

The motivations and decision-making processes of parents who adopt older children

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journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf**Claire Elizabeth Palmer**

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Abstract

This article explores the motivations and decision-making processes of parents who adopt older children from the UK care system. It draws on interview data from parents from 14 adoptive families to consider what influenced their decision to adopt an older child. Data were analysed thematically, and the analysis was theoretically informed by the concept of adoption as a ‘marketplace’. The study shows how prospective adoptive parents can be influenced in their decision-making by the information they have been given or perceive about the state of the adoption marketplace and indicates that making choices and decisions around the characteristics of future children is often an uncomfortable aspect of the process. The participants cited moral reasoning and notions of fate as key factors influencing their decisions. The article concludes by making recommendations for practice.

Plain language summary

In this research, parents from 14 families who adopted older children (children aged four and over when they moved into their adoptive home), were asked about why they made the decision to adopt an older child. This is important, as older children are often more difficult to find

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adoptive homes for than younger children. We found that the messages given in adoption preparation courses and by social workers influenced parents' thoughts around the child or children that they went on to adopt. Parents in the study highlighted that making choices and citing preferences around the characteristics of their future child or children was an uncomfortable part of the adoption process. Several parents saw adopting an older child as a way to provide a permanent home for a child that might not otherwise have this chance. Many spoke of the strong sense of connection they felt to their new child, even before they had met them. Ways to improve practice are noted.

Keywords

Older children, adoption from care, child adoption, decision-making, motivations, linking and matching, adoptive parents

Introduction

This article explores the motivations and decision-making processes of parents who adopt older children – defined here as children aged four and over at the time they joined their new family – and focuses on adoption from state care in the UK context. Research suggests that adoptive parents often start their adoption journey with a preference for adopting younger children as older ones can be considered more difficult to place (Dance, Neil and Rogers, 2017; Department for Education [DfE], 2013; Lowe et al., 1999; Rogers, 2017; Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997; Ward, 2011). The factors that influence parents' decisions to adopt older children are investigated here, and the analysis draws on the conceptualisation of adoption as a 'marketplace' whereby potential adoptive parents are aware that they are in competition with other prospective applicants for a limited pool of children (e.g., Higgins and Smith, 2002; Raleigh, 2016; Skidmore, Anderson and Eiswerth, 2016). While acknowledging that the process of matching adults with children involves numerous actors, this study focuses on how this process is experienced by adoptive parents and the reasoning underpinning the decisions they made regarding the formation of their adoptive family. Farmer and Dance define matching as:

The process of identifying a family whose resources will, as far as possible, meet the assessed needs of a particular child or sibling group, throughout childhood and beyond... it involves fitting parents' strengths to the needs of children awaiting placement. (2016: 975)

Older children as 'hard to place'

In the 1970s, there was a shift in UK adoption policy and practice whereby children who had previously been viewed as 'unadoptable' began to be placed for adoption (Howe, 2003; Ivaldi, 2000; Lowe et al., 1999). These included those who were older, who had physical and learning disabilities and developmental difficulties, who needed to be placed with siblings, who were of dual heritage and who had experienced early adversity, abuse and neglect (Lowe et al., 1999; Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997). These children became described as 'hard to place' (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997: 9).

Several factors influenced this shift. For example, it was, at least in part, a response to concerns about children ‘drifting’ or ‘languishing’ in the care system with no clear plan for their future (Parker, 1999: 3; Rowe and Lambert, 1973; Thomas, 2013: 16). Changing social factors, such as the availability of more effective means of contraception, the legalisation of abortion and the increased availability of support for single mothers, also meant that fewer relinquished babies were available, but this was not matched by a reduction in childless couples wishing to adopt (Ball, 2005; Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997). Therefore, some prospective adopters became more receptive to considering the adoption of non-infants as a means to create or add to their family (Ball, 2005; Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997).

Although the practice of placing older children for adoption is now well-established, there are acknowledged challenges relating to the experiences of children who are older at the time of placement and the families that they join. Research into the outcomes of adopted children has demonstrated that older-placed children experience less stability in their adoptive homes than their younger-placed peers (Fratter et al., 1991; Palacios et al., 2019; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014; Wijedasa and Selwyn, 2014). Increased age at placement, when compared to other child attributes such as gender, placement with siblings or ethnicity, has also been identified as the key indicator in ‘adoption disruption’ (Palacios et al., 2019; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014; Wijedasa and Selwyn, 2014), a term used to describe the child prematurely leaving the adoptive family home.

