons why adults would want to adopt a child, and these reasons seemed to add to children’s sense of integration though their sense of their parents wanting to create a family. The most common motivation (mentioned by about half of the children) was adopters wanting a child (for example “they want a child”, “they really want children”). Many children (again about half of the sample) also identified that some adoptive parents want to adopt because of infertility (though nobody used this word) e.g. “they can’t have babies of their own”, “because they can’t give birth to one”. Children generally presented adoptive parents wanting a child, and being unable to have a child by birth, as two separate ideas rather than the former following from the latter, and adoption therefore being a second choice for adoptive parents. Only one child explicitly made this link saying he felt sad because if his mum had given birth “I would still be living in foster care if they didn’t adopt me.”

Several children’s views about adoptive parents’ motivations suggested that adopters had specifically chosen the child e.g. “They thought I was beautiful”, “my mum said because I was special, I tended that they love me, they do actually”. Children sometimes described their birth parents as wanting a child for example, one girl insisted that she was going to stay with her adoptive mother once a year, but could not describe her saying that she had forgotten about her birth mother who had got her “from her tummy”.

Several children have to differentiate their birth family from their adoptive family, and understand their difference from others as an adopted person. Overall children fell into three main groups in terms of how they were managing this task, and these are described below (39 of the 43 children were fitted into these three categories – with four children the quality of the interview was insufficient to make a rating). Table 2 shows how many children were in each of these groups and reports the children’s ages at interview, at placement, and their gender.

Some children did not yet appear to be at the stage of thinking about differentiation, and for them adoption was an unexplored topic. For example, Olivia, aged nearly 7, understood that she had a birth mother who had got her “from her tummy”. She saw her birth mother once a year, but could not describe her saying that she had “forgotten” and said the best thing about seeing her was “getting the presents”. Although she placed her birth mother in “really love” on the feelings map she could not say why, and when asked how she felt about her birth mother replied “I’ve never thought about it”. This group of nine children were all quite young (the oldest was

| Table 1 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Children’s feelings about birth parents and adoptive parents as indicated on the ‘Feelings map’** |
| **N** | **Children’s placement of doll figures on the ‘Feelings map’** | **Gender** |
| **Really love** | **Love** | **Like** | **Don’t like** | **Really unhappy with** | **Not on map/outside circles** |
| **Adoptive mother** | 40 | 31 (77.5) | 8 (20) | 1 (2.5) | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Adoptive father** | 36 | 27 (75) | 5 (13.8) | 1 (2.8) | 1 (2.8) | 0 | 2 (5.6) |
| **Birth mother** | 40 | 9 (22.5) | 6 (15) | 5 (12.5) | 3 (7.5) | 2 (5) | 15 (37.5) |
| **Birth father** | 40 | 3 (7.5) | 6 (15) | 6 (15) | 3 (7.5) | 2 (5) | 20 (50) |

* Three children did not complete this map. Some children did not include the adoptive father because they were adopted by a single mother or their father had died.

3.3. Differentiation: Children’s feelings about their birth family and about being adopted

As well as integrating into their adoptive families, adopted children have to differentiate their birth family from their adoptive family, and understand their difference from others as an adopted person. Overall children fell into three main groups in terms of how they were managing this task, and these are described below (39 of the 43 children were fitted into these three categories – with four children the quality of the interview was insufficient to make a rating). Table 2 shows how many children were in each of these groups and reports the children’s ages at interview, at placement, and their gender.

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eight) and their understanding of adoption was the least advanced; they may have lacked the cognitive capacity to appreciate the implications of being adopted (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). They also had the lowest mean age at placement, none being over age 2 and so were unlikely to have any memories of the time before they lived in their adoptive family.

The second group of children were those for whom adoption was unproblematic — these children were not finding tasks related to differentiation stressful. They talked positively of both their birth family and their adoptive family. They felt comfortable or happy about being adopted, as one child said, “There’s nothing bad about it... It’s normal”. Other children argued it made them feel “special”, although some did feel annoyed or upset if other people teased them about being adopted. Some children in this group were quite young, and it could be that as they get older and understand more about adoption their feelings may become less positive. But other children in this group were at the older end of our age range and their understanding of adoption was quite advanced. In some such cases positive views seemed to follow from the child having a less difficult background e.g. an absence of abuse or neglect, or easily understandable reasons why a parent could not cope (e.g. a very young birth mother).

