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“Something to just be ticked off on a care plan”. Organisational professionalism and procedure-based decision-making in practice with children who go on to be adopted

Abstract

In England and Wales over the last decade, at a time when funding for services intended to support families has been dramatically curtailed (Bywaters et. al., 2020; Featherstone et. al., 2014a, 2018a), successive governments have sought to increase the numbers of children being adopted from care (Conservative Party, 2019; Department for Education, 2015). In light of the central role which children’s social workers play in progressing plans of adoption (Featherstone et. al., 2018b; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020), this research sought to investigate 15 practitioners’ experiences of operating within the current context. Evidence of significant tensions in social worker’s accounts of planning for adoption and post-adoption contact under austerity is presented and Evetts’ (2011) distinction between organisational and occupational professionalism is drawn upon in understanding the influence of the wider political context on decisions made by practitioners in working with children who go on to be adopted.

Introduction

Over the last 40 years, as the legitimacy of the welfare state has been challenged and elements gradually dismantled in accordance with the growing influence of neoliberal ideology in the provision of public services (Dowd, 2019), social work across all disciplines has been subject to a “deliberate transformation” (Ferguson, 2019:63), a key element of which has involved the individualisation of the social problems encountered by vulnerable populations (Cummins, 2018; Featherstone et. al., 2018a; Featherstone, 2019; Penna and O’Brien, 2013). Neoliberalism is recognised as being both an “elusive and contested notion” and a “transnational political project” (Wacquant, 2009:306), which incorporates institutional logics of economic deregulation based on ideas of the supremacy of the market, welfare state retrenchment, the “cultural trope” of individualism (Wacquant, 2009:307) and an intrusive penal apparatus (Cummins, 2018; Wacquant, 2009). Committed as it is to the values of market capitalism including, for example, competition, choice and individual responsibility (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2017; Dominelli, 2004; Frost and Parton, 2009), neoliberalism

is understood as being fundamentally incompatible with the provision of generous programmes of welfare, favouring instead market alternatives and reductions in rates of individual and corporate taxation (George and Wilding, 2002; Penna and O'Brien, 2013). The entrenchment of neoliberal imperatives within the field of social policy has, since the 1970s, involved the marketisation and privatisation of core public services, the perceived need to cut the costs of service provision and a "presumption of undeservingness" in relation to claimants of welfare benefits (Schrecker and Bambra, 2015:67). Although traditionally associated with conservatism, neoliberal ideologies were also fundamental to reforms made to welfare provision under New Labour between 1997 and 2010 (Dominelli, 2004).

The impact of the advancement of neoliberalism within Children's Services, along with long-standing debates about what the role of the professional social worker ought to involve (Cummins, 2018; Davies, 1985; Lavalette, 2019; Payne, 2006; Shennan, 2020), are well-documented within the literature. While there is evidence that individual workers have sought to resist such trends where possible (Cummins, 2018; Singh, 2019), the progression of ideologies of free market capitalism, individualism and personal responsibility have meant that practitioners' capacity to meaningfully support vulnerable service users has been progressively restricted (Fenton, 2014; Lavalette, 2019). Much of the current workforce have been born into neoliberal social policy, arguably impacting upon the profession's collective inclination and capacity to consider alternative ways of working with the most vulnerable. Contemporary social work with children and families takes place in a societal context within which a proliferation of "poverty propaganda" has established myths about people who live in poverty as being feckless, workshy and responsible for their own fate as hegemonic (Jones, 2012; Shildrick, 2018:1). Such understandings mask the structural causes of poverty and have facilitated an acceleration in class prejudice associated with welfare dependency (Morriss, 2018; Shildrick, 2018; Tyler, 2013a). Stigmatisation surrounding the receipt of state welfare often interacts with stigma associated with the state removal of children (Harris and Whyte, 1999; Logan, 1999; Neil, 2003; Howe et. al., 1992; Memarnia et. al., 2015; Morriss, 2018; Wells, 1990), young motherhood (Wenham, 2016) and childhood adversity (Broadhurst et. al., 2017; Roberts et. al., 2017) to create an "intersectional" experience of stigmatisation and societal shaming for many parents whose children are non-consensually adopted (Morriss, 2018:819).