Alongside this propensity for increased difficulties for older-placed children is a reported level of reluctance on behalf of prospective parents to consider adopting older children, with many waiting parents initially stating a preference for younger ones (Dance, Neil and Rogers, 2017; DfE, 2011; Rogers, 2017; Ward, 2011). Moreover, there is some evidence that adoptive parents who are open to adopting older children may be discouraged from doing so by cautious professionals who are concerned about the increased risks associated with the child’s older age (Brind, 2008). When these factors are combined, it can be seen that older children represent a group who may experience greater challenges in adoptive family life and who may be more difficult to place in adoptive homes.

Adoption as a marketplace

Several scholars have drawn on the concept of the marketplace when theorising about family formation in adoption (e.g., Fonseca, 2006; Garrett, 2018; Higgins and Smith, 2002; Raleigh, 2016; Skidmore, Anderson and Eiswerth, 2016). Much of this research has focused on the US context where the adoption landscape is different – more intercountry adoptions, a mixture of state and privately arranged adoptions and, often, financial costs incurred as part of the process.

In the UK, adoption is a little different. Prospective adopters of children from care, the primary means by which children are adopted in the UK, are not expected to incur any significant financial costs and have less choice around differing types of adoption; for example, private adoption is not lawful in the UK. Nevertheless in spite of these differences in practice, some scholars have explored the concept of the ‘marketplace’ in relation to the UK adoption context, including understanding adoption through a perceived lens of commercialisation. For example, Higgins and Smith (2002), in a critical and theoretically informed discussion of the adoption process in the UK, consider the moral consequences of using marketing techniques, particularly in relation to child-specific advertising, such as that which used to appear in the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)’s *Be*

My Parent magazine in which children available for adoption were advertised to prospective parents and their social workers. They argue that through child-specific advertising, the child is presented as a category for the perusal of the intended audience, namely adoptive parents, rather than as a child in their own right. They suggest that this was considered acceptable through a belief that the end of achieving a permanent family justifies the uncomfortable means of marketing the child to prospective parents.

Similarly, Garrett (2018) has critiqued adoption activity days and other events where prospective adopters can meet available children or view their profiles as being ‘consumer driven’, whereby the adoptive parent, conceptualised as the ‘customer’, is ‘afforded the opportunity...to peruse and select from an array of “goods”’ (Garrett, 2018: 1251). But in response, it is arguable that these methods can provide an effective means of promoting children to parents where matches may not have otherwise been made. This is because they allow for ‘chemistry’ (Cousins, 2003: 13) and an emotional response to a specific child rather than eliminating children from the process by the application of broad exclusion criteria, such as age and disability.

However, the analogy of the adopter as a ‘consumer’ is not entirely straightforward, and the notion of adoption as a marketplace can prove uncomfortable. Higgins and Smith (2002) have suggested that it is not just children who are commodified by the adoption process. They argue that declining numbers of prospective adopters meant that adoption agencies needed to widen the criteria of those considered to be acceptable future parents to include previously excluded groups, such as single parents or same-sex couples, and that for prospective adoptive parents, as with waiting children, ‘relative value is determined by supply and demand and the needs of the marketplace’ (Higgins and Smith, 2002: 187). Indeed, over 20 years ago, Lowe and colleagues (1999) reported that it was assumed that older parents would be more suited to adopting older children rather than younger ones. Similarly, historically, there has been a tendency to link single and same-sex adopters with ‘hard to place’ children, with heterosexual couples viewed more favourably by placing agencies (Lowe et al., 1999; Owen, 1994).

The analogy of adoption as a marketplace therefore seems to be both uncomfortable and compelling. Due to its provocative analogy, criticism of the notion of adoption as a marketplace is understandable but oversimplifies the complex moral societal issues around state intervention in family life and the related practices around matching prospective adoptive parents with children (Higgins and Smith, 2002; Tarren-Sweeney, 2016). There is a need for balance, of course, in how issues around adoption are represented, and whilst there are persuasive explanations as to why adoption practices have evolved in the way they have, it is important to consider that markets have moral limits and thus to ensure that adoption practices and processes are ethically justifiable; it seems sensible to both consider and critique the experiences of all those involved in adoption as they navigate this complex terrain (Featherstone, Gupta and Mills, 2018; Higgins and Smith, 2002; Sandel, 2013). This article seeks to clarify this complexity by exploring how adoptive parents of older children narrate and experience the adoption process. It then considers the marketplace as a conceptual lens through which to understand their experience.

