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**What happens in the making of an adoptive family?  
Rethinking matching in adoptions from care**

*Louise Sims*



**Thesis presented for the award of Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Sussex  
August 2018**

**Collaborative PhD supported by CORAM BAAF**

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not and will not, be submitted in whole or in part at another University for the award of any another degree.

Signature:

## Summary

This study examines the confluence of practices that are generated when the state brings strangers together to make a brand new family. Concerns about matching, the process in which an adoptive family is made, are driving significant changes in the organisation of adoption services yet 'research evidence is lacking- not just sparse, but virtually absent' (Quinton, 2012, p.1). This study addresses these gaps and offers original empirical and conceptual contributions to the knowledge base. My approach draws on sociological and anthropological perspectives through which family life is understood as constructed through day-to-day activities, action, imagination and emotional interactions. This study focuses on the 'doing' of family *and* the 'doing' of social work to illuminate and analyse everyday practices.

The research design is original in the field and builds on innovative methodologies at the interface of pedagogy, practice and research. Through a psychoanalytically informed multi-modal ethnographic study I observed a single matching process in 'real time' over 9 months. This methodology afforded direct access to dyadic, familial, professional and organizational relationships in homes, offices, forums, in documents and in email correspondence. Group analytic practices were used to help access subjective and sociocultural dimensions. The data generated from these groups (which included adults adopted from care, adoptive parents, researchers, social workers and policy advisors) allowed the juxtaposition of contemporary matching practices with intergenerational perspectives. Collaborative processes brought a multiplicity of minds to the study helping maintain a recursive and critically reflective approach. This unique data-set provides an opportunity to consider matching through multiple lenses *and* as a lens through which to consider multiple practices.

This thesis makes four analytical claims. Firstly, I suggest that during a matching process intense emotional forces, multiple paradoxes and uncertainty converge, creating a 'liminal hotspot' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.147). For those directly involved, (including children, carers, prospective parents and professionals) navigating this space requires spatialized and temporalized strategies. In this study social work practices were found to function as necessary rites of passage, tools and processes which could also mitigate polarizing forces. Secondly, I suggest that matching is a site where work and non-work practices become entangled. In the midst of these entanglements those involved have to navigate 'distinct cultures of child rearing' (Thomson et al., 2011, p.4). In this context the role of the foster carer emerges as extraordinarily complex. Thirdly, this thesis claims that current powerful social projections and transformative processes are played out and become visible within matching practices. Matching practices are considered to be an epistemic lens into a matrix of tensions relating to care and authority.

Finally, this research suggests that reductions in welfare spending, increasing pressures on services and a policy pre-occupation with timeliness are undermining essential deliberative processes. This study found that this is a high risk situation; creating unnecessary vulnerability across a workforce, across multiple families and ultimately in the lives of children.

## **Acknowledgements**

My thanks go to my brilliant supervisory team Barry, Gillian and John. Thank you. It has been a complete privilege.

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My research participants took time out of busy lives and gave me access to personal and professional spaces, sharing their time, thoughts and feelings. Thank you.

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Trish and Caroline generously and carefully read this thesis. Thank you both.

To my Mum and my Dad, to Jake, Noah and Joe, sorry! It's nearly over...

Finally, to all my former colleagues at 253 and particularly Mary, Gillian, Pascale, Karen, Nicky, Nicola, Claire, Debbie, Sharon, Siobhan, Caroline, Jo and Carol. This is my work about our work and I have thought about you all throughout.

## Foreword

For story-tellers and those touched by adoption, ‘the missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void’ (Winterson, 2012, p.5). In Western cultural studies adoption is recognised as a rich source of stories, ‘...a fiction-generating machine’ (Homans, 2006, p.5). Adoption is also still widely considered ‘...a fictive or “as if” form of family making, fabricated or figurative’ (Homans, 2013, pp.3-4).

In this study I work with the possibilities afforded by the relationship between fiction and adoption. I use ‘an old principle widely adhered to in storytelling today’ (Moura, 2014, n.p.) and use the 3-act structure to organise the thesis. This structure has its roots in Greek dramaturgy and ‘can be found in plays, poetry, novels, comic books, short stories, video games, and the movies’ (ibid). At a basic level Act 1 is the Set-Up, Act II is the Confrontation and Act III is the Resolution (discussed in Moura, 2014). Prior to the Set-Up I provide a glossary of characters. Act 1 contains an introduction, the literature review, the theoretical framework and the methodology. Act II comprises 3 distinct analysis chapters or novellas. Act III contains the discussion, the conclusion and the afterword. The Acts fulfil different roles within the overall story of the research and are written differently. I am drawing in particular on the work of Froggett et al. (2014), who juxtapose ‘experience-near’ and ‘experience-distant’ approaches to writing and argue for ‘...the value of combining arts-based and social scientific perspectives when working with imagery, affect and researcher imagination’ (para. 5.62). In this thesis Act I and Act III are largely (although not completely) written through an approach I understand to be ‘experience-distant’. In Act II I develop a dramaturgical ‘experience-near’ writing style. Here I use associative writing to attend to ‘the affective, emotional, irrational and unconscious dimensions of subjective and social life’ that emerge through the analytic process (Redman, 2016, p.84).

My approach is aligned to the field of psychosocial studies understood by Baraitser ‘as a set of transdisciplinary practices that allow movement across different traditions of thought without having to fully belong anywhere’ (2015, p.212). Yet this doctorate does belong *somewhere*, it is derived from and speaks to social work practice. This tension (to be free and to belong) is felt throughout the thesis. It is a tension addressed by Redman (2016) who asks if transdisciplinary approaches which undo ‘what we believe we know’ and emphasise

‘process and becoming’ can also ‘identify what something is, how it has come about and how it might be made better’ (p.76). He suggests that following Rustin (1998);

...we approach these questions in a both/and manner, advocating a ‘negative practice’ that at the same time acknowledges its dependence on and ability to contribute to a ‘positive structure’ (p.76).

