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“Some days it’s like she has died.”

A qualitative exploration of first mothers’ utilisation of artefacts associated with now-adopted children in coping with grief and loss.

Abstract

In this article, I take a critical approach to the marginalisation of the grief experienced by first mothers who have experienced the non-consensual adoption of a child in England, in a context within which welfare benefits and services intended to support the most disadvantaged families have been dramatically curtailed (Bywaters et. al., 2020; Featherstone et. al., 2018a; Hastings et. al., 2015). With reference to the concepts of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999; 2002) and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999), and in light of some identified parallels between the death of a child and the loss of a child to adoption (Mander, 2006), I draw upon literature from the field of bereavement studies in presenting findings arising from semi-structured interviews in which 17 first mothers sorted through artefacts such as toys, clothing and blankets associated with their now-adopted children and reflected upon the meanings that such keepsakes had taken on in their lives after loss. Respondents’ accounts revealed that artefacts were invested with high value (Castle and Phillips, 2003; Rosenblatt, 2000), and could operate as vehicles for memories of time spent caring for children (Unruh, 1983). It was found that interacting with artefacts could bring comfort (Goldstein et. al., 2020), evoking in mothers sensory memories of the smell and feel of their now-adopted child (Gibson, 2004). Interactions with artefacts were found to hold capacity to affirm respondents’ maternal status (Riches and Dawson, 1998), as well as symbolising oppression and injustice, sometimes evoking strong feelings of anger directed towards professionals involved in children’s adoption.

Keywords: Adoption, motherhood, grief, loss, artefacts.

Introduction

The term “adoption” refers to the process by which the legal relationship between a child and their first family is permanently severed and a new legal relationship between the child and their adoptive parent(s) is established (Brayne and Carr, 2013). In England and Wales, contemporary adoption law is premised on the Adoption and Children Act (2002), section 52 b) of which allows the court to dispense with the consent of a child’s parents in making an Adoption Order if it is deemed that the welfare of the child requires this. While children adopted in England and Wales prior to the passage of the Children Act 1975 were likely to have been relinquished by unmarried mothers in a context within which pregnancy outside of wedlock was heavily stigmatised (Howe et. al., 1992; Neil et. al., 2013; O’Halloran, 2006), children adopted contemporaneously are likely to have been non-consensually removed from the care of their first families by Children’s Services and the family court, due to concerns that they are suffering, or at risk of suffering, significant harm (Neil et. al., 2013).

The Children Act 1975 facilitated the adoption of looked-after children against the wishes of their first parents and led to older children with more complex needs being placed for adoption (Howe, 2009), however in the period between the 1960s and the late 1990s, the number of children being adopted each year progressively declined (Keating, 2009). A prime ministerial review of English adoption law under New Labour in the year 2000 set out governmental plans to increase the use of adoption as a welfare intervention for children in care (Department of Health, 2000), and led to the passage of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which facilitated the adoption of children by single people and same-sex couples. The numbers of children being adopted each year began to steadily rise under New Labour, a trend which continued until 2015 (Department for Education, 2016). Since 2016, the number of Adoption Orders being made each year has decreased annually after reaching a peak of 5,360 in 2015. 3,440 children were adopted from care in 2019-20 (Department for Education, 2020).

The National Adoption Leadership Board (NALB) linked the decrease in the numbers of children being adopted to the influential Re: B-S and Re: B judgements in the family courts (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2013; Department for Education, 2016; NALB, 2014). In the case of Re: B-S (a child) (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2013, point 45), former President of the family division Sir James Munby acknowledged adoption without parental consent as being a “highly draconian step” requiring “the highest levels of evidence”. Similarly in Re: B (Supreme Court, 2013, point 74), it was asserted that the granting of orders which facilitate the non-consensual adoption of a child should be a “very extreme thing...a last resort”, only to be pursued “when nothing else will do”. When considering the influence of such judgements, the NALB expressed concern that the “substantial progress” in increasing the numbers of children being adopted each year may be reversed (NALB, 2014: 1).