Adoption as a route to permanence for children who cannot live with their birth families has a long history in England and Wales, with the Adoption of Children Act 1926 providing a legal

basis for 'de facto' arrangements already in place in many communities (Keating, 2009). Prompted by the permanency movement which raised awareness of children's need to experience stability in the arrangements for their care (Biehal et. al., 2010; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Neil et. al., 2013), the Children Act 1975 facilitated the adoption of children against the wishes of their birth parents and led to older children and children with additional needs who had experienced abuse and neglect being placed for adoption (Howe, 2009). Societal changes, such as the increased availability of contraception and changing attitudes towards single parenthood contributed to a steady decline in the numbers of children being adopted each year until 2000 (Garrett, 2002; Keating, 2009; Neil et. al., 2013), when the New Labour government commissioned a review which explicitly set out plans to increase the use of adoption as a child welfare intervention (Biehal et. al., 2010; Department of Health, 2000; Neil et. al., 2013).

New Labour's policies towards children operated from a social investment discourse, within which children are conceptualised as being future adults, requiring skills and expertise to compete in the labour market and contribute to the smooth-running of the future economy (Churchill, 2013; Fawcett et. al., 2004; Featherstone, 2006; Featherstone et. al., 2012; Hendrick, 2003; Parton, 2005; Parton, 2011; Ridge, 2013). While politicians have long been concerned about the way that children are brought up (Parton, 2014), under New Labour there was a move towards an explicit policy focus on parenting (Dominelli, 2004; Lister, 2006) which was understood as being crucial in determining children's future success in education and employment (Churchill, 2013). The focus on adoption in this context can be understood as being politically opportunistic, with the issue attracting high levels of public interest and complementing governmental imperatives relating to conditional welfare and the individualisation of social problems (Garrett, 2002). New Labour's reforms were successful in increasing the numbers of children who were adopted each year, a trend which continued until 2015 (Department for Education, 2016). As has been argued elsewhere, such an emphasis on adoption for children who could not safely grow up within their birth families took place in a context within which far-reaching reforms were made to social policy provision for the most disadvantaged families (Featherstone et. al., 2014; 2018; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020). In contrast, since 2010 adoption has been promoted in a context within which welfare entitlements and services intended to support families have been drastically curtailed (Bamford, 2020; Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Dowd, 2019; Featherstone et. al., 2014a; Featherstone et. al., 2018b; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020; Lavalette, 2019; Kirton, 2013, 2019).

Justified on the basis of necessity following the global financial crisis of 2007-8 (Edwards and Gillies, 2016; Lavalette, 2019), Local Authorities saw a 14% reduction in expenditure per child on Children and Young People's Services between 2010 and 2015 (Bywaters et. al., 2020), with the most deprived areas experiencing cuts of 21%, compared with cuts of 7% in the least deprived areas. Simultaneously, evidence has emerged that spending on child protection practice in England and Wales has been targeted towards "investigative" interventions in the lives of children and their families (Bilson and Martin, 2017:793), with child protection investigations increasing by 79.4% between 2009/10 and 2014/15. The number of children entering the care system has also increased each year since 2010 (Department for Education, 2020; Thomas, 2018). Such developments have led to concerns about "crisis" in Children's Services (Thomas, 2018:1). Disquiet relating to the risk of injustice which the promotion of adoption poses to birth families is particularly pertinent given that adoptive parents are typically, although not exclusively, middle-class (Kirton, 2019). Social class is rarely explicitly acknowledged in a context concerned with the individualisation of social problems (Gillies et. al., 2017; Wood et. al., 2022), however adoption regularly involves the transfer of children across class boundaries (Kirton, 2013; Ryburn, 1994), from multiply deprived birth families into the care of more affluent adoptive parents. The operation of adoption within such a context has been likened to a process of "social engineering" (Kirton, 2013:2), and instigates repercussions within communities which can be felt for generations (Lonne et. al., 2016; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020).