The both/and approach advocated by Rustin and Redman is helpful in thinking about the contrasting demands ‘to not know’ and ‘to know’. This formulation does not eliminate tension and that is not the aim. The task is to use this tension productively. This foreword is intended as a heads up for the reader. In my thesis I am trying to craft a social work doctorate, from ‘arts-based and social scientific perspectives’ (Froggett et al., 2014, para. 5.62). I look to a wide pool of disciplinary and cultural practices for help.

## GLOSSARY OF CHARACTERS

### MAIN ACTORS

**Claire:** Senior social worker working in an adoption team. Claire volunteered to be part of the study and approached a number of approved adopters to ask if they would be prepared to participate in the research alongside her. Debbie agreed (see below). As part of Claire's role she has responsibility for 'family finding' for specific children, one of whom is an infant called Lily.

**Debbie:** A single prospective adopter approved after a lengthy and complex assessment process. Her first social worker, Lara, left to have a baby. Claire, her second social worker, has been working with Debbie for over a year. Debbie is a teacher, cyclist and artist. She lives alone in a 3 bedroom house. She is being 'matched' with Lily.

**Lily:** 10 month old infant removed from birth parents at birth due to child protection concerns. She is subject to a Placement Order which directs the Local Authority to pursue an adoptive placement for her. Lily is fostered by Jane and Mike who she has lived with since birth. She also shares her home with Fay (see below). Lily's social worker Zara has known her since birth. Lily is starting to crawl and her favourite toy is Sammy the Seal.

**Louise:** Researcher, senior social worker and writer/narrator of the thesis. Interested in the dynamics surrounding the matching process, an area of social work she specialised in as a practitioner. Louise is a mother by birth to two sons.

**Jane:** Experienced foster carer in her early 60s and married to Mike. The couple have two adult daughters who have both just had babies. They also foster Fay, an 8 year old girl under a Special Guardianship Order. They have committed to providing a family for Fay throughout her life. Jane is the main carer for Lily and Fay. Mike is a lorry driver and often works away from home.

**Fay:** 8 year old child who is 'looked after'. Fay has lived with Jane and Mike for a number of years. Her background is unknown but we do know she has a younger sister Heather who has been adopted. Her birth mother is Chloe who lives locally and she has some contact with Fay.

**Sandra:** Senior social worker in the Fostering Team. Sandra is Jane and Mike's social worker and has known the family for many years. She is experienced in supporting transitions in foster care. She works part-time and is a mother to two children.

**Zara:** Senior social worker in the Child in Need Team. Zara is Lily's social worker. Zara has a huge work load and is very stretched by the competing demands of her work. She works part-time and has two young children.



## **SUPPORTING CAST**

**David:** Member of Many Minds Group convened for the purposes of the study. David is a father by adoption and recently a grandfather. He is a social worker, writer, researcher and policy consultant.

**Jenny:** Member of Many Minds Group and facilitator of the group. Jenny is a social worker working in adoption services and is a doctoral researcher. She was adopted as an infant and is mother by birth to two children.

**Marie:** Member of Many Minds Group. Marie is a social worker and a doctoral researcher. She is a mother by birth to two children.

**Karen:** Member of Many Minds Group. She is a social worker and specialist adoption and fostering consultant working and writing for training and policy.

**Angela:** Member of Many Minds Group. She is a social worker and trainer consultant specialising in foster care. She is a Chair of Fostering Panels.

**Sarah:** Member of Many Minds Group. Campaigner and consultant specialising in open adoption practices. Sarah developed services promoting access to records and information for people affected by family separation.

**Andrea:** Member of Adoption Support Group for over 20 years. Andrea is a mother by adoption to 3 siblings. Adopted with her female partner prior to the Adoption and Children Act 2002, at a time when very few single sex couples were being approved to adopt.

**Edwina:** Member of Adoption Support Group for over 20 years. Edwina is a mother by adoption and a grandmother.

**Gail:** Member of Adoption Support Group for over 20 years. Gail is a mother by adoption and a grandmother.

**Pauline:** Member of Adoption Support Group for over 20 years. She is a mother by adoption and adopted with her husband.

**Sue:** Member of Adoption Support Group for over 20 years. Sue is a mother by adoption and adopted with her husband. She is primary carer for her grandchildren for whom she has special guardianship orders.

**Dawn:** Member of Adoption Support Group for over 20 years. She is a mother by adoption to a sibling group, all now adults. She adopted with her husband and is the host of the group

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# Act 1

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

I was initially awarded funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in April 2014 (to start in September of that year) for a collaborative PhD exploring the ways in which social work supported adoptive families post adoption-order. What were the issues facing adoptive families as young people approached adulthood? How were endings managed and separation navigated? My background is that of a social worker with a decade of experience in adoption practice. My intention was to use this experience to design a 'practice-near' study through which I could examine the dynamics of the work. The aim was to illuminate and critically examine practice in order to improve it. My collaborative partner, the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), were well established as a successful charitable organization producing and disseminating research, policy and practice guidance. In 2014 the organization was 36 years old. I was familiar with its outputs having used its practice tools, accessed its training and read its journal (*Adoption and Fostering*) throughout my career. The original design of the study was premised on the importance of the practice relationship in adoption work. In my own practice I had undertaken work with families over many years. As a researcher I was interested in the ways this relationship was used as a form of intervention over time and particularly at pivotal moments in the life course involving transition. The initial proposal for the study was developed through a Masters in Social Science Research Methods (MSc). The proposal for the doctoral study was supported by colleagues at the University of Sussex and BAAF. It was further endorsed by the ESRC award.