As has been consistently highlighted within existing research (Featherstone et. al., 2014; 2018a; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020), New Labour’s emphasis on adoption took place in a context within which policy provision for disadvantaged children was subject to far-reaching reform, with new initiatives such as the investment of around £3 billion into the opening of more than 3,000 Sure Start children’s centres in disadvantaged communities intended to provide parents with multi-disciplinary support in retaining care of their children (Driver and Martell, 2006). In contrast, since 2010 successive governments have sought to continue to increase the numbers of children who are non-consensually adopted in a context within which welfare entitlements have been curtailed and funding for supportive services intended to help first families to care for their children has been dramatically reduced (Bamford, 2020; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Featherstone et. al., 2014; 2018a; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Kirton, 2013; 2019). Such developments have led to mounting concerns regarding the risk of injustice to first families, many of whom experience mutually reinforcing difficulties which are without straightforward resolution (Lonne et. al., 2016).

The experiences of mothers who lose children to adoption

Existing evidence relating to the experiences of first mothers who lose a child to adoption highlights that children are disproportionately removed from the poorest communities (Bywaters et. al., 2020), from mothers who have often experienced state intervention in their own childhood (Broadhurst et. al., 2017), and who typically live with a range of complex and mutually reinforcing difficulties such as learning needs and mental health issues, substance misuse and domestic violence as adults (Broadhurst et. al., 2017; Featherstone et. al., 2014; Lonne et. al., 2016; Roberts et. al., 2017). There is evidence that the child protection and court processes can be highly stressful and traumatic for first mothers (Charlton et. al., 1998; Jackson, 2000; Memarnia et. al., 2015; Neil, 2003; Smeeton and Boxall 2011), eliciting feelings of humiliation and painful experiences of stigmatisation (Charlton et. al., 1998).

First mothers have described strong ongoing feelings of grief, shame and guilt (Memarnia et. al., 2015; Neil, 2003), as well as an escalation in the difficulties in their lives following the removal and adoption of a child (Broadhurst et. al., 2017). There is also evidence that mothers who are separated from their children by the care system are at higher risk of completing suicide (Wal-Weiler et. al., 2017). Around 24% of first mothers who lose a child to adoption can be expected to return to court in respect of a younger child in future (Broadhurst et. al., 2015). Existing research has also highlighted evidence of first mothers' enduring love for and commitment to their children (Neil, 2003; Memarnia et. al., 2015), and of the ways in which holding onto ideas about future reunion can support women in coping with the overwhelming loss that they have experienced (Mason and Selman, 1997; Morriss, 2018).

Disenfranchised Grief (Doka, 1999; 2002) and Ambiguous Loss (Boss, 1999)

This article draws upon the concepts of disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss in understanding the experiences of mothers who lose children to adoption. Doka's (1999:323) theory of "disenfranchised grief" refers to the grief experienced by those who incur a loss that is not openly acknowledged, sanctioned or supported within wider society (Brodinsky and Livingston-Smith, 2014; Charlton et. al., 1998; Doka, 2002; Thompson and Doka, 2017). Corr (1998) gives examples of the grief experienced by individuals who undergo elective terminations of pregnancy and those who lose a loved one as a result of suicide, suggesting that the taboo existing around such losses inhibits individuals from seeking social support, hindering their capacity to mourn in a healthy way (Corr, 1998; Doka, 1999; 2002). As the phenomenon is rooted in social processes and structures, disenfranchised grief is best understood as a sociological concept which has psychological implications (Thompson and Doka, 2017), and is intended to be utilised as a flexible conceptual tool in the development of understanding of the complexities of grieving (Thompson and Doka, 2017:182).

Due in part to the stigma surrounding the state removal of children (Morriss, 2018), first mothers who have lost a child to adoption often do not have access to a discourse by which their grief can be publicly named and mourned (Corr, 1998), and there is evidence that, in the absence of effective social support, women can turn to alternative coping mechanisms as a means of managing their distress (Memarnia et. al., 2015; Wells, 1994). Research which considers first mothers' experiences of adoption consistently highlights the inherent shame, stigmatisation and lack of social support associated with such a loss and the concept of disenfranchised grief is useful in understanding such experiences. In losses which are non-death related, there is also a significant element of ambiguity which further complicates first mothers' attempts to manage loss and navigate life post-adoption (Boss, 1999).