Alongside concerns relating to the use and promotion of adoption in a context of welfare retrenchment, the subject of the type and level of contact which children should have with their birth families has remained a site of controversy (Narey, 2011; Quinton and Selwyn, 1998; Ryburn, 1998; Sales, 2015). Historically when children were adopted it was expected that they would have no ongoing communication or relationship with members of their birth family (Keating, 2009; Neil et. al., 2013). Due to emerging evidence of the distress suffered by adults who were adopted within a secretive and closed model of adoption (Avery, 1998; Howe and Feast, 2000; Hughes, 1995; Lee and Thwaite, 1997), and an acknowledgement that older children are likely to have existing relationships with members of their birth family (Neil et. al., 2013), most children who are adopted in England and Wales are now expected to have some form of post-adoption contact (Select Committee on Adoption Legislation, 2013). The trend towards openness is also evident internationally (Henney et. al., 2003; Neil, 2002; Neil et. al., 2013).

While the Adoption and Children Act (2002) introduced a requirement that the arrangements for post-adoption contact between children and their birth families are considered, there is no obligation for such contact to be promoted (Neil et. al., 2013). Research has raised concerns that indirect (letterbox) contact has become the default contact plan for children after adoption and that, even when birth relatives such as grandparents pose no risk of harm to children, direct (face-to-face) contact after adoption is rarely considered (Featherstone et. al., 2018b). There is well-established evidence that the maintenance of indirect contact arrangements pose significant difficulties post-adoption, particularly for birth families (Featherstone et. al., 2018b; Logan, 1999; Memarnia et. al., 2015; Neil, 2003; Neil, 2009; Selwyn et. al., 2006). Given the central role of children's social workers in planning for adoption and post-adoption contact, this study set out to investigate practitioner's decision-making around planning for adoption, the type and frequency of post-adoption contact to be offered to children and social worker's views on the use of adoption as a child welfare intervention in the context of welfare retrenchment.

Methodology

The findings presented in this article derive from a doctoral project which explored non-consenting birth mothers' experiences of the loss of a child to adoption. Alongside interviews with birth mothers, 15 social workers with experience of progressing plans of adoption through the family court were interviewed with the aim of understanding their decision-making when planning for adoption and their views on the use of adoption as a child welfare intervention. This article explores findings arising from interviews with practitioners, which could not be included in the PhD thesis due to space constraints. Social workers were recruited to the study via Twitter and semi-structured interviews took place between March and July 2019. 13 interviews were held via telephone or video-conferencing technology, and two took place in-person. At the time of interview, every respondent was registered with the previous professional regulator, the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC). 10 were employed by Local Authorities in a social work or management role, three were working as Children's Guardians, one respondent was employed as an independent adoption assessor and one respondent was working as a professional advisor to an adoption panel. The average time which social workers had spent in practice post-qualification was nine-and-a-half years. All respondents gave informed consent to taking part in the study and ethical approval was granted by the University of York's Departmental Ethics Committee. Analysis of data was undertaken using the Framework approach (Spencer et. al., 2014).

Findings

Social work with children under austerity

“The impact of poverty and...austerity in particular, cutting off services...it is really underplayed.... You are expecting more...with less...You want parents to do better, by giving them less”.

SW7, (5 years in practice).