In the UK in 2014 researchers (like me) interested in exploring adoptive family life, particularly those with a practice orientation, were well placed to access funding and institutional support. There was a high level of interest in adoption. In some ways this was nothing new. Adoptive family life has long been a source of interest to researchers across a range of disciplines (discussed in Sales, 2015). Nearly 30 years ago the adoption literature was described as 'voluminous' (Thoburn, 1990, p.4). In other ways 2014 marked a new era for adoption practice. Features of the field that had been relatively stable for decades underwent significant, possibly even paradigmatic, changes. In later chapters I try to locate these changes within a historical context. Radical change does not just come from nowhere. In this introduction I want to zone in on the specificities of the changes and their intersections in the context of this study.

I had begun developing the proposal for the PhD in September 2012. The report 'Further Action on Adoption: Finding more loving homes' was published by the Department for Education in January 2013. At the time I knew of the report but the details may have passed me by. I was 7 months pregnant and gave birth to Joe in March 2013. The report built on the Government's ambitions for the sector as mapped in 2012 in 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay'. The key driver in the 2012 report was '...to accelerate the whole adoption process so that more children benefit from adoption and more rapidly' (Department for Education, 2012, p.3). The resultant legislative, policy and practice changes became known as the adoption reform agenda. The 2013 report developed the reform agenda, and proposals included new ways to improve adoption support. A key initiative was the Prototype Adoption Support Fund (ASF). In this new model social work practitioners conduct adoption support assessments and help families identify the appropriate support package from agency approved providers. Practitioners and families could then apply for funding from the ASF, the premise being that the creation of a market place in adoption support would encourage the development of innovative services, create choice and serve to empower families who could choose the appropriate intervention (Department for Education, 2016). The sector had to assimilate this news into practice. Practitioners and their agencies had to adjust to a new way of working. Through this initiative the practice relationship in adoption support was no longer the primary form of intervention. Whilst the social work role was not rendered completely defunct both the field of study and the object of inquiry had changed.

In April 2014 the publication of two different research studies generated other changes. These changes did not seismically alter the field of study but they did alter the course of this PhD. The first, 'Beyond the Adoption Order' (commissioned as part of the reform agenda), set out '...to calculate the national adoption disruption rate (post order) and to report on the experiences of those involved when adoptions disrupt' (Selwyn et al., 2014, p.3, my brackets). The study findings were initially presented at a one day conference organized by the BAAF Research Group in March 2014 which I attended. A number of stakeholders (including the Coalition government) were highly invested in adoption being shown to work. The research study concluded that adoption did work. Adoptive family life for most children and their adoptive parents was good. The report found that children overall made extraordinary developmental progress and experienced love and a sense of belonging in their lives. In the conference hall, as Julie Selwyn announced that the disruption rate had been calculated at between 3-9%, there was a palpable sense of relief.

The report (and the presentation), however, did raise concerns about practice. The report found that adoption support services were not working well for a minority of parents who reported feeling ‘...blamed, demoralised and unsupported.’ (Selwyn et al., 2014, p.287). Quotes from research participants were used to illustrate the frustrations and sometimes the despair of adopters for whom family life was very hard. The focus of many of these accounts was the difficulties of caring for children who exhibited disturbing, rejecting and sometimes violent behaviours. Some adopters also fed back to interviewers that they felt they had been encouraged to consider children who in hindsight they were ill suited to parent. The researchers pointed to the need for more research into matching practices. Serendipitously, a small UK based qualitative study exploring matching practices was also published in April 2014. To far less political attention Boswell and Cudmore (2014) published a paper examining the transitional process and the beginnings of adoptive family life. This study raised questions about the attention given to the emotional needs of children in the transition from foster care. The authors suggested that the process was generating high levels of anxiety and resultant organizational defensive strategies. Questions were raised specifically in relation to the ways in which the child’s relationship with their foster carer/s was understood and taken care of by practitioners. These findings echoed the work of Lanyado (2003) and Wakelyn (2012).

Both studies resonated. As a practitioner I had worried about this aspect of the work and found it very stressful. I had noted too the lack of guidance and research surrounding the ways in which adoptive families were made. This was particularly incongruent as the adoption assessment process, which directly precedes the making a family process, is highly regulated. In my research design I had proposed a study that would seek to examine the ways in which the practice relationship was used as a form of intervention over time with adoptive families, and particularly at pivotal moments in the life course involving transition. The intention was always to produce research which could help to improve practice. The ASF did not make the original proposal meaningless but it did lead me to question the relevance of the study for the practice community. ‘Beyond the Adoption Order’ alerted me to the significance of the matching process both as a pivotal moment and as something that had significant consequences for future family life. My encounter with the Boswell and Cudmore study was galvanizing. Things had shifted.