The term “ambiguous loss” refers to situations when it is not known whether the loss which has been suffered is certain or permanent (Boss, 1999:1), for example the concept has been applied to the experiences of families whose loved ones are missing-in-action during conflict or lost at sea (Boss, 1999). The phenomenon is characterised by longing and is described as being traumatic, unending, confusing, and “the most devastating” form of loss because it remains indeterminate and unclear (Boss, 1999:5). There is evidence that the psychological task of grieving an ambiguous loss is complicated (Fravel et. al., 2000), and it appears to add a significant layer of complexity to mothers’ experiences of grief that their child, although lost to them, is safe and well and living within another family (Brodinsky and Livingston-Smith, 2014; Howe et. al, 1992). There is evidence that first mothers often live in hope of reunion with their now-adopted child (Coleman and Garratt, 2016; Morriss, 2018), and this can complicate women’s’ efforts to move forward with life.

The role of artefacts in coping with loss

The maternal work of caring for children is supported in Western society by a wide array of objects, utilised by caregivers in order to meet children’s needs (Baraitser, 2009; Lavelle, 2020), with Baraitser (2009:124) conceptualising the mother as an “encumbered body” who is weighed down by the physical “stuff” of mothering. With the passage of time and as children grow and change, particular objects identified as holding special meaning are commonly retained for safekeeping, having become “imbued with mnemonic value” (Whincup, 2004:80). Such artefacts can be associated with feelings of loss even when children grow up healthily within their first families (Lavelle, 2020), as their bodies and needs develop and they progress towards independence, prompting in parents a sense of “the finiteness of loss and time” (Lavelle, 2020:6). In considering the “enchantment-powers of things”, Bennett (2012:246) identifies that objects often outlast bodies and relationships, providing a sense of stability and duration despite inevitable physical and relational change.

When an Adoption Order is granted in respect of a child their legal link to their first family is permanently severed, meaning that there is a real possibility that a first mother will not see her child again (Howe and Feast, 2000). This is the case even when plans are made for children to remain in touch with their first families indirectly via letterbox contact, with well-established evidence that such arrangements often do not work well for first families, adoptive parents or adopted young people in the long term (Featherstone et. al., 2018b; Logan, 1999; Macdonald and McSherry, 2011; Memarnia et. al., 2015; Neil, 2002; Selwyn et. al., 2006). There are therefore parallels which can be drawn between the experience of losing a child to death and losing a child to adoption (Mander, 2006), and the psychological literature on grief and loss provides valuable insights into the experiences of mothers whose children have been permanently removed from their care. There are also significant discontinuities between the two experiences, for example the loss experienced by a mother whose child has died is likely to be socially supported in ways in which the loss of a child to the care system is not (Rosenblatt, 2000).

Research in the field of bereavement studies has found that artefacts associated with deceased loved ones, defined here as “cherished...special possessions which are treasured independent of their exchange value” and which have been invested with “private or personal meanings” by the bereaved (Curasi et. al., 2004:609), can support the management of strong feelings of grief after loss (Castle and Phillips 2003; Drenton et. al., 2017; Gibson, 2004; Goldstein et. al., 2020; Jurcevic and Urlic, 2002; Riches and Dawson, 1998; Romanoff, 1998; Sas and Coman, 2016). Within this article I set out evidence that artefacts can similarly be utilised by first mothers in the wake of the loss of a child to adoption, presenting findings as to the ways in which such objects were employed by respondents in the maintenance of ongoing connections with their now-adopted children, who were found to be psychologically present in the daily lives of their first mothers despite their physical absence (Fravel et. al., 2000; Morriss, 2018).

Methodology

The findings presented within this article derive from a doctoral project which explored non-consenting first mothers' experiences of the loss of a child to adoption. 19 respondents who had lost one or more children to adoption took part in semi-structured interviews in their own homes between March and July 2019 and were recruited from 3 voluntary-sector agencies offering post-adoption support in England. Respondents chose pseudonyms to be utilised in the writing-up of the project and were each provided with a £20 voucher in exchange for their participation. All of the mothers who took part in this study had plans in place for annual or biannual letterbox contact, with 2 respondents being permitted to see their children in face-to-face contact sessions once each year. For five respondents however, contact arrangements were not happening with the regularity that had been agreed at the time of the child's placement and three mothers had heard no news of their child since they had been adopted. All respondents gave informed consent to taking part in the project and ethical approval for the research was granted by the Institution's Departmental Ethics Committee. Interviews were audio-recorded and respondents' reflections about the role of artefacts in their lives were incorporated into interview transcripts. Analysis of data was undertaken using the Framework approach (Spencer et. al., 2014).