A key theme arising from respondent's accounts of practising social work in a context of welfare retrenchment was concern relating to the impact of austerity on the lives of vulnerable children and their families. Social worker's concerns about austerity tended to focus on cuts which have been made to public services, with seven respondents identifying the closure of community-based initiatives such as SureStart as having been particularly damaging for families they had worked with. Five social workers referenced having less time to be able to spend in children's homes and neighbourhoods than had previously been the case (Ferguson, 2011), with practitioners commenting that their roles had become “paper driven” (SW10), with “the vast majority of...time spent in the office, sat at [a] computer, writing out reports” (SW8). SW2 expressed that such changes were symptomatic of “a focus on numbers rather than individuals”, explaining, “...there was a lot more support [previously] and we had a lot more time with the families, there was more focus on...getting things right...Now it just feels like the thresholds have moved and what I used to do as a newly-qualified social worker, schools or other people are expected to do...I think there is something missing in supporting families properly”.

Recent research has identified that within the current context, social workers can overlook the impact of living in conditions of material poverty on parenting capacity (Bywaters et. al., 2020; Cummins, 2018; Featherstone et. al., 2018a; Featherstone, 2019; Morris et. al., 2018; Wood et. al., 2022). It would appear that practicing under austerity was having a similar impact on some social workers who took part in this study, with only two of 15 respondents identifying the detrimental impact of reductions to disposable income, brought about by welfare reform and increased sanctioning, on the families they had worked with (Patrick, 2017; Shildrick, 2018). SW6 explained, “With Universal Credit, we are getting kind of side-lined with helping

families that don't have any food...gas...electric and aren't going to get money for 5 weeks. So, we have got whatever issue we are involved to work on the families with and we are prevented from doing that because we are literally getting the children food". The perception that supporting families to navigate the welfare system constitutes 'side-lining' from the 'core' business of social work is indicative of a narrowing professional remit within the current context (Cummins, 2018; Lavalette, 2019; Morriss et. al., 2018:368). While respondent's considerations tended to focus on cuts to services as opposed to inadequate financial provisions, there was agreement across the sample that austerity has had a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable children and their families, with 12 of 15 respondents expressing the view that there is no longer enough support for families experiencing the most complex difficulties to be able to keep children in their care. Practising within such a context was impacting upon the emotional wellbeing of some respondents, with two practitioners referring to the impact of secondary trauma on their lives and four disclosing plans to leave the profession in the near future.

Procedure-based approaches to decision-making

"When you are thinking about adoption...you have kind of given up on helping and...it's the last straw now. You have got to get on with the procedural stuff...you kind of abandon the theory side".

SW15, (3 years in practice).

Traditional social work education emphasises the critical role of the application of theory to practice as a means of understanding the difficulties encountered by service users, facilitating the empowerment of disadvantaged individuals and groups and instigating social change (Howe, 2009; Payne, 2014). However, social work can also be understood as being a 'practical' activity and the relevance of theory within the profession is contested, with some perceiving time spent considering the applicability of theory to practice as a "luxury" which the demands of the job forestall (Gray and Webb, 2013; Hicks, 2016: 403). Such a view of the significance of theory to practice, described by Howe (1996:78) as "analytically...shallow and increasingly performance-oriented" can be linked to the advance of neoliberalism throughout the public sector since the 1970s (Hicks, 2016; Howe, 1996; Morley and Macfarlane, 2014),

as managerialist practices have been seen as encouraging an “instrumental” (Hicks, 2016:203) or “technical-bureaucratic” (Morley and Macfarlane, 2014:350) mode of practice (Howe, 1996), and a narrowing of the now “performance-oriented” social work role towards the completion of sharply-defined tasks (Howe, 1996:78; Morley and Macfarlane, 2014).

As demonstrated in the quotation from SW15 above, a further theme to emerge from respondents’ accounts of working with children who would go on to be adopted was the apparently limited use of social work theory in care planning. It appeared that knowledge about theory was not integrated into respondent’s practice, with six practitioners professing a lack of familiarity with social work theory when asked about the knowledge base which they routinely draw upon when recommending plans of adoption for children. While none of the social workers who took part expressed an open hostility to the application of theory to practice, six respondents explained that they tend to concentrate on research evidence about “outcomes” for children when making adoption plans. A move towards evidence-based practice (EBP) or a “what works” approach to decision making can also be linked to the dominance of neoliberal ideology within public services, within which evidence can be utilised in a rigid manner in order to justify particular interventions (Gray and Webb, 2013:6; Payne, 2014). It has been argued that, while evidence-based approaches and the use of social work theory can interplay, the positivist emphasis on outcomes inherent in EBP misrecognises the highly complex nature of the difficulties experienced by users of social work services, which are often not amenable to scientific research conditions (Payne, 2014).