The reform agenda generated the specific conditions through which this collaborative doctoral study came to be. It also directly (through the ASF and the government funded



Beyond the Adoption Order) almost immediately altered the course of the study. In a practice field undergoing rapid and radical reform I had to find an area of practice in which the social work role was unlikely to change during the course of a 3 year study. With the support of my supervisors at Sussex and at BAAF I applied to the ESRC to change the focus of the study. The research would still be focused on the social work role in supporting adoptive family life at a time of transition, but this transition would be about a becoming and the creation of a family. How did the practice relationship support the making of adoptive family life? In November 2014 the ESRC approved the changes and I began the process of designing this study.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for this study is bound up in my practice experiences and their intersections with other areas of my life. In this section I highlight two examples and these are 'cases' (for want of a better word) that book end my practice experience as a social worker in adoption. I became a social worker in 2003 and worked as a practitioner undertaking permanence work until 2012. On my first day in the team I was given the Serious Case Review (SCR) relating to the death of John Anthony Smith. This four year old boy had been killed by his adoptive parents. The SCR found that the social workers involved had failed to undertake thorough assessments and had been too readily accepting of the adoptive parents' accounts. National assessment procedures had been changed in response to this SCR. I later learned that the social workers involved had been struck off and that many practitioners (including all my colleagues) felt they had been scapegoated. Also in 2003, to extensive media coverage and intense political scrutiny, Lord Laming published his report into the murder of Victoria Climbié. I began my social work career at a time of heightened attention to assessment practices and risk in relation to children and their families.

In my post I undertook a range of roles relating to foster care and adoption including assessment, supervision, adoption support, family finding and birth records counselling for adults. I also provided consultation for colleagues in other teams around permanency planning. I was promoted to senior social worker in 2006. I gave birth to my first son Noah in 2007. Following 9 months maternity leave I returned to work part-time. I worked in a team of women who all had other caring responsibilities, whether to parents, partners or children. Most of us worked part-time. Over the years (including when pregnant) I worked with colleagues, foster carers, adoptive parents and children under the remit of permanence policy and legislation. One of my roles was that of 'family finder' for named

children for whom adoption was the plan. As a senior social worker, I had responsibility for finding families for harder to place children (including older children and children who were part of sibling groups). In this role I was charged with building a profile of a child in conjunction with the child (depending on their age), their foster carer/s and their social worker. I would visit the child in their home and in other settings (which could include nursery or school). Photographs and video footage of the child would be produced. I was seeking information on which to build a profile and I was trying to get to know the child through their world and their relationships. I would remain involved following a match and would help to formulate plans for the transition to a new family. This might also include work with birth families and the child's social worker around future contact planning.

As a newly qualified social worker my first involvement in this process felt like a disaster. I had been allocated as the social worker for adopters who had been approved and were being linked with a five year old boy from a different locality. During the introductions period it became apparent that this couple were struggling to manage the child's challenging behaviour. They were unable to acknowledge their growing anxiety. The match was eventually stopped after a meeting in which my manager directly challenged the couple to be honest about their feelings. They admitted feeling scared and out of their depth. The momentum of the process, their desire to be parents and their compassion for this little boy meant they had been unable to acknowledge that things weren't right. We jointly decided that the match had to be stopped. My manager and I drove to the offices of the placing agency and held a meeting with the child's social worker and his foster carer. They were devastated and angry. How could they tell this child that he was not wanted by this couple? He had been told they were going to be his new Mum and Dad, now what? Did we deliberately undermine the match? What was the nature of this meeting in which the decision had been made and what was our intervention? A plan was formulated in which the couple would meet the child and an ending of some sort was devised. Months later a meeting was held in which the circumstances of the match were reviewed by the placing agency. There was some criticism of my and my manager's role in the process, which we disagreed with, but chose not to challenge.

Over the years I was involved in multiple matching processes. Most of them progressed to placement and to the granting of an adoption order. Some of this work was relatively straight forward and other aspects were highly complex. I found the work both energizing and stressful. During 2011 I was allocated as the family finder for a six year old boy, Paul.

His age, his background and his presenting behaviours meant that he was a child who would be hard to place. In talking to Paul and visiting him at home and at school I developed a suspicion that the emotional neglect he had experienced in his birth family was being replicated in his foster home. I felt that Paul in his day to day life was not adequately cared for. My concern was not shared by other colleagues although I was supported by my manager.

I was highly motivated to place Paul in a family where he could be cared for and to do this quickly. The idea of him staying in a home where he was not loved was intolerable. For a time his permanency was my mission. It took some time but from profiling work we eventually found a potential family for him. This couple, were foster carers who had always been interested in adoption. They were drawn to Paul and described feeling a connection to him. I connected to their connection. After an informal initial assessment we asked them to resign as foster carers for their agency and I undertook their adoption approval assessment specifically for Paul. This was an additional piece of work which took me over my allocated working hours. I worked in the evenings after I put Noah to bed. The match progressed and was approved by the Adoption Panel. During the introductions process Paul's self-harming behaviour increased; he was head-banging in his sleep and scratching his arms when he was awake. The match should have been stopped or delayed. My manager and I pushed for it to continue and the placement was made. Together we sought to convey our confidence in the capacity of this couple to meet Paul's needs. We performed with a certainty we did not feel. During the introductions I could not sleep and felt highly anxious. On one occasion I was bathing Noah and as I looked down I saw Paul. Noah's arms now had deep scratch marks. I was hallucinating and worlds were colliding. I kept working. Paul moved. I handed in my notice. Paul was adopted six months later. In 2017, during the writing of this thesis I received a message on my mobile phone through the messenger app. It was Paul's adoptive parents. They sent me a photograph of him with a message. They adored him and life was good. I was both delighted and unnerved by the message; delighted because he looked happy, relaxed and loved. Unnerved by the way this news was communicated. How did they get my personal mobile phone number? I had no recollection but I must have given it to them during the matching process. My professional boundaries had slipped along with my psyche.