The largest and most diverse group of children were those for whom adoption was something they thought about, a topic that was relevant to them, and which brought about a range of feelings that were a mixture of positive and negative emotions. Adoption was complicated and differentiation, for these children, was stressful. Compared to the other two groups, these children were the oldest at placement and at interview, and they had the highest levels of understanding of adoption. This group also contained more boys than girls. Most children in this group expressed positive feelings about their adoptive parents, but this group did include the small number of children who idealised their adoptive parents. Some children attempted to describe how this felt, for example one boy said about his birth mother “I think she’s a little bit scary and a little bit friendly... I think as a whole, but chopped in half... if you put it together it makes a whole.”

For some children, making sense of their birth family was impeded by lack of information. Nearly three-quarters of children had gaps in their information about their birth family relating to very basic facts. Several children shared their life story books with the researcher, but many commented that their current knowledge was out of date, like they did not know where their parents were now, or what they looked like now. Some children were unconcerned about not knowing the answers to questions about their birth family, but about a quarter of children mentioned wanting to know more information, usually about what members of their birth family would be doing now, and how they were getting on. In some cases, children’s information gaps were very significant, for example one child worried that his birth parents might have died, saying the question he “really wanted” the answer to was “how did my birth mum end up being like dead”. The fact that so many children had information gaps about their birth family is quite surprising given that most adoptive families were having some contact with the birth family. This could reflect the fact that some post-adoption contact arrangements involved quite minimal information exchange between the adoptive parents and birth relatives; adoptive parents may not have had the information to pass on to children. Or it could suggest that adoptive parents are not necessarily aware of children’s questions or information gaps, and do not pass on everything that they know. For example the boy who worried about his birth mum being dead had quite regular direct contact with birth relatives, but he had not questioned the whereabouts of his birth mum with either his adoptive parents or his birth relatives.

Compared to their feelings about their adoptive parents, children’s much more mixed feelings about birth parents were also indicated in their use of the ‘Feelings map’. As the data in Table 1 show, over a third of children did not place their birthmother on the map, and half of children did not represent their birth father. This could indicate that these children did not consider their birth parents to be part of their family or relevant people in their life, or that it was hard for them to identify how they felt about them. Although the majority of children who did place their birth parents on the “Feelings map”...
map’ chose positive feelings, the ‘really love’ category was used far less often for birth parents compared to adoptive parents, and a few children did use negative categories.

3.3.3. Leaving the birth family: Children’s views about why adoption happens

Once children can understand that they have a birth and adoptive family, they need to make sense of why they did not stay with their birth family. The most dominant theme (mentioned by over two thirds of children) was about birth parents not being able to look after the child. Sometimes the reason why was not specified, e.g. “because they can’t look after you properly”, but some children referred to specific difficulties faced by parents. One of the most common reasons given was illness, which if specified was usually physical e.g. “my mummy was too poorly”, “She had this really bad headache.” A small number of children tried to describe psychological illness or disability e.g. “Well adoption means that ... your real family is not right in the head...Like they’ve, like this really weird virus and, and they can’t really look after the child very good”, “[my mother] wasn’t very good, like speech, maths, literacy and all that”. Four children mentioned drugs or “tablets” for example “they are special tablets and they make you not look after babies very well”. Only two children referred to a birth parent’s own upbringing as relating to problems in parenting for example “my mum didn’t look after me, because her mum didn’t look after her properly”. Another common reason children put forward for why birth parents couldn’t look after their child was lack of material resources such as money or childcare e.g. “they can’t afford the baby”, “she keeps on having to go to work”, “they didn’t have any-one to look after the baby”. Seven children mentioned the birth mother being too young to look after the baby and five of these specifically mentioned that their own birth mother was a teenager. Children for whom adoption was ‘uncomplicated’ generally focused on parents being unable to look after the child.

A significant minority of children (about a third of the sample) identified reasons for adoption that implied the birth mother chose not to care for the child. It was interesting that where children did mention this theme, they tended to return to it at several points in the interview suggesting strong emotional significance. For children in the ‘complicated’ group the language used was often quite emotive, and feelings of rejection were implied or made explicit e.g. “they just can’t be bothered”, “she got rid of us both at a daycare centre”, “they could put up a sign saying ‘come and adopt a baby today’”. Four children suggested that the child themselves might be reason why a birth parent would choose adoption. For example, one boy talked about the child being “too much mayhem... too much to handle... too naughty”. Two children for whom adoption was ‘unproblematic’ took a more positive view of birth parents choosing adoption: “I don’t know – there is like two sides of it ...well she might not even want to [give up the child]”, “my birth mother wanted to find somebody really nice to look after me for, for a very nice life for me”.