When considering the applicability of psychodynamic theory to practice, some social workers expressed concern as to the propensity for attachment theory to be misused in work with children and families. SW7 explained, “...I think there is a misinterpretation that [the child] will... leave this birth family where they have insecure attachments and be put into an adoptive family where they will form...good ones?...That’s not how it works... Attachment theory might be used, but possibly misused at the same time”. Similarly, SW2 spoke about theories being “used in a way that suits for court” saying, “Someone might have thought there was a theory in the beginning, but it’s more like going through a process, a Local Authority process...”. Other practitioners expressed that theory is not routinely utilised in everyday practice, with SW9 stating, “I have never, in my current role...seen a social work theory named or anything like that in final [court] evidence”. Concerns relating to the use of attachment theory by social workers are also explored within the literature, with White and colleagues (2020:vii) arguing

that such ideas can come to operate as a “foil for moral judgements”, used to justify particular interventions in the lives of families experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Planning for post-adoption contact

“There are lots and lots of mothers who have no further contact with their children...and I’m not sure that’s the right way to go. Not for the children and not for the mother”.

SW11, (4 years in practice).

Judgements as to the type and frequency of post-adoption contact to be offered to children and their birth families after adoption emerged as a site at which “procedural” approaches to decision-making appeared to be particularly influential (Shennan, 2020:102). It was found that while every respondent could see a role for adoption as a child welfare intervention, there was a consensus that models of adoption involving indirect contact only are no longer fit for purpose. Despite such widespread agreement, when planning for post-adoption contact respondents were found to adhere to a model of decision making based on existing informal protocols, with social worker’s accounts revealing significant tensions as to the value of direct contact between a child and their birth family post-adoption. The view that a default plan of indirect contact tends to be offered to adopted children and their birth families was shared across the sample, with annual or biannual letterbox contact referred to as being “the blanket” plan (SW2), “the automatic recommendation” (SW6), “the status quo” (SW7), “standard” (SW9) and “just what has always been done” (SW13). SW1 asserted that “there is not much thought” behind planning for post-adoption contact, and SW5 felt that it would not be possible to recommend anything other than annual, indirect contact stating, “You wouldn’t be able to put anything other than, ‘It’s not in the best interests of the child to have [direct] contact’”. Concerns relating to the “formulaic” approach to planning for post-adoption contact were also expressed by social workers in the BASW adoption enquiry (Featherstone et al, 2018b:27).

Despite the finding that respondents almost always recommended indirect contact between children and their birth family post-adoption, most practitioners asserted that such arrangements can be problematic. Indirect contact was described by SW9 as a “nice idea” which is “probably not always stuck to”, and similarly SW5 stated that “half the time [the

contact] doesn't go on". Plans for indirect contact were described as "unrealistic" by SW7 who said, "I don't know...that it works that well. Maybe for a short time". SW13 said that, in her experience, indirect contact "often doesn't work well" and SW2 described the process of exchanging letters on an annual basis as being "outdated". It appears that planning for post-adoption contact could therefore be tokenistic, with SW4 describing decision-making around contact as being "something to just be ticked off on a care plan". Three respondents cited awareness of longstanding evidence relating to the value of carefully planned direct post-adoption contact between children and their birth families (Beek, 1994; Logan and Smith, 2005; Neil, 2002, 2003, 2009; Neil et. al., 2013), commenting that, in their experience, such findings were yet to be incorporated into routine practice. SW14 expressed the view that plans for direct contact after adoption would mean that fewer children would be adopted saying, "Contact is a very, very scary subject for adopters and I think a lot of adopters wouldn't go through with adopting if contact was more frequent". Relatedly, Wood and colleagues (2022) have highlighted the potential for more open models of post-adoption contact to amplify shame relating to class inequalities between children's birth and adoptive families, made visible for example, in the gifts exchanged in celebration of birthdays.