The UK adoption process

Prospective adoptive parents in the UK are required to go through an assessment process conducted by a social worker from an adoption agency. Although this process appears to be

relatively straightforward, it is frequently experienced as uncertain and emotionally complex and marked by delays (Adoption UK, 2019; Dance, 2015).

As part of the assessment process, prospective parents are required to undertake adoption preparation training where they learn about the potential needs of children who will be placed with them. They can specify which attributes they do and do not want in a future child, for example, with regard to past history or disability. The social worker's report on the prospective parent is then taken to an adoption panel comprising members with personal or professional experience of adoption. They then question the adoptive parents and their social worker and forward a recommendation about the prospective applicants' suitability to the agency's Adoption Decision-Maker (National Adoption Service, 2023).

Once the parents have been approved, the adoption agency can then begin to look for a child whose needs can be met by the prospective parent. They can proactively participate in identifying a child or children by attending specialist family-finding events, such as adoption activity days or information exchanges, or by looking at children's profiles on specialist websites or in adoption magazines. Prospective adopters in Wales may also utilise the online family finding tool, *The Adoption Register Wales*, to identify potential children.

Previous research has found that the initial preferences of adopters may need to be 'stretched' in discussion with social workers (Dance et al., 2010; Farmer and Dance, 2016). Stretching is 'the gap between what new parents want and the child they adopt' (Farmer and Dance, 2016: 976). Once a potential link has been identified, the professionals involved will consider whether the prospective adopters are likely to be able to meet the child's emotional, behavioural and attachment needs (Dance et al., 2010). The timings of identifying potential children and matching them with adoptive parents can vary considerably, and this can be an uncertain and difficult time for waiting adopters (Rogers, 2017). Once a potential match has been approved by the adoption panel, the adopters can then begin a series of introductory visits to get to know the child (or children) which normally take place over a few weeks prior to them moving into the adoptive home. When the child has been in the home for a minimum of 10 weeks, the adoptive parents can start the legal process of formalising the adoption by applying to the court for the adoption order (Doughty, Meakings and Shelton, 2017).

Recent context

To provide some wider context to the findings presented below, 266 children were adopted from care in Wales between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021. Their average age was three years and one month at the time of adoption, and 85% of them were below the age of four (Welsh Government, 2021). It is noteworthy that in recent years, there has been a downward trend in the number of adoptive placements in England and Wales (Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board, 2022; DfE, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021). There are several possible explanations for this. One is that the Covid-19 pandemic has had some recent impact, with court proceedings either progressing more slowly or being paused. Others offer a longer-term view, suggesting causes including the growing preference for placing more children with friends or relatives and two court rulings made in 2013, which ordered that an adoption order should only be made when no alternative options are available (DfE, 2021).

Study methodology

This article draws on data gathered as part of a wider study, the Wales Adoption Cohort Study (WACS), which used a sequential, mixed-methods design aimed to develop a better understanding of the early support needs and experiences of newly formed adoptive families. Its primary aims were to explore factors associated with early placement success, to identify support needs in early placement, to explore the impact of pre-adoption decision-making by local authorities and courts on early family life and to establish a prospective cohort with the potential to be followed up in future research studies. It received ethical approval from Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the fieldwork. Further detail regarding its research design is described in other publications (e.g., Meakings et al., 2018). From the data gathered for the wider study, a subsample of adoptive parents of older-placed children was drawn, and it is the interviews with these parents that inform the findings presented below.

The wider study was promoted to new adoptive parents through adoption agencies in Wales and the adoption-focused charity, Adoption UK. Parents who met the criteria of having a Welsh child placed with them for adoption within the study period then contacted the research team to express their interest in participating in the study. Forty interviews were carried out, 14 of which were with families who had adopted older children. Where parents were parenting in couples, they could choose whether one parent or both participated in the research. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out by a team of researchers approximately nine months after a child was placed in the new family home. These were then transcribed verbatim from audio recordings.

In the smaller study outlined here, qualitative data were analysed from in-depth interviews with all respondents who had adopted older children. The interview questions relevant to this article focused on the parents' pre-placement preferences about the child they wanted, for example, whether a single child or sibling group or their age and gender. Later, parents were asked about the process of being linked and matched with their child, how they first heard about them and how close the match was to their initial preferences.

