

# The Role of the Social Worker in Adoption: Ethics and Human Rights

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# Outline

- ▶ Background to the Enquiry
- ▶ Methods and participants
- ▶ Key messages: the role of adoption in UK
- ▶ Key messages: the role of the social worker in adoption, ethics and human rights

# Background

- ▶ BASW – policy, ethics and human rights policy committee
- ▶ Developments since 2010 particularly
- ▶ Non-consensual nature of adoption and challenges from Europe

# Methods

- ▶ Seminars
- ▶ Questionnaires
- ▶ Interviews
- ▶ Focus groups
- ▶ A scoping review of the literature

# Defining ethics

- ▶ We defined ethics as follows: *In its broadest sense ethics is concerned with looking at what is the right thing to do and what ought to be done. Ethics help us consider the benefits of actions or decisions for individuals, groups or society in general and the importance of the values and principles behind our decisions. So it moves us beyond questions such as 'does this policy work?' and it makes us consider questions such as 'is this policy right?'*

# Defining human rights

- ▶ *Broadly speaking, we see human rights as emphasising our common humanity and the importance of social, economic, political, and legal rights. So in the context of this enquiry a crucial question is whether all families can use the economic, social, legal and political rights they need to ensure their children's safety and wellbeing.*

# Participants

- ▶ 105 social workers
- ▶ 56 birth family members
- ▶ 44 adoptive parents
- ▶ 32 adopted people
- ▶ 15 legal personnel
- ▶ 24 academics
- ▶ 24 related professionals
- ▶ 13 organisations

# Some thoughts on the process

- ▶ The seminars, in particular, provided a unique and dynamic space for hopeful and helpful conversations between those who do not normally have such opportunities
- ▶ Telling and hearing stories were central and very powerful aspects
- ▶ Challenging myths and offering opportunities for re-appraisal

# The use of adoption: key messages

- ▶ Limited evidence of views that saw adoption as either wholly good or wholly bad
- ▶ But a very emotive area with powerful feelings mobilised....
- ▶ Focus was on how it was being used in specific contexts
- ▶ Focus also on the model of adoption being used

# The use of adoption: key messages

- ▶ All voices need to be heard
- ▶ Problem of the 'happy ever after narrative'
- ▶ The status of adoption and its relationship to other permanence arrangements needs continued discussion
- ▶ The current model of adoption fails to recognise multiple attachments and complex identities adequately
- ▶ Thus, a rethink of contact arrangements between adopted children and their families is needed

# Thinking holistically

- ▶ The use of adoption needs to be discussed in the context of wider social policies and the impact on already disadvantaged families and communities
- ▶ This is vital in the light of the research evidence on the links between poverty and a child's chances of becoming subject to child protection processes and/or looked after (this is a much misunderstood point)

# Listening to social workers

- ▶ How did they talk about ethics?
- ▶ Evidence of 'ethics work'- austerity, timescales, scorecards
- ▶ Problem with talking of terms of right or wrong
- ▶ Fragmented roles can mean fragmented approaches to children and families
- ▶ Delay ...
- ▶ Post adoption issues

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- ▶ Lack of human rights talk ( except in NI)
  - ▶ Human rights are for adults!
  - ▶ Children's welfare or their rights are what matters

# Listening to those who experience social work services

- ▶ A surprising amount of similarity between accounts of birth and adoptive parents
- ▶ The quality of the relationship is crucial- different outcomes attributed to different workers
- ▶ Problems with asking for help in a risk dominated climate
- ▶ Complexity of services in post-adoption contexts
- ▶ Some groups are particularly vulnerable ....

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- ▶ Identity - a central aspect of adopted people's lives
  - ▶ Siblings matter
  - ▶ CONTACT
  - ▶ Letterbox contact is problematic
  - ▶ Post adoption support services need to be available for all and through the lifespan

# Some quotes:

- ▶ *'Children are part of families – a social worker cannot only be the child's social worker.'* (birth mother)
- ▶ *'Contact is not even about foster care and adoption. It is about something much deeper, something much more ancient than modern policies and procedures. It's about the connections you make with people as you live your life. It's about the right to love and be loved.'* (adopted person)
- ▶ *'Children by and large are the innocent ones in all of this. They have done nothing wrong. They shouldn't be penalised by not seeing their siblings because of what's going on. Why should they have their rights stripped, their human rights stripped just because the adults made a made a mistake? And so therefore, I think adoption should be open.'* (birth mother – children with her and adopted)
- ▶ *'An adopted child is a 'shared child' – searching for birth family does not mean losing the adoptive family.'* (adopted person)

# Other Professionals and Organisations

- ▶ Similar messages to other groups:
  - ❖ The impact of austerity, diminishing support services and a risk averse climate on families and prevention of children coming into care.
  - ❖ The importance of post adoption support for all – on a life-long basis
  - ❖ Need to re-think contact and move away from formulaic responses to more flexible individualised plans

# We can do things differently

Some examples:

- ▶ Family Drug and Alcohol Court (FDAC) – a more ethically sound process
- ▶ Specialist resources for working with parents with learning difficulties (CHANGE)
- ▶ The lessons learned from developing support services for birth parents
- ▶ Exploration of use of alternative ways to support families (e.g. short breaks/respite care)

## Concluding Remarks

*The Enquiry demonstrated that hopeful and helpful conversations are both possible and absolutely vital.*