Separating out children's interests

The need to put the needs of the child first...is obviously right...I think maybe in my experience that has been understood as not having to think about the parent's needs and the effect on the parent of some of these things."

SW15, (3 years in practice).

Social work with children and families in England and Wales centres around acting in the "best-interests of the child" (Kelly, 2000:16). The best-interests construct was devised by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1980) and is enshrined in Article 3.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 2017). The construct has also been incorporated into law in the form of the "welfare test" or "paramountcy principle" (Brayne and Carr, 2013:166), which stipulates that when a court considers any matter concerning the welfare of a child, the individual child's welfare, as opposed to the rights of the parent or the interests of any third party, shall be the paramount consideration (s1.1, Children Act, 1989). While the best interests construct can be understood as having led to significant improvements in the protection of children from harm (Kelly, 2000), the decision regarding what is in the interests of individual children is subjective, particularly given that the term has no agreed

meaning (Ainsworth and Hansen, 2011; Ryburn 1994). It has been argued that the needs, rights and interests of children and their birth families and communities cannot be neatly disentangled from one another (Ainsworth and Hansen, 2011; Featherstone et. al., 2014a and b; Garrett, 2002; Lonne et. al., 2016), and that children can often be most effectively supported by providing their birth parents with the financial, practical, emotional and long-term support that they need (Crittendon, 2016).

It emerged within this study that, although all respondents demonstrated awareness as to the calamitous impact that the loss of a child to adoption has on a mother and wider birth family, the operation of the “welfare of the child” paradigm within the current context was prohibiting practitioners from being able to meaningfully respond to the needs which they could identify in mothers they had worked with. SW7 explained, “There is barely enough resource [to protect children]...there is no duty on the Local Authority to support birth parents...I think Local Authorities struggle to manage their duties to children, so they are not going to be taking on any...voluntary work, if you like, with a parent”. Three respondents explained the reason for the almost exclusive focus on the needs of the child as opposed to their mother in practice with reference to their role as being a “child’s social worker” and not a “family social worker” (SW7) or “mother’s social worker” (SW12) (Featherstone et al, 2018a:70), and each of these practitioners found this conceptualisation limiting and frustrating. SW12 explained, “I can see why it has to be like that, but I think it’s very detached...that’s a very focused lens...you can’t just cut off from a parent’s pain or suffering”. Lack of independent advocacy for mothers in the court arena and patchy post-adoption support leading to potential for recurrent losses also emerged as important concerns for respondents, who identified that it is outside the current remit of a child’s social worker to be able to offer any help in meaningfully addressing such needs. Respondents described that, in their experience, birth mothers are “forgotten” (SW11, SW13) or “left” (SW4) following the removal of children and were concerned about this.

The child’s timeframe

“The parents would argue that 26 weeks isn’t a long time to establish change...but for that child...every day is important”.

SW8, (2.5 years in practice).