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically using codes divided into categories to manage and organise the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke and Braun, 2017). The notion of the marketplace was identified as an analytic lens through which to examine the data, and this provided an analytical framework for coding, as suggested by Gale and colleagues (2013). For a more detailed discussion of some of the methodological considerations in this study, please see Palmer (2019; 2020).

To be included in the subsample, parents had to have one or more adopted children who were over the age of four when placed with them. The oldest child in the subsample was aged nine when moving to the adoptive family home. Half the adoptive parents had a single child placed with them, and the remainder had a sibling group of two or more children. The subsample contained one same-sex couple, two single adopters and 11 heterosexual couples. In three families, there were already children present in the household prior to the adoptive placement; these were birth children, children from previous relationships and previously adopted children. In the remaining 11 families, the parents were first-time adoptive parents. No-one in the sample had been the foster carer for the child so all of the parents were strangers to their child when they began the process of introductions. The names of the adoptive parents and children have been changed to maintain their anonymity, and some

key details about family structure have also been altered to make the families less identifiable.

Findings

Initial preferences

In all but one of the 14 families represented in the interviews, the parents had initially arrived at adoption for reasons of involuntary childlessness, having experienced primary and/or secondary infertility. The remaining family arrived at adoption for altruistic reasons linked to their religious beliefs. Some adopters had explored assisted reproductive technology, including fertility medication and IVF, while others had struggled to conceive and quickly decided to adopt, seeing it as preferable to the treadmill of treatments involved in 'doing infertility' (Sandelowski, Harris and Holditch-Davies, 1989; Ward and Smeeton, 2015).

Several parents described the family that they had always wanted or imagined. For example: 'Initially I always imagined...I suppose an 18-month-[old], I always wanted a little girl... I had a picture of a little blonde 18-month-old [laughs]' (Sophie, parent of children placed at ages six and four). The use of the word 'always' here is emotive, suggestive of long-held images of future family life. As part of the process of identifying potential matches with children, prospective adoptive parents are asked by social workers to note their preferences for their future child. However, these conversations and decisions were frequently described by parents as an especially difficult part of the adoption process. For example:

To be honest...they give you an awful questionnaire asking...well...do you mind if the child has a touch of Down's syndrome...What colour?... Race?... Religion?... It was horrible...you [were] just sat there thinking, 'Well, actually, what does every parent want, really?'. Well, you're looking for the box that says 'One perfect child, please'. Well, there ain't no such thing...and so that, I think, made both of us feel really, really uncomfortable. (Phillip, parent of children placed at ages five and two)

As a hypothetical exercise, this activity, undertaken as Phillip describes, made it challenging to imagine a real child and their actual needs. His comments indicate that 'choice', which is a feature of the early thinking about adoptive family formation, is not always something that is viewed positively by adoptive parents or comfortable for them to consider.

Why an older child?

Through the interviews, it became clear that there were various reasons for accepting a match with an older child. Early in the process, some adopters had come to the decision that they did not want to parent a baby:

When we discussed it initially, we said [aged] two to five...we knew that younger than two would probably be a really steep learning curve. Rose [adoptive mother] is principal carer for [child], and I think it's tough being thrown into looking after a baby... Also, we knew enough about it just from reading about the system that the chances of actually having a baby placed

with you are very slim. So, it wasn't something that we'd even considered really, and then we thought five because, well again, just because that was a section on the form, it said two to five. (Michael, parent of child placed at age seven)

In Michael's account of his and his wife's decision-making, they had decided not to adopt a baby for two reasons. Firstly, they felt that caring for a baby would be a 'steep learning curve' and secondly, because of their understanding about the profile of children available for adoption. Hence, the decision was informed by their current skillset and their understandings of the shape of the marketplace. We can also see the influence of the bureaucratic process on the decisions made by adoptive parents. Michael explains that the reason they set their preferred aged limit at five was 'just because that was a section on the form'.

Other parents who had also settled early on adopting an older child cited moral reasons for their decision:

We didn't want a baby, but we were prepared to take up to about [age] nine. And we sort of knew that between six and nine they were very unlikely to be placed, so we took the decision that we would do that mainly to give a kid another go really, a second chance. (Jennifer, parent of children placed at ages six and two)

Through choosing to adopt an older child, Jennifer and her partner felt that they were giving a child a chance to have a home that they may not otherwise have had. In this instance, the fact that the couple did not wish to parent a baby gave an opportunity to perform what they perceived to be a moral act. It is salient that although altruism was not the initial motivation, as Jennifer and her partner came to adoption for reasons of infertility, moral reasoning was still an important factor in their decision-making. This shows how for many of the parents, motivation was not binary – either due to infertility *or* moral reasoning. Non-voluntary childlessness played a role in their decision to adopt but was not the entire story. Some began the process with some awareness of the potential difficulties while others came to understand this throughout the assessment process. The decision to adopt, therefore, was often about both infertility *and* morality.