First mothers were asked prior to interview whether they had retained artefacts associated with now-adopted children and whether they would consent to a photograph of such objects being taken for inclusion in the project and 17 of 19 respondents took part in this element of the study. The majority of respondents chose more than one special item which they associated with their now-adopted child and all items identified as holding meaning for respondents were included. I made the decision to include photographs of artefacts as I felt that they facilitate a unique and powerful communication of emotion, loss and the ongoing love experienced by first mothers which could not have been arrived

at with the use of language alone (Crilly et. al., 2006). Photographs of artefacts hold the potential to allow a sense of “communicability and empathy” to develop among the audience (Joanou, 2009:221), incorporating elements of experience which are “unspoken, felt or sensed” (Morriss, 2017:292). Given the difficulties with the written medium experienced by many first mothers (Selwyn et. al., 2006), the inclusion of photographs also provides evidence of the symbolic emotional investment which respondents have made in artefacts in a form which is accessible to them.

In keeping with the ethos of the Interpretive paradigm, within which immersion in the descriptive accounts of actors who inhabit the world produces understanding of the situated experiences of individuals (Ormston et. al., 2003), I approached interviews with an attitude of relational openness and deep respect for the legitimacy of respondents’ ways of creating meaning and experiencing the world (Brownell, 2008; Finlay and Evans, 2009). Sitting with mothers as they sorted through artefacts associated with their now-adopted children had a profound impact upon me as a researcher and children’s social worker, with mothers’ careful handling of keepsakes demonstrating their ongoing enactment of the maternal role (Lavelle, 2020).

Findings

Application of the existing literature on the use of artefacts in bereavement was combined with new insights from respondents relating to their utilisation of artefacts in grieving a non-death related loss. It was found that first mothers were actively employing artefacts in the management of disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss post-adoption (Boss, 1999; Doka, 1999; 2002). Analysis of findings resulted in the emergence of 5 tentative and overlapping categories, which are described within this section.

Artefacts as invaluable

"I am a slight hoarder, so I have got every single paperwork of [my daughter's] in a big box in the loft, and I have got all her clothes...But I have also got a memory box, if you want to see it?"

Corvette. Three years after child's adoption.

[Insert Figure 1].

It is identified within the bereavement literature that artefacts associated with deceased loved ones can come to be regarded as being "sacred" or priceless by survivors (Riches and Dawson, 1998:122), and this study found evidence that artefacts associated with now-adopted children can take on similar value in the lives of first mothers. Eight respondents had created, or had plans to create, "memory boxes", described by Lavelle (2020:3) as, "small boxes which contain...the essence of life", within which to store artefacts associated with their now-adopted child for safekeeping. In keeping with findings from bereavement research which suggest that to lose artefacts associated with a loved one can be acutely painful (Unruh, 1983), some respondents expressed worries about items being misplaced or damaged. Keeping objects safe was one way in which respondents could continue to enact their "lifelong duty of care" to children (Hindmarch, 2009:33), with the presence of artefacts in mothers' homes outliving the relational changes necessitated by adoption (Lavelle, 2020).

In sorting through artefacts for inclusion in the project, four respondents made reference to the parallels between the loss of their child to adoption and the death of a child, with Corvette reflecting, "Some days it's like she has died". The prospect of future reunion, however, emerged as a key site of hope and expectation for every first mother who took part in this research, and some respondents explicitly referenced future reunion when considering their motivation to keep artefacts safe. Amber, for example, explained that it was important to her that her son's baby items were preserved so that she could demonstrate her love and commitment to him upon anticipated reunion, commenting that she kept the artefacts, "...to show him, look, I did give a fuck about you. It was always me".

While first mothers were asked to select particularly meaningful artefacts for discussion during interviews, five respondents explained that they had been reluctant to part with any of their child's belongings, with Laura stating that she had "...not thrown much away" and Corvette and Lilly each describing themselves as "hoarders". There appeared to be a sense of stability and connection for respondents in maintaining a "hoard" of objects associated with their children (Bennett, 2012:239), the "lastingness" of which was consistent even when children had been adopted (Lavelle, 2020:8). In keeping with the findings of previous research relating to the death of a loved one (Riches and Dawson, 1998), many respondents seemed to derive feelings of validation from sorting through their children's belongings and talking about their memories and maternal status.