Surprisingly given 70% of this sample of children had been adopted from the care system, less than one in five children mentioned abuse or neglect as a reason for adoption, and just four children mentioned the role of social services in “taking” the child away. Children tended to focus on physical neglect for example “they didn’t give her food or warm clothes”, “they got dirty, scruffy” though two or three children did mention a lack of attention to the child suggestive of emotional neglect e.g. “she wasn’t concentrating on looking after me”. Descriptions of abuse tended to be non-specific for example “do something that is bad to her, hurt her”, “they don’t treat it very good”. One child made a reference to emotional abuse: “some mothers are nasty and they don’t want it [the child], like ‘The Boy Called It’”, and one child referred to her own specific experience of physical abuse “they broke my arm and leg”.

3.3.4. Being adopted — Feeling sad or “weird”

A third of children identified sad or strange feelings associated with being adopted. Some children could not say why they felt sad, but where children could they always referred to feelings about their birth family. For example, one girl felt sad that her birth mother had not looked after her properly. Another girl said that having two mummies made her feel sad. A few children talked about missing their birth parents e.g. “sad that I miss my birth mum”, and one boy talked about really missing a baby brother that he remembered being born. One girl talked about feeling sad because her birth mother was missing her. Three children talked about their wish that they could live with both of their families, for example one eight-year-old said she would like to live “One year with [birth mummy and daddy] and the other year I would visit [birth mummy and daddy] and then the other year I would visit [adoptive mummy and daddy]”. These children all expressed very positive feelings of being loved and belonging in their adoptive families. Their feelings did not suggest rejection of their adoptive family, but more longing for an ideal world where they could enjoy both families. Some children seemed to find it hard to explain what felt difficult about being adopted, but a sense of strangeness or nervousness was suggested. For example one boy said it felt “weird”, another “nervous”, a third child said “in the tummy it feels all squiddy”, and a fourth child said his feelings were a “mixture”. Some children said they did not like talking about adoption, even with their parents e.g. “It makes me sad a little bit, talking about it”.

3.3.5. Being seen as different: Dealing with other children’s reactions

Over half of children described difficult experiences in relation to other people knowing they were adopted, a finding also reported by Thomas et al. (1999). Some children talked about how others would “give things away” or “spread it around”. Some found that other children did not believe them, or that they asked difficult questions e.g. “loads of my school friends kept asking me questions like, oh your mum is not like your real mum.” Several children mentioned that they did not like other children’s questions because it was “personal”, “embarrassing”, because it upset them to talk about their birth family, or because they did not know how to answer. A few children talked about other children tormenting or teasing them or feeling sorry for them because they were adopted.

3.3.6. Seeing adoption from different points of view: Differences between children

There were clear differences between children, even of a similar age, when it came to their ability to talk and think about adoption in a way that integrated different perspectives. For example, when it came to explaining and describing feelings, children varied from those who found it hard to specify their feelings at all, or who could not move beyond broad descriptions of feelings being positive (for example nice, good, happy) or negative (sad, unhappy), through to those who would give detailed descriptions of the range and origins of their feelings.

Some children could describe how and why their feelings were mixed. For example, one nine year old girl described how she felt both sad and annoyed that her birth mother had no contact with her (sad because she worried about what had happened to her, and annoyed because she had not kept social services informed of her address), but also glad that she did not send letters (because she was angry about her abusive behaviour in the past). She was also able to speculate on the reasons why her birth mother had not kept in touch, saying, “she sort of like feels ashamed probably, so she doesn’t write any letters because she feels ashamed.” The ability that this girl, and some others, showed to balance and articulate different feelings and perspectives about adoption could reflect innate differences such as gender (most children who talked about adoption in these complex ways were girls) or cognitive ability. But it was also clear from some children’s interviews that their adoptive parents had
shaped and scaffolded their understanding and feelings, and this is likely to have helped build children’s emotional resilience and perspective taking abilities.