For other parents, the primary reason for choosing an older child was due to a consideration of their own and other family members' ages, including other children living in the home. Below is an example of this:

I'm 44 and technically I would have been 37 when [child] was born and I think if you think about the bigger picture, it means that we're not going to be dodderly elderly [parents]. . . It made sense, and I think that I feel like I've caught people up. (Rose, parent of a child placed at age seven)

Older children as potentially less risky

Another key theme in the participants' decision-making was the notion of adopting a child who was old enough for any developmental issues to be apparent. For some parents, adopting an older child was perceived as less risky than adopting a very young one where difficulties may not yet be fully understood or visible. An example of this thinking is illustrated by one set of parents below:

Sophie: Talking through it with our social worker, they explained that often babies have a lot of uncertainties in terms of health and...development and so the age thing definitely moved.

Ben: Yeah... Once we had been on the initial course, you learn more about children and what the pros and cons are of older or younger children, it actually made a bit more sense... You never thought you would get a baby, and I'm not into babies anyway. (Sophie and Ben, parents of children placed at ages six and four)

In some cases, adopters had already accepted that older children are likely to be less developmentally risky prior to the assessment process. For others, conversations with social workers had been a catalyst for parents to appreciate this possibility. Although Sophie had initially imagined parenting a younger child, her awareness of the state of the marketplace meant that she and her partner did not think they would 'get a baby'. It is noteworthy that this realisation was shaped by 'talking it through with our social worker'.

Stretching of preferences

Several parents had initially hoped to adopt a younger child but through the process of assessment and their developing perception of the state of the marketplace had altered their preferences regarding the child's age. In some instances, this had happened prior to the point of any links being made with potential children, often with encouragement from their social worker early in the process. Most did not feel negatively about these changes and accepted, perhaps reluctantly, that an element of flexibility was part of their adoption journey as they had not had any initial matches and widening their criteria would increase their chances of securing a child. For example, Ruth was encouraged by her social worker to consider a child whom she would not otherwise have looked at:

My social worker nagged me, she said, 'You need to look at this little boy', I said, 'No, I'm not'...this was a bad time... I had a serious discussion with her as to whether or not I could carry on with the process at that point, and she said, 'You need to look at this little boy'. 'No, he's too old.' 'You need to look at him, I think it will work.' 'No.' And in the end she persuaded me to have his social worker and the family finder come round and tell me a bit more about him. (Ruth, parent of a child placed at age five)

In this instance, the social worker was key to persuading Ruth to consider a particular older child. As she describes, this came at a time where she was considering abandoning the adoption process altogether. Despite her protests that the child was too old, the social worker persisted, and she went on to be matched with the child. This example highlights the role that social workers can play as gatekeepers and brokers in adoptive parents' journeys to parenthood and the balancing act that is required. Whereas for most adopters in the study, the decision to adopt an older child was framed as a positive, proactive choice, albeit sometimes after a process of learning about the needs and availability of the children awaiting placement, this was not the case for a small minority. For them, adopting an older child was seen as the *only* option that remained available if they wanted to become parents. For example, Linda noted that if she had stuck to her original preference of adopting a younger child, she felt it was unlikely that she would have found a match:

[Child] was four and a half or four at the time [when the adopter saw her profile]... I'd had to open my scope up to older children because I just wasn't getting anything with the younger ones, so it was a case of having to face reality. (Linda, parent of a child placed at age five)

Sibling groups

Out of the 14 families interviewed for the study, half had begun the process with a desire to adopt a different number of children from what they had eventually accepted. There appeared to be a good deal of movement in this area. In the seven families where there was a shift regarding the number of children desired, four went on to have more children placed than they had imagined and three went on to have fewer. Of those who adopted fewer than imagined, one was a single adopter who was persuaded that an individual child would be more manageable than siblings, one family was deemed not to have the financial resources to adopt two children and one family who had been fairly ambivalent about numbers decided in the assessment process that one child would be a better fit in their family than two.