While ideas about being the “social worker for the child” were understood by respondents as being problematic and frustrating, nine practitioners uncritically utilised the phrase “outside of the child’s timeframe” (Brown and Ward, 2013:1) when thinking about the reasons why it is not always possible to meaningfully respond to the psychological needs of birth mothers, illustrating the permeation of statutory social work with ideas about a “now or never” approach to decision-making (Munro, 2011:69). Such a discourse has been argued to have been based upon an oversimplification of neuroscientific evidence which has been misused in policy debates (Bruer, 1999; Gillies et. al., 2017; Featherstone et. al., 2014b; Kirton, 2013; Wastell and White, 2012). When discussing the significance of the “child’s timeframe” (Brown and Ward, 2013:1), it was common for respondents to cite examples of cases in which court-appointed experts had assessed that the trauma which birth mothers had suffered would necessitate “intensive” (SW1, SW15), “deep-rooted” (SW14) or “extensive” (SW13) therapeutic intervention spanning years in order to be able to affect change. SW7 explained, “[In] the majority of cases where a psychological need is identified [in the mother] ...the timescale to achieve [psychological] change is not within the children’s timescales, and so they basically don’t get [psychological help]. And...then that is used as a way to sort of, evidence that [the children] need permanence outside of the family...by adoption if they are of that age”. Similarly, SW6 asserted, “Even when that psychological therapy starts, there is no...timescale on how long that parent might need...for it to bring about any changes, if any changes *do* happen...So, we are in a situation where, say you wait six months for it to start, then it’s two years to be effective, but then at the end of that two years...it’s still not been enough... That child is now three or four...they still need to be removed, but they have had all the attachment and behaviour and experiences of living with that parent, which may have been negative”.

Alongside concern about therapeutic intervention for mothers being outside of children’s timeframes, two respondents explained that some parents they had worked with had clearly required long-term and intensive help in looking after their children, which is “prohibitive within the current system” (SW3). SW9 asked, “Are [Children’s Services] going to be involved forever?...No, they’re not...Every child has a right to a normal, family life, without the intrusion of the state...Everybody would love for children to be able to remain with their parents, but it needs to be safe, above everything. Some parents aren’t able to deliver safety to a child without a high level of support...in that context you have to look at the long-term involvement of services, balanced against the child’s right to a normal family life...” For some practitioners therefore, families whose difficulties in parenting cannot be resolved with the time-limited intervention of Children’s Services risk permanent separation on the basis of a child’s right to privacy and normality. Such an understanding could be argued to overlook the intrusive and

destabilising nature of the adoption process on children, as well as rights-based considerations for both children and their parents in relation to permanent legal severance from the birth family. The preclusion of long-term support as a viable option for families experiencing difficulties can be understood in relation to ideas that there is no form of “legitimate” dependency within neoliberal welfare regimes (Bissell and Peacock, 2015; Featherstone et. al., 2018a; Peacock et. al., 2014a; 2014b).

Discussion

The accounts of social workers who took part in this study reveal significant tensions in existence in contemporary practice with children who go on to be adopted. While all practitioners expressed concerns relating to the efficacy of indirect contact as a means for adopted children to maintain relationships with members of their birth family for example, social workers continued to recommend such arrangements in an organisational context which necessitates quick decision-making and adherence to protocol. Practitioners also described significant incongruence between their professional values in relation to the provision of support to families and the increasingly short-term, paper-driven approach to practice within the current context. Such tensions can be understood with reference to Evetts’ (2011) distinction between organisational and occupational professionalism, which is argued to have relevance across professional groups in contemporary public service provision. Whereas “occupational” professionalism involves allegiance to a profession’s established knowledge base and code of ethics, allowing for discretion, judgement and creative or bespoke approaches to problem solving, “organisational” professionalism necessitates deference to the employing organisation, replacing occupational control and substituting notions of discretion and trust for a target-led and managerialist approach to practice (Evetts, 2011). Such “procedural” (Shennan, 2020:102) or “technical-bureaucratic” (Morley and Macfarlane, 2014:350) approaches to practice are associated with the embedding of neoliberal discourses throughout the public sector, which Howe (1996:92) describes as “a move from reason to rote”.