My rationale for this study is bound up in all the factors I have conscious access to and have elected to remember and record here. This is inevitably a selective and subjective mapping

process. I see these specific 'cases' as intersecting with pivotal times of transition in my own life. In the first example I was becoming a social worker. In the final example something was coming to an end and I was ceasing to be an adoption practitioner. Somewhere in the middle of all this I began a process of becoming a mother to Noah. Some of my reasons are based on a curiosity and a desire to understand more, some of my reasons are pragmatic and opportunistic (availability of funding and desire for a career change) and some are about a search for meaning or catharsis. Throughout this study I try to access my experiences and to use my personal sphere of action and understanding to try and create 'something meaningful and actionable' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.149).

### **Collaborative Practice**

BAAF had long been central to my social work practice and to have them as a collaborative partner was/is very exciting. As part of the collaboration I was provided with work space at the BAAF head office in London. I was invited to attend team meetings and be involved in the work of the team that related to the focus of the study. I was also invited to attend two of the advisory groups which BAAF facilitated and I was given access to their library. John Simmonds, Director of Policy, Research and Development, provided ongoing support and advice in a supervisory capacity. On 27<sup>th</sup> July 2015 BAAF employees were told that the organization was experiencing financial difficulties and that redundancies were likely. On 31<sup>st</sup> July the organization went into administration with immediate effect. The building was physically locked and the organization was digitally shut down as email accounts were closed and electronic communication systems ceased to operate.

Of its 135 employees, 55 were told they were now working for Coram, which had taken over several BAAF services in England including the Adoption Register, its membership, publications and the Independent Review Mechanism. Around 50 of those remaining were told they were now unemployed while in Scotland staff learned that the country's adoption register and national adopter information helpline had been transferred to St. Andrew's Children's Society. Meanwhile, the rest of BAAF's operations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were to continue for "a brief period" while options for their future were explored (Stevenson and Donovan, 13.08.15, n.p)

**From:** John Simmonds [John.Simmonds@baaf.org.uk]

**Sent:** 30 July 2015 10:46

**To:** Louise Sims

**Subject:** Messages

Hi Louise,

You may have seen that there are very significant issues about baaf and its future. These are complex but the expectation is that the development team will move to

Coram and that includes you. There is much to say about all of this but I wanted to reassure you on that. At the moment I do not know when that will be.  
 Hope you have a good summer.  
 John

**From:** Louise Sims  
**Sent:** 30 July 2015 10:49  
**To:** John Simmonds  
**Subject:** RE: Messages

Thanks for thinking of me John, must be a hugely unsettling time for you all. I think you all do such amazing work and hope that can continue.  
 Bw  
 Louise

My relationship with BAAF and the collaboration continued through the emergence of a new organisation, later to be named CoramBAAF, based at Coram Fields in London. The Policy, Research and Development team to which I was attached remained intact. John Simmonds continued in his role as supervisor and supporter of this study. Whilst their work continued the team were deeply affected by the changes, particularly the laying off of longstanding colleagues. There was also continued uncertainty in respect of job security and disquiet about the merger with Coram in respect of BAAF's independence. I still felt part of the team but it was difficult to find space to work in the new offices. People were upset and angry. The intensity of the emotional environment made it a difficult place to be. Practically there were difficulties too as systems were in the process of being developed and workspace was limited.

BAAF went into administration on 31<sup>st</sup> July. Less than a week later on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2015 Kids Company ceased trading amidst political controversy and allegations of financial mismanagement. Two months prior to this in June 2015 The Royal College of Social Work was closed after the government withdrew funding. In response to the closure of BAAF, Kids Company and The Royal College of Social Work Andrew Cooper wrote the following blog post:

Social work is entering a new and very difficult phase of its history in this country...The small state has arrived; the rough seas of the health and welfare market encroaches. Old certainties and assumptions underpinning our welfare state are dying (2015, n.p.).

'Old ways of formulating problems presupposed the background of a nation-state with its relatively fixed institutions and disciplines' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.148). The nation-state and its institutions can no longer be understood or experienced as stable. The

background to this study is one of rapid change and uncertainty across the micro, meso and macro. Why does this matter? Firstly, it matters because it is important contextual information for understanding the conditions under which this specific study has been conducted (conceived, designed and operationalized). Secondly, it matters because these contextual themes of uncertainty and rapid change are key features of the field and the object of inquiry. Uncertainty and change are a constant. Finally these features come to matter because of the paradox they produce as they encounter the concept underpinning contemporary UK social work practice with children and families - permanence.

### **Permanence**

The objective of planning for permanence is therefore to ensure that children have a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond and to give them a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging (Department for Education, 2015, p.6).

Social work with children and their families is underpinned by a quest for stability and continuity. It is not just about securing the safety and care of children in the present but also in their future lives. Permanence is *the* key construct framing social work intervention it: ‘...provides an underpinning framework for all social work with children and their families from family support through to adoption...’ (ibid). It is predictive and imaginative. It is also fantastical. How can anyone know what the future will hold? Boddy (2013) identifies a broad consensus across the literature: permanence is widely understood to include love, security, stability and continuity of relationships and ‘a sense of *belonging* and mutual connectedness as part of the family’ (p.7, original emphasis).

The central principle which influences UK policy and legislation, in relation to social work with children, is that every child has a right to belong to a family (NIA, 2010). This principle is influenced by attachment theory, and enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which was ratified by the UK in 1991 (MacDonald, 2013, p.16).

Children are understood to ‘need a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity and belonging’ within ‘a secure, stable and loving family’ (ibid). Families are understood to provide the conditions through which permanence can be achieved. The two are explicitly linked. Skivenes and Thoburn (2016) suggest that in high income countries the term permanence has become ‘a short-hand translation for a complex set of aims around providing stability and family membership for children who need child welfare services’ (p.152). They posit that the extent to which permanence is embedded and developed in policy and practice (particularly in relation to adoption) is unique to the UK. Whilst many

countries focus on the importance of stability in the care of children it is only the UK where 'components of permanence are explicitly set out in legislation, statutory guidance and advisory documents' (p.152).