Of those who had more children placed with them than they initially imagined, one set of adopters described their change of mind as caused by the 'process'; they had gradually changed the type of family they had in mind from viewing different profiles of sibling pairs rather than individual children. Several parents realised that if they adopted more than one child they could instantly achieve their desired family size without having to repeat the potentially difficult and lengthy adoption process (as described in Palmer, 2020). One family broadened the number of children that they were willing to have because the local authority offered a support package that gave them the resources to have more children. In the final family, the adopters stated that their social worker had persuaded them to change their mind to consider two children rather than one. They viewed their social worker's encouragement to agree to this as a sign that the social worker recognised and appreciated their potential as parents:

[Adoption social worker] knew that we were really serious, and she said to us quite candidly... 'You've said one, would you consider two?' And we said 'Well... we had always said if we had been lucky enough to naturally have one child we wouldn't have stopped there'... So, all of a sudden then she was saying... 'But you can cherry pick... You're taking them off the shelf, aren't you?' And we sort of thought about it and said, 'Well we'd be open to up to two'. (Jennifer, parent of children placed at ages six and two)

In addition to the influence of perceptions of choice described above, moral reasoning was also mentioned by several parents who adopted sibling groups. For example, Phillip (parent of children placed at ages five and two) stated: 'We always said that we weren't prepared to split up a sibling group... We were adamant we weren't going to break up a family'. Adopting siblings was seen as a way to perform a moral act, to keep siblings together who might otherwise have been separated.

Two families in the sample had adopted large sibling groups, defined as groups of three children or more. One of these parents, Charlotte, explained how she had always hoped for a large family and adopting a large sibling group was a way to achieve this instantly. Although the sibling group contained a child over the age of four, the other children

were younger, and so it was the combination of wanting a sibling group of relatively young children that led her to become a parent to an older child. Therefore, as Ivaldi (2000) suggests, in this instance, the adoption of a sibling group paints a distorting picture in terms of the parent's desires about the age of her children. It was not the child's older age that influenced her decision-making, but the relatively young cumulative age of the sibling group that made her and her partner consider them.

Finding the 'right' child: Ideas of destiny and fate

The perception that there was a 'right' child waiting for adopters was a powerful narrative within the interviews. Adopters phrased this in different ways. For some, when they saw their child's profile, they had a sense that this was the right child for them. For example, Margaret explained:

There was a couple of children that were sort of in the background but we both immediately had a connection with [child] and that was really important for us. . . From the paperwork and his picture, we immediately. . . he was lively, he was energetic, he had some educational problems, but it was nothing that John and I felt we couldn't cope with. . . He just seemed perfect, didn't he? (Margaret, parent of a child placed at age seven)

Rose (parent of a child placed at age seven) spoke of it being 'chance and fantastic fate' that they had found their daughter. Similarly, Christina (parent of a child placed at age four) stated that she knew immediately they would accept the match as they fell in love with their child's name: 'I just thought it was a beautiful name'. In contrast, for Nicola, who did not feel an immediate connection with her children, it was difficult to explain why she had chosen them:

It is difficult to put into words, because it sounds terrible, you sometimes take longer to choose a pair of shoes or choose a house or something like that. . . without thinking about it too much, it's just, I don't know what made us choose [them]. (Nicola, parent of children placed at ages four and two)

Her admission that there was no sense of immediate connection with her children proves uncomfortable ('it sounds terrible'), and she appears to acknowledge that she has broken a 'feeling rule' (Hochschild, 1983: 56), whereby adoptive parents are 'supposed' to feel this attraction.

The notion of the 'right' child was also called into question when parents felt an immediate emotional connection with a child's profile, only for the match not to be made. As Linda explained:

[Social worker] presented me with a few profiles and I kept putting my name forward. . . I mean, the first one I looked at I can still remember her actually. She was a lovely little thing. . . I can still see the picture in my mind's eye. . . because it was that first one. . . and I got all emotional and I went 'Oh yes, I want her'. I had no idea that the process would be the way it was. . . So, she [social worker] put my name forward and of course nothing came of it. (Linda, parent of a child placed at age five)

The child's profile clearly had a considerable impact on Linda; she notes that she 'can still see the picture in her mind's eye'. In her account she recognises that her instant sense of connection with the child's profile may have been, in part, due to her inexperience in the adoption process. Having gone on to express interest in numerous children that did not progress, she adopted a more pragmatic approach. But, unlike Linda, most parents in the sample were matched relatively quickly with their child or children, and stories of blocked progress were relatively uncommon.