Artefacts as vehicles of remembrance

"The moon, the reason why this is important...when my son was in foster care, I said to him, 'I say goodnight to you every night...we look at the same moon every night'".

Lilly. Six years after children's adoption.

[Insert Figures 2 & 3].

It emerged that artefacts operated for some first mothers as aids to memory, supporting the reinterpretation of memories which may previously have appeared mundane as being emotionally charged and meaningful in light of the loss which they had gone on to suffer (Riches and Dawson, 1998; Unruh, 1983). As Lilly reflected in the quotation above, looking at a silver ornament of the moon inscribed with the words, "Love you to the moon and back", reminded her of a conversation that she had with her son when he was in foster care. Similarly, a pair of Christmas slippers chosen by Maisy for inclusion in the project prompted happy memories of her baby son's first Christmas, when he had been allowed to spend the day with his mother away from his foster placement.

Four respondents identified artefacts imprinted with their children's hand and footprints as being particularly meaningful to them, and a further two mothers chose for locks of children's hair to be included in the project. Such 'bodily' artefacts can be conceptualised as providing evidence of children's existence and respondents' status as a mother. Artefacts also appeared to support respondents in remembering the physicality of their children, with two mothers expressing renewed disbelief when they saw items of clothing that their babies had ever been so small. Such findings resonate with research completed with bereaved parents, which has highlighted parents' presentation of photographs of deceased children as "concrete evidence" that children had existed in time and space (Riches and Dawson, 1998:127).

Artefacts as comforters

"I used to like, cuddle stuff, like their jumpers or bibs...that had their smell. Like a sickly smell...it is a bit of a sickly smell, but it were a comfort to me...The smell went away after a while".

Louise. Two years after children's adoption.

[Insert Figure 4].

There is evidence from research in the field of bereavement that touching and smelling items belonging to lost loved ones can provide some comfort to the bereaved and can evoke a sense of the continuing presence of the deceased (Gibson, 2004; Goldstein et. al., 2020; Sas and Coman, 2016). It emerged within this study that mothers who have lost children to adoption can similarly derive a sense of comfort and ongoing connection to children through smelling and touching their clothing or belongings and this was illustrated during interviews, as some respondents intuitively stroked, smelt or held soft items to their face as they sorted through memory boxes. Touching and smelling such items appeared to evoke a sense of the "small body [once] contained" for respondents (Lavelle, 2020:7), making manifest intimate moments of the past in the present.

Ruby explained that, following the loss of her 2 eldest children to adoption, she had found it comforting to sleep in her daughter's bed as a means of feeling close to her and as illustrated in the quotation above, Louise remembered that she would regularly smell her sons' clothing when they were in foster care and after they had been adopted. Touching and smelling soft items appeared to hold the capacity for some respondents to momentarily bridge the separation between mother and child (Gibson, 2004), providing respondents with a sensory memory of the smell and feel of their child before their adoption. Interactions with artefacts thus held the capacity to transcend time (Lavelle, 2020).

Artefacts as affirmations of respondents' maternal status

"This is what makes me smile, looking at pictures...Someone keeps saying, 'Are they your kids?', and I say, 'Yeah, they are mine'. It just makes me happy, to be honest".

Sha-Sha. One year after youngest child's adoption.

[Insert Figures 5, 6 and 7].

It emerged that artefacts could be utilised by respondents in affirming their maternal status after the loss of a child to adoption. Artefacts from pregnancy such as a positive pregnancy test, scan pictures and notes relating to the baby's progress pre-birth had been retained by some respondents and appeared to act to affirm their status as a mother to their now-adopted child. Other items, such as a hat chosen by Chu-Chu for inclusion in the project reading, "Mummy's Number 1", bore written affirmations of the parent-child relationship. As described in the quotation from Sha-Sha above, some women had created books of photographs of their children and the "psychological presence" of now-adopted children in the lives of their first mothers was also often illustrated in the pictures which were proudly displayed on walls and mantelpieces in womens' homes (Fravel et. al., 2000:425).

Three respondents chose artefacts for inclusion in the project which had been gifted to them by children's foster carers on behalf of babies and very young children. Rosie, for example, had kept a teddy given to her on Mother's Day which was inscribed with a message to her, intended to be from her baby son and in this way the foster carer acknowledged Rosie's status as the child's mother. Similarly, Cassandra was given a locket containing photographs by her daughter's foster carer and this became very meaningful to her. Such recognition of their maternal status was remembered with fondness by first mothers, many of whom reported very difficult relationships with other professionals such as social workers during the time that their child was in foster care (Ryburn, 1994; Smeeton and Boxall, 2011).