'The history of permanence within children's services can be traced back to the 1970s' (Thomas, 2013 p.16), specifically to 1973. In this year Rowe and Lambert published their research in which they suggested that children were drifting in long-term care due to a lack of planning. In the same year Goldstein et al., published 'Beyond the Best Interests of the Child'. This book argued that insecure and unstable care had a detrimental and lasting impact on children affecting both their psychological and social development (discussed in Thomas, 2013). The two publications had a galvanising impact on a generation of practitioners and policy makers. Thomas (2013) describes the subsequent birth of a 'permanency planning movement' whose focus 'was on finding adoptive placements for older children and those with complex needs' (p.16). The ethos underpinning the movement was that all children needed permanence without delay, that adoption provided permanence and that any child was adoptable. Subsequently 'the Children Act 1975 changed the legal framework for adoption to facilitate adoption for children from care by both strangers and known carers' (p.16).

In the 1980s the emphasis within policy and practice shifted 'towards the strengthening of family support services to prevent children being looked after, and to rehabilitate children with their birth families' (p.16). The Children Act 1989 'placed a duty on social services departments to provide services to prevent children coming into care, and to facilitate reunification with their parents when they do' (MacDonald, 2013, p.16).

In the 1990s, '...concerns about placement stability combined with evidence of poor outcomes for looked after children contributed to a renewed interest in adoption' (Thomas, 2013, p.16). With the Adoption and Children Act 2002 the Labour Government set out to radically reform adoption services. The aim being 'that more children should be adopted from care' (Thomas, 2013, p.17) and that decision making processes should be speeded up, 'the Act and its associated regulations and guidance also set out clear timescales for permanency planning' (ibid). This ethos of promoting adoption as a route to permanence and in reducing delay has shaped government policy ever since.

Researchers and practitioners have cautioned about the existence of hierarchies of permanence which have elevated adoption above other permanence options (including kinship care, foster care and residential care). 'There needs to be greater recognition, too, of the possibility for permanence (love, security and a sense of belonging) through long-term foster placements' (The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.8). The governmental focus on adoption is seen as anomalous and disproportionate given that the vast majority of children who are looked after do not have a plan for adoption. Boddy (2013) highlights 'the elusiveness of permanence as an explicit concept within government guidance on foster care' (p.16) and calls for a 'shift in focus to relationships' (p.10) 'for children on the edge of care, in care, and as they leave care' (p.13). Research by Schofield et al., (2012) notes significant policy discrepancies:

...in spite of the inclusion in policy of long-term foster care as a permanence option, there has been no government guidance, unlike for adoption, on how this pathway can be achieved procedurally or whether a long-term foster care placement with a plan for permanence is to be treated any differently in practice from a short-term foster placement (p.245).

In 2015 new guidance was issued and the word 'legal' was removed from the definition of permanence (Skivenes and Thoburn, 2016). Permanence could be achieved through all types of relational care and legal recognition of that relationship was not required. This shift re-animated the requirement that permanence planning is the objective in *all* social work with children and families (Department for Education, 2015). The question of how to do that for children placed away from their birth parents in foster care, residential care and kinship care arrangements remains a significant concern (Schofield et al., 2013).

Timeliness and decision-making have been, from the beginning, closely associated with permanence. The notion of drift, as portrayed by Rowe and Lambert (1973), still packs a powerful punch. A child adrift without the foundations provided by love demands our attention, our action. Goldstone et al., (1973) argued that infants were highly vulnerable to changes and inconsistencies in care. In the past decade advances in developmental and neuroscientific research have produced a body of work which empirically supports these claims (discussed in the NICE guidance on attachment, 2015). This research is highly influential and has reinforced the imperative for timely decision making in relation to children's relational care.



Barn and Kirton (2012) note the impact on policy makers and suggest that 'policy has tended to portray any delay as unacceptable or damaging' (p.30). The Children and Family Act 2014 developed by the Coalition Government introduced new timescales for interventions related to children and their families. In the legislation and its accompanying policy papers (see Secretary of State for Education, 2013) the government highlighted the body of evidence that links child development to the impact of delay in securing permanence. In a press release, 'Landmark Children and Families Act 2014 gains royal assent', the government set out its intentions to have '...more children being adopted by loving families with less delay' (Department for Education, 2014). From April 2014, under the Act an application for a care order or a supervision order would have to be completed within 26 weeks (courts could grant extensions if they were satisfied that a delay was necessary) (ibid). The government intended to create 'a swifter system' and to have 'more children adopted' (ibid). It can be said that a consensus exists in the practice, policy and research community around the damaging effects of delay on children's development. Yet the Act was not the product of consensual politics. There was considerable opposition to key features of the Act (discussed in Kirton, 2016). The four Parliamentary Committees that conducted pre-legislative scrutiny on the draft provisions recommended significant revisions (discussed in Secretary of State for Education, 2013). More broadly, opposition to the pace and direction of government reforms was widely expressed.

...respective places and appropriate share of limited resources to be devoted to family support, reunification, services for children in care and adoption continue to be hotly contested in English academic, professional and political spheres (Skivenes and Thoburn, 2016, p.157).