The findings of this study add to existing evidence about the uneasy relationship between theory and practice in social work (Hicks, 2016). Anti-oppressive or “emancipatory” approaches (Dominelli, 1998:3), poverty-aware practice (Krumer-Nevo, 2020) and community-based perspectives can all make useful contributions to understanding the

experiences of families and communities from which children are non-consensually removed (Bywaters et. al., 2020; Featherstone et. al., 2018a and b). In light of the prevalence of domestic violence as an issue experienced within families whose children are the subject of statutory investigations (Ferguson et. al., 2019), feminist perspectives which take a critical stance to societal expectations surrounding “good” motherhood are also crucial (Lawler, 2000; Miller, 2005; Skeggs, 1997). Psychologically informed theories about attachment (Bowlby, 1971) disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999), ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) and continuing bonds in bereavement (Klass et. al., 1996) also have direct relevance to understanding the issues involved in planning for adoption (Geddes, 2021). Theory and practice are inherently interlinked, and all social work practice is informed by either formal or informal, explicit or implicit theory (Gray and Webb, 2013; Howe, 2009; Payne, 2014). Within an increasingly procedure-based neoliberal work environment, there is a danger that the exclusion of more formal or occupationally institutionalised ‘ways of knowing’ about the individual, familial and societal difficulties encountered by vulnerable people can lead to the uncritical acceptance of dominant, individualised explanations for such issues (Gray and Webb, 2013). “Trauma-informed” approaches to practice, for example, have become increasingly influential in recent years (Asmussen et. al., 2022:4), and it is important for workers to maintain a critical approach to theories which situate explanations for difficulties at the site of the individual. The integration of academic theory and the day-to-day activities involved in everyday practice can be impeded by lack of access to textbooks and academic journals, which are expensive to access and are not routinely provided to staff by Local Authorities.

Social workers who took part in this study expressed significant concerns relating to the neat separation of a child’s interests from those of their birth families and were particularly worried about the lack of support in place for birth mothers following the loss of a child to adoption. The unproblematic prioritisation of the welfare of the individualised child (Featherstone et. al., 2014a; Lonne et. al., 2016), along with the implication that children can be neatly extricated from their birth family should their welfare require it, underpins the operation of adoption within the current context (Wood et. al., 2022). While there is clear evidence that long periods of delay and instability have a detrimental impact on the development of young children (Biehal et. al., 2010; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Neil et. al., 2013), ideas about the child’s timeframe which emphasise quick decision-making and short-term intervention in families experiencing the most complex difficulties should be acknowledged as complimenting neoliberal imperatives relating to residual welfare provision and the preclusion of long-term support as a viable option (Bissell and Peacock, 2015; Featherstone et. al., 2014; Peacock et. al., 2014a;

Peacock et. al., 2014b). When considering the support needs of families whose children are non-consensually adopted, there is a need for a national conversation between Children's and Adult's Services, with teams working more closely together to ensure that parents can access their own support relating to the difficulties which precipitate the removal of their children. In a context in which practitioners are subjected to high levels of "ethical stress" (Fenton, 2014:322), there is a role for Social Work England in protecting the occupational professionalism of its members in working environments saturated with dominant ways of understanding and intervening in the lives of vulnerable people. Evidence arising from this research suggests that there is also a pressing need for further scrutiny as to the ways in which plans for adoption and decisions for post-adoption contact are made, with a move towards reflexive planning based on occupational expertise as opposed to organisational protocol (Evetts, 2011).

Conclusion

In a context of diminished resources within which long-term support is not considered viable, adoption can come to be seen as a straightforward policy solution for the most disadvantaged children (Kirton, 2013, 2019). This study found evidence of significant tensions in 15 social workers' accounts of planning for adoption and post-adoption contact under austerity. Evett's (2011) distinction between organisational and occupational professionalism has been shown to be useful in understanding the influence of the wider political context on decision-making in practice, with planning for post-adoption contact emerging as a site at which procedural decision-making has become particularly entrenched. Given the profound and intergenerational consequences of the adoption of children (Featherstone et. al., 2018b; Gupta and Featherstone, 2020), there is an urgent need to re-examine practice in this field and reassert occupational values in decision-making for the most vulnerable children and their families.

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