Artefacts as symbols of oppression and injustice

"We have done a lot of stuff, as you can see. We have got a lot of stuff prepared for our daughter".

Chelsea. One year after youngest child's adoption.

[Insert Figures 8 & 9].

Two respondents, Chelsea and Katie, each had youngest children who were in foster care at the time when their interview took place. Both of these respondents selected baby equipment which they had acquired in preparation for their children's anticipated return home for inclusion in the project. As illustrated above, Chelsea's account of the preparations which she had made for her daughter's return home was told with strong feelings of anger and injustice. Such a sense of disillusionment echoes findings in the literature relating to first mothers' expressions of a sense of betrayal at the decisions made by social workers and the courts (Smeeton and Boxall, 2011). The cot full of baby equipment which was still present in Chelsea's bedroom at the time of her interview acted as a permanent reminder of the loss which she had suffered with the removal of each of her 7 children at birth.

Similarly, Lilly, chose a suitcase which had belonged to her eldest son for inclusion in the project explaining, "I packed this when he first went into foster care and then they gave me back everything when he got adopted". The returning of Lilly's son's possessions to her when he was adopted could be seen as symbolising the end of Lilly's parental responsibility and involvement in his day-to-day life. However, the accounts of first mothers who took part in this research clearly illustrate that the adoption decision did not end mothers' love for their children, nor their ongoing psychological relationships with them. Children continued to be present in respondents' hearts and minds (Fravel et. al., 2000; Morriss, 2018), and mothers were found to utilise artefacts as a means of managing strong and ongoing feelings of grief and retaining links with their children.

Discussion

This study has identified evidence that, in navigating overwhelmingly painful experiences of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999; 2002) and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) post-adoption, first mothers were able to utilise artefacts in maintaining psychological relationships with their children (Fravel et. al., 2000). Artefacts told stories of enduring love, maternal care and loss, information which acted to counter the dominant narrative which respondents were aware had been put forward within children's social work files. Carefully preserving artefacts for safekeeping provided a means by which first mothers could continue to enact their maternal role in respect of their children, reclaiming a sense of control in a situation within which they were largely powerless. Mothers' treasured collections of artefacts can also be understood as functioning as "prestige" or "status symbols" (Goffman, 1963:59), as they acted to refute dominant and stigmatising portrayals of mothers whose children are removed from their care as being uncaring (Kuhn, 1995).

Women who took part in this study often expressed feelings of deep shame relating to the experience of having a child removed from their care, with four respondents discussing the complexities involved in everyday decisions such as whether to tell new acquaintances about their maternal status. Such management of what Goffman (1963:58) refers to as “undisclosed discrediting information about the self” is acknowledged within the literature as being a key task to negotiate in the identity work of individuals whose stigma is not immediately visible to others. Respondents were found to be active in their utilisation of artefacts in managing stigmatised loss, as interactions with children’s possessions acted to legitimate feelings of disenfranchised grief, evidence the physical existence of children in space and time and affirm respondents’ identity as a mother to their child despite the adoption decision (Doka, 1999;2002).

It has been noted that in cases involving disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; Doka, 1999;2002), formal grief rituals such as the registration of a death, the facilitation of a funeral service and the receipt of cards of condolence often do not take place, meaning that there is little community verification of the emotional pain experienced by survivors (Boss, 1999; Rosenblatt, 2000). Combined with the stigma associated with the state removal of a child into care (Charlton et. al., 1998; Morriss, 2018), and the difficulties experienced by first mothers in accessing formal and informal support (Broadhurst et. al., 2017; Cossar and Neil, 2010; Sellick, 2007), it can be very difficult for women who suffer the loss of a child to adoption to be able to move forward with life. It emerged during interviews that, although more formal grief rituals were not available to them, five respondents had instigated arrangements to enact specific activities involving artefacts on children’s birthdays or at Christmas time, in order to mark the occasion. Engagement in such activities, which can be understood as being akin to the ritualisation of grief, appeared to support first mothers in managing the overwhelmingly painful feelings associated with such anniversaries (Coleman and Garratt, 2016; Henney et. al. 2007;

Howe et. al., 1992), as well as providing a means for respondents to acknowledge their ongoing love for, and enduring connection to, their now-adopted child.