Critics argued that resources were being unfairly directed towards the promotion of adoption. At a time of austerity, growing poverty and public sector cuts the adoption reform program was seen as an anomaly or rather an indicator of the government's neo-liberal ambitions for a smaller state (Featherstone et al., 2014). UK adoption practice was also 'powerfully criticised on human rights grounds by the Council of Europe (Kirton, 2016, p.484). But it was closer to home, through English Case Law and in the English High Court, that the reform agenda met its biggest challenge. It was in 2013 that rulings in two appeal cases signalled the beginnings of a new era in the landscape of permanency planning (case law discussed in a report produced by the Adoption Leadership Board, 2014). In the first case (known as *Re B*) the parents of a three year old child (removed at birth) challenged the making of a care plan that the child should be placed for adoption. The appeal reached the Supreme Court who upheld the original decision and dismissed the appeal. It was the

following explication of the grounds on which a care order is sought that generated attention. The Supreme Court ruled that:

Making a care order that is likely to result in the child being adopted against the parent's wishes is a "very extreme thing", "a last resort". The judge must be satisfied that it is "necessary" to do so in order to protect the interests of the child, in other words, that "nothing else will do" (cited in Adoption Leadership Board, 2014, p. viii).

Following *Re B*, *Re B-S* was heard at the Court of Appeal and the notion of adoption as 'a last resort' was further reinforced. *Re B-S* involved two children removed from the care of their mother and subsequently placed for adoption. The Court of Appeal upheld the trial judge's decision. Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division, said in the ruling:

We have real concerns, shared by other judges, about the recurrent inadequacy of the analysis and reasoning put forward in support of the case for adoption... This is nothing new. But it is time to call a halt (Munby, 2013, para. 30).

In this ruling judges were also directed to rigorously question local authorities to ensure that resource issues were not influencing the care planning for a child. Munby further emphasised in the ruling from *Re B*, that adoption should only be considered 'when nothing else will do' (2013, para. 74.iii). The questions rippling through the sector were what did this mean and what impact would it have? At a press conference on 30th April 2014 (eight days after the introduction of the Children and Family Act 2014) Munby reasserted the independence of the judiciary and acknowledged that these institutional tensions would affect practice:

...under our system Parliament makes the law; the judges interpret the law and if Parliament does not agree with the judges' interpretation of the statute they passed, then the remedy is for Parliament to change the law. In saying that I think I've acknowledged that there is that tension there. But I appreciate that on the ground, as it were, for the directors of social services; for the social workers dealing with adoption cases; it must be slightly difficult to know exactly what they should be doing given that tension (Munby, 2014, n.p.).

In November 2014 the Adoption Leadership Board published a myth busting document in which they argued that 'The law has not changed' (n.p.). The document suggested that local authorities were misinterpreting the judgements and sought to re-establish the central tenets of the adoption reform agenda. For many, including influential legal commentators, the document did not fully address the changes to the legal landscape. One legal blogger described how following these rulings '...case law on adoption has been going through its

most radical changes in a generation' (suesspiciousminds.com, 2015, n.p.). Were we witnessing a paradigm shift? Judges across the country interpreted Re B and Re B-S as a directive to re-examine the quality of social work assessment (particularly the support and interventions provided to birth families) through which the placement orders had been granted. Since Re B and Re B-S a number of cases at the point of adoption order application have resulted in children being returned to birth parents. This represented 'a completely new phenomenon, having not occurred at all prior to December 2014' (ibid). Never before have children settled and assessed as thriving in their new families been removed at the point of the adoption application order. Placement orders;

...were designed to consider dispensation of parental consent prior to the adoption proceedings. They provided an element of certainty and a sense of assurance to local authorities and for prospective adopters when children were placed with them. The effect of these cases is that this confidence has now been removed (Kingsley Knight, 2017, n.p.).

From September 2013, the number of decisions being made by local authorities to pursue adoption has been declining sharply, as has the number of adoption placement orders granted by the courts. The data show that, since quarter 2 of 2013-14, local authority decisions to pursue adoption are down by a total of 41%, and the number of placement orders granted by the courts is down by a total of 50%.<sup>20</sup> The numbers of local authority decisions and placement orders granted are now below where they were at the beginning of 2011-12 (Department for Education, 2016, p.15).

In May 2016, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) launched an inquiry into adoption policy and practice with the aim of creating 'safe spaces to hear the experiences and views of everyone involved' (BASW, 2018, n.p.). Public comments from key BASW figures suggested a more partisan position. The 'policy imperative towards more and quicker forced adoption means we may well look back at this period in horror' (Mellon, 2015, p. 7). Mellon (BASW's Deputy Director) employs the phrases 'forced adoption' and 'horror'. She is contributing to the Family Justice Council's 2015 annual debate which addresses the motion, 'Adoption without parental consent is wrong in principle', a suitably provocative title for a highly adversarial debate. During the debate a range of influential actors across the adoption and permanence practice and policy field lock horns and arguments seem to fall into for or against camps. Lewis (2004) describes adoption discourse throughout the past 60 years as swinging like a pendulum between adoption as rescue and adoption as theft. In reading the transcript of the Family Justice Council's debate it seems that most participants are swinging on this pendulum, end to end.

For Berebitsky (2000) adoption has long provided 'a public site to thrash out meanings on the nature of family raising questions of identity, social divisions and social justice' (cited in Kirton, 2013a, p.97). Recent controversies can be understood through this lens and as reflecting historical ambivalence about adoption. They can also be seen to generate further polarity *and* animate questions about the legitimate use of authority more generally. Can social workers be trusted to exercise the power that is vested in their role? Can local authorities be trusted to provide sufficient support for families? Could the government trust the law courts? Could the law courts trust social work assessments? Could children and adults trust in the permanence of their adoptive family? Over the course of this study trust in and across institutions and bodies charged with formulating and delivering permanence policies seemed at times to be at the point of collapse.

### **Emotional Politics and Modernisation**

...emotions such as anger, disgust and shame over the abuse of children are not only personally and subjectively felt, but are also generated and experienced collectively. Emotions are thereby relational, cultural and deeply political (Warner, 2015, p.1).