Children who had been 'miss-sold'

Several adopters spoke of the gap between the information that they had been given about their child and the reality of the individual with whom they were matched. Phillip (parent to children placed at ages five and two) stated:

To be honest with you what we ended up with was...umm, I hate putting children in the way of sounding like buying a car, but if I said that we were buying a top of the range car and it had everything on it, which is what we were led to believe, and then actually what we ended up with was a five-year-old car with bits that were broken and didn't work on it anymore, and weren't quite strictly how the salesperson's pitch was.

As Phillip found, once he was living with his children, the reality was different to that which he had been led to believe from the profiles he had seen. His analogy is reminiscent of ideas that would fit better with notions of consumer rights than with the adoption of children – and he acknowledges his discomfort at making the comparison. But his analogy fits well with the notion of a marketplace where sales talk based on selected information is often necessary to sell an unattractive product. Phillip went on to explain that some time after the adoption had been finalised, information came to light about his elder child's previous difficult behaviour in foster care, which was similar to the challenges he was now facing.

In another family, Fiona questioned the adoption process, suggesting that key information may be omitted by social workers to secure a match for children:

I think the big thing is that the social workers want [children] to be adopted...because they can see the benefits of them having a sound family environment...so is it in the social workers' best interests to tell an adoptive family everything? And the answer is, well, possibly not. So, having spoken with the foster carers subsequently...there were bits that we maybe should have been told. (Fiona, parent of child placed at age six)

She suggests that social workers are not impartial participants in the process and have vested interests, wanting to see children moved into permanent families. They are looking for the best result for the child rather than necessarily meeting the needs or hopes of the adoptive parents. In other words, the parent is there to meet the needs of the child, not the other way around (Howe, 2003; Rogers, 2017). The information that Fiona was able to glean from her child's former foster carers after they had been placed with her appeared to be different from what she was initially given. Sadly, in Fiona's family, the adoption eventually broke down.

Discussion

The findings outlined above indicate several points that warrant further consideration. Firstly, it is apparent in the accounts of many parents that their initial preferences and thoughts about future children were not static and evolved considerably throughout the adoption process. This concurs with the findings of Dance and Farmer (2014) who found that there was a great deal of movement in adopters' expectations from the point that they first considered the possibility. Professionals were frequently cited as an important source of information and expertise for adopters making decisions around their future child, and discussions with social workers were identified as especially significant. But this can be a difficult path for social workers to navigate in order not to push adoptive parents too far from their initial thoughts or, indeed, too far from what they are likely to be able to cope with. Farmer and Dance (2016) caution that where serious compromises occur, family stability is threatened if they cannot be balanced.

It is also of note that several adopters considered adopting an older child as a way of reducing the risk of adopting a child with developmental uncertainties, which can be prevalent among children in care (Ford et al., 2007; Woolgar and Scott, 2013), as these would be likely to be more clearly apparent in an older child. But, on the other hand, research has consistently highlighted that the child's older age at adoptive placement is a significant risk factor for placement disruption, most likely due to longer exposure to adversity in their early years and its impact on their development and behaviour (Palacios et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the findings highlight some benefits of adopting older children. For example, Rose noted that through adopting an older child, she felt that she had 'caught up' with peers. This fits with Weir's (2003) notion of 'leapfrogging patterns' in adoptive families, whereby adopters can leapfrog through the stages of the life-cycle, catching up with peers through having a non-infant placed with them. This, for some prospective parents, could create opportunities to build families quickly and strengthen support from friends and family members who already have similarly aged children. This might also help to reduce some of the isolation that can often occur among new adoptive parents (Palmer, 2020).

Several parents in the study felt an immediate sense of connection to their child when they first heard details about them or saw a picture. As Baxter and colleagues note, these accounts, which draw on ideas of fate or destiny, challenge notions of adoption being a 'second best' (2014: 253) route to parenthood and perceive it as a way by which parents are better able to make choices about the children that they parent. However, for those who did not feel a connection to the children who subsequently became theirs, this expectation could create unease as it questioned their true feelings for their child.