4. Discussion

This study has succeeded in capturing the rarely heard thoughts and emotions of adopted young children, offering a glimpse of what adoption means and what it feels like from the inside. The sample was drawn from cohort of adoptive families approached via placing adoption agencies and all participants took part voluntarily. Caution should be exercised in generalising from this sample; the response rate of adoptive parents was 38% and those who chose to take part in this study of contact after adoption may be more open in their attitudes and practises than other adoptive parents (Neil, 2009). A further level of selectivity relates to how adoptive parents acted as gatekeepers to their children. Children having ongoing contact with their birth families, and/or relatively high levels of communicative openness within the adoptive family, are likely to be over-represented. As both structural and communicative openness may affect children’s feelings about adoption, the views expressed by children in the current study cannot necessarily be generalised to all adopted children, especially those in closed adoption arrangements. Children’s levels of participation and concentration during the interviews were quite variable, and the understanding and feelings children conveyed may reflect their mood on the day. It is also important to remember that children’s understanding and feelings will change and evolve over time, and further exploration of how children are managing family integration and differentiation at later stages of development is needed. Despite these limitations the study has provided valuable insights into the significance of integration and differentiation in adoption as experienced by children in middle childhood, and these insights can assist in working with adopted children and supporting their adoptive parents in a range of contexts.

Several years after their adoptions, almost all children were integrated successfully into their new families, most experiencing themselves as always having been there. For some children a little older at placement (age three or four) a more active process of constructing membership of the adoptive family was evident, these children tending to emphasise their kinship with adoptive parents, as opposed to taking this for granted. There was no sense from children’s interviews that tasks related to differentiating between their birth and adoptive families undermined children’s feelings of closeness to their adoptive parents, or feelings of belonging in their adoptive family.

In terms of thinking about having a birth family and what this means, most of the youngest children in the sample were barely beginning to tackle this issue. Where children were trying to make sense of being adopted, their understanding of why they were adopted was not, from an adult perspective, complete. Some children did show a preliminary understanding of some of the more difficult facts in their background may not realise that they were considered at risk from their own parents, or that their parents’ limitations were psychological not just practical. For other children understanding they were not given away by their parents, but were taken away, may ease feelings of rejection.

Adoptive parents clearly have an essential role to play in supporting children in making these advances and adjustments. Children will not absorb and incorporate information given to them until they are old enough (and cognitively advanced enough) to understand it (Brodzinsky et al., 1984), and stories and information will need to be told and retold in different ways as children grow. Parents may need to initiate conversations, and find out from their children if they have questions they need answering. Given some children’s reluctance to talk about adoption, always leaving the initiative with the child may mean that where children are inclined to avoid difficult topics, feelings remain buried and unresolved.

There were suggestions in this study that girls may be more advanced in expressing their feelings than boys, fitting with other research showing girls typically demonstrate more emotional intelligence than boys, possibly due to gender-typic emotional socialisation by parents (Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). Adoptive parents therefore may need to make extra efforts with their sons to engage in conversations about feelings related to adoption. Children may need help to integrate different viewpoints, rather than seeing them as either/or or all good/all bad e.g. understanding that although birth parents may not have provided good enough care, that there were reasons why this happened; as one child in the study put it “everyone has a good side, and everyone has a bad side”. Some children were showing remarkable evidence of their ability to view adoption in this complex way, understanding how other people think and feel. Exploring these differences in reflective function more systematically in children’s accounts, and looking at how these may link to adoptive parents’ characteristics or behaviour, is an important area for further research.

This research has a number of implications for adoption policy and practise. Firstly the research supports previously iterated arguments that it is normal for adopted children to think about their birth families, and ask questions about why they were adopted. This underlines the need for openness in adoption practises including making information available to adoptive parents at the time children are placed, and providing means for this information to be updated at later points in time. The role of the birth family in providing initial and subsequent information that the child may mean that where children are inclined to avoid difficult facts in their background may not arise until several years into the adoption, and so it is important that the adoptive parents and children can access adoption competent support and advice at later stages. Thirdly, children’s reports of how difficult it could be to manage their identity as an adopted person in the social context of the school classroom and playground suggest much of the stress of being adopted at these ages is socially constructed. Although children themselves felt fully integrated into their adoptive families, and saw their family as ordinary or normal, comments and questions from other children brought home that this is not how adoption is viewed from the outside. A particular area that parents may need to think about (and professionals support them with) is helping children manage disclosure or nondisclosure of adoption in the social situation (especially at school), and an understanding of how adopted children feel would be useful for teachers.

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