Warner uses the concept of 'emotional politics' to examine the 'cycle of continuous reform' (p.90) in the child protection system. She argues that highly moral and personal rhetoric is mobilized by the deaths of children and in this rhetoric a number of processes are evident. These include 'the myth of political control through reform, and emotional interest representation' (p.90). Drawing attention to the highly personal responses of specific politicians to the deaths of specific children she argues that responses invariably follow a 'feeling rule that anger and blame' are the only appropriate response (p.90). In her exploration of the interactions between emotion and political action she further suggests that 'politicians act as envoys for feelings that are already circulating within local communities' (p.90). Underlying the constant 'cycle of reform' is a collective defence against the intolerable fact that we cannot eliminate risk and that children will always be harmed in the care of their parents. The adoptive family has over the past 20 years become an integral part of the political response to child abuse. In its political construction it is linked to a powerful cultural norm and an 'idea of the middle-class, respectable, responsible parent' (p.93).

I know how much difference a loving and caring family meant to me. My own father was adopted and not brought up by his own parents (Blair, 20.12.00, n.p.).

I was placed with a loving family within four months of being put up for adoption...That knowledge means I'm determined to use the position I have in the Coalition Government to help children who most need rescuing (Gove, 05.11.11, n.p.).

The 16th of May 1983 was a significant day in my life, but it was an even more momentous moment for my brother Oliver. It was the day he was adopted into our family. The next 28 years have been far from easy, and the trauma Oliver suffered before he came to live with us as a six year old foster child still to this day affects his behaviour, his relationships and his ability to cope with what life throws at him. But we wouldn't have changed it for the world (Timpson, 31.10.11, n.p.).

Across temporal and party lines Blair, Gove and Timpson, all leading advocates of adoption reform, speak to the media from direct personal experience of adoptive kinship. Emotion directly linked to the personal and to family life is used to legitimise and promote policy. In debates leading up to the Children and Family Act 2014 Kirton (2016) argues that the government set out to '...occupy the emotional domain' and this was 'apparent in Timpson's claims of 'compassion at my core' (p.482). Within this domain of emotional politics adoption is explicitly framed as a rescue measure for children. Rescue from what exactly?

...feckless and capricious individuals who may be bringing up children in homes scarred by violence, abuse and neglect are allowed to keep children in squalor and condemned to misery... when you read, as I have, of what the amoral residents of the most broken parts of Britain do to their children then no-one with a conscience would want us to do anything other than snatch these innocents away (Gove, 05.11.11, n.p.).

In this Daily Mail interview entitled, 'Saved by the love of strangers', Gove connects poverty ('squalor') with an absence of morals and a call to action: we must 'snatch those innocents away'. His position is unchallengeable because 'no-one with a conscience' could oppose him. Gove's use of highly emotive language and figurative speech to generate disgust for the 'feckless and capricious' poor can be read as an example of a powerful moral narrative about poverty and poor parenting. Scholars across a range of disciplines have noted 'a dramatic form of Othering' of 'parenting identities' along class lines over recent decades (Warner, 2015, p.93). Through this lens the birth family occupies a position of moral dirt and the adoptive family is idealized as 'the good, stable and loving family' (Warner, 2015, p.111). The Children Act 1989 had promoted a philosophy of 'partnership' with families (Lewis 2004, p. 243). The Children and Adoption Act 2002 signalled a sea change in approach. For Logan (2013) the Act, alongside a promotion of adoption, also promoted an exclusive construction of adoptive parenthood that underestimated the significance of

ongoing connection between the child and their birth family. The birth family (read 'the poor') are conceptually, emotionally and politically confined to the past.

The idea that feckless parents are responsible for the economic and moral decline of the nation- and conversely that 'good parenting' is the solution to problems as diverse as social fragmentation, stagnant social mobility and unemployment – have been re-vitalized as powerful political narratives (Jenson and Tyler, 2012, p.1).

Jenson and Tyler explore the emergence of 'parent-citizen responsibility'. They suggest a focus on parenting as a key factor in prosperity came to replace a focus on the structural causes of inequality. This era also marked an escalation of the 'disbanding and dissolution of various public services' and of 'shifts to volunteerism and private enterprise' (p.1). Parenting has now become 'the primary means for which children are brought up' (Warner, 2015, p.102). Individuals and individual families are increasingly positioned as solely responsible for the future prosperity of their own children and by extension for the prosperity of society. Lee (2014) notes the rise of a politicized parental determinism in political and media discourse 'that construes the everyday activities of parents as directly and causally associated with failing or harming children and so the wider society' (cited in Warner, 2015, p.102). Risk and the management of risk have become closely associated with a style of intensive parenting through which childhood is increasingly micro-managed.

The widening of the purview of the state in relation to parenting can be understood as reflecting the shift towards the 'social investment state' where even middle class families are no longer seen as adequate for maximizing the potential of their children as future workers and law-abiding productive adults (Warner, 2015, p.102).

Warner (2015) draws attention to the ways in which social work has become closely associated with a 'range of anxieties and fantasies' related to powerful fears around the notion of the 'good-enough parent' (p.111). She builds on Sayer (2005) who suggests that middle class anxiety is largely based on '...fear of refusal of respectability and recognition' (cited in Warner, 2015, p.104). In the implementation of adoption policy, social workers are charged with a powerful regulatory role. In this role they are routinely involved in assessing the suitability of applicants (many of whom may be middle class) in respect of their parenting capacity:

...the apparent crisis of adult anxiety and insecurity about childhood and parenting has specific implications for how social work