The experiences of first mothers as highlighted within this article suggest that the provision of post-adoption support involving activities which acknowledge the value of artefacts in the management of grief makes a useful contribution towards supporting first mothers after adoption. Respondents who had created memory boxes or photo albums with support spoke positively about this experience, which appeared to have facilitated opportunities for validation and reinforcement of womens' sense of their maternal status, countering feelings of isolation and shame associated with disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999, 2002). Ambiguous loss has been identified as the most problematic form of loss to manage (Boss, 1999), and therefore any support which can be offered to women to reinforce the legitimacy of their maternal identity and provide comfort and relief from emotional distress should be actively encouraged and developed.

It is important to acknowledge that the women who took part in this research were in touch with post-adoption support services at the time when they were recruited for participation, and such receipt of ongoing support is unusual in England and Wales (Cossar and Neil, 2010; Sellick, 2007; Selwyn et. al., 2006). While some promising developments have been made in some areas of England in recent years, ethical concerns have also been raised relating to the roll-out of the Pause programme (Pause, 2021), which requires first mothers to consent to taking long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) in order to access the intensive help provided. Depending on geography, it may be that consenting to taking LARC which limits their reproductive freedom is the only way that vulnerable first mothers experiencing complex needs post-adoption can access useful support (Morriss, 2018). Given the established history of vulnerable groups such as people with learning disabilities being subjected to

marginalisation in the area of reproductive choice (Eastham et. al., 2020; Gomez et. al., 2014; Tilley et. al., 2012), there is a pressing need for good quality post-adoption support which does not infringe on women's reproductive autonomy to be made available for first families consistently throughout the country. In countering the risk of injustice to first families who lose children to adoption, it is vital that more detailed consideration of the ethical implications of the promotion of adoption in a context of welfare retrenchment is prioritised by policy-makers.

The gravity of the loss which first mothers had experienced when their child was adopted cannot be overstated and was often palpable during interviews, with many respondents crying as they shared happy memories of their children alongside ongoing daily experiences of painful suffering. Such accounts of the devastation brought about by a child's adoption sit in stark contrast with "happy ever after" stories about adoption which permeate policy (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020:166; Ward and Smeeton, 2017:68), and provide clear evidence for the refutation of ideas of adoption as a neat policy solution which straightforwardly meets the needs of both disadvantaged children and prospective adopters (Kirton, 2013). Such a conceptualisation excludes and erases the lived realities of first mothers who, far from experiencing a "clean break" (Gupta and Featherstone, 2020:168), often live out their lives in the shadow of loss, continuing in a psychological relationship with their now-adopted child in hopeful expectation of a future reunion (Fravel et. al., 2000). There is also evidence that adoptive parents and adoptees similarly dispute conceptualisations of adoption as being straightforward (Featherstone et. al., 2018b). The findings of this study support existing calls for conversations about adoption in policy, practice and wider society to change to reflect recognition of adoption as a complex, ever-evolving process which is built on a foundation of loss (Becker et. al., 2002; Benet, 1976; Dunbar et. al., 2006; Featherstone et. al., 2018b; Verrier, 1993).

Conclusion

This study found evidence that, in the face of complex vulnerability, disenfranchised grief and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999; Doka, 1999, 2002), first mothers who had lost a child to adoption were able to utilise artefacts as a means of continuing in psychological relationships with their children, evoking special memories of the past and providing a comforting sense of emotional and sensory connection (Fravel et. al., 2000; Lavelle, 2020). In keeping with evidence from the bereavement literature, artefacts were found to be precious and irreplaceable to respondents (Castle and Phillips, 2003; Riches and Dawson, 1998:122; Rosenblatt, 2000), holding capacity to support mothers in reclaiming their maternal status and outlasting the relational changes which adoption had necessitated (Bennett, 2012; Lavelle, 2020). Interactions with artefacts were also found to hold potential to elicit powerful and emotive memories of pregnancy, birth and children's early lives (Riches and Dawson, 1998; Unruh, 1983). For some respondents, artefacts came to symbolise experiences of oppression and injustice, eliciting enduring feelings of pain relating to the non-consensual removal and adoption of their children.

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