Handling the deep emotions surrounding adoption is only one of the many complexities to be navigated by parents embarking on stranger adoptions whereby the child is not known to them prior to a potential match. They also have to find their way through the complexity of the choices with which they are presented. While the notion of the 'right' child might be helpful in such situations, giving them a sense of entitlement to their child (Krusiewicz and Wood, 2001; Sandelowski, Harris and Holditch-Davies, 1993), acknowledging the arbitrary nature of choosing future children is an uncomfortable story to tell and can serve to make adoptive families feel as if they have been haphazardly formed, rather than brought together by fate. Furthermore, the language of the marketplace was used by several adopters in the study to signify their discomfort with the choices with which they were presented; comparisons were drawn with buying shoes, property or cars. Social workers were

also reported to use marketplace terminology, as in Jennifer's account, stating that they were 'taking [children] off the shelf'.

Choice was identified as a salient theme within all the accounts given by parents. But the notion of parental choice became questionable when parents found that their child had been misrepresented to them in the information that they had been given. Where details were perceived to have been withheld or incomplete, they became unable to make informed choices about whether potential matches were right for them, and whether they were equipped to meet the needs of the child(ren) concerned. This reiterates the complexity to be navigated within the adoption marketplace: social workers aim to ensure children are given every opportunity to be placed with permanent families but there is a risk that 'marketing' children as adoptable products may cause information to be held back from parents, or even overlooked or not investigated, which raises the risk of later family instability and placement disruption (Dance, Neil and Rogers, 2017; Farmer and Dance, 2016; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

Notions of marketplace reasoning, moral reasoning, choice and fate (the understanding that there was a 'right' child 'out there' for the parent) were key factors in the adoptive parents' narrative accounts of their decision-making. In many instances, they drew upon moral reasoning when making the decision to adopt older children or sibling groups. Moral reasoning and marketplace thinking were not necessarily mutually exclusive; adoptive parents usually considered the societal as well as the personal benefits of adopting a child. But the ability to choose was not always viewed positively. Several participants expressed discomfort with the ways in which the process potentially commodified children. In some instances, they used the language of the marketplace to highlight their discomfort, such as Phillip's likening of the process to that of buying a used car and Nicola comparing her decision-making to choosing shoes.

One of the ways in which adopters explained the rationale by which they chose their child or children was by articulating their belief that there was a 'right' child for them. However, to find the 'right' child, it was necessary for adoptive parents to engage with and negotiate the uncomfortable decisions and processes associated with participation in the marketplace. As these uncomfortable decisions had to be made whilst their suitability was being assessed by social workers, this scrutiny may have made them hesitant to ask for more details and to weigh up the information. Furthermore, as flexibility appeared to be valued by social work professionals, there was some pressure for potential adopters to extend their preferences to ensure they were a proposition for the child.

The idea of an adoption marketplace is an uneasy analogy, and yet we argue that there is value in pursuing this as a way of making sense of some of the complexities and contradictions of the adoption process. From this study, it is clear that adopters draw on some kind of marketplace reasoning and social workers appear to have presented options to them in these terms. Adopters are informed in their decision-making by their understandings of the state of the adoption marketplace in terms of the availability and characteristics of children and an awareness that they are essentially in competition with other prospective parents. The adopters of older children in this study therefore made choices and compromises to increase their chances of securing a match with a child.

These findings offer several recommendations for improved practice. Firstly, for adopters of older children, it is likely that considerable movement from their initial preferences or thoughts about their future children will occur during their adoption journey. Most participants were comfortable with the changes and viewed them as a positive result of the learning that they had gained during the adoption process. However, as the process of making these decisions was often described as difficult and uncomfortable, professional empathy and understanding are essential given the magnitude of the decisions that have to be made.

Secondly, given the influence held by social workers in this process, and the weight given to their advice by prospective adoptive parents, it is important that this trust is recognised and upheld by social workers by giving an honest picture of the needs and presentation of the children that they represent to prospective adopters. Prospective parents need to have an accurate representation of potential children when making decisions about their future child or children and have to understand the possible support that their child(ren) may require. It is important that information is also provided by those who know the child(ren) well, such as previous foster carers, and that they are afforded the opportunity to ask questions without worrying that their concerns may be counted against them in the assessment process.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This article sheds light on a previously underexplored area and provides a contribution to understanding the decision-making processes of prospective adoptive parents who adopt older children from their own perspectives. The participants in the study all had a child placed in their care approximately nine months before they were interviewed so the experience was relatively fresh in their memories. The data presented here are based on interviews with a relatively small sample of parents who all adopted during a specific timeframe and in a particular policy context, so some caution needs to be exercised around the generalisability of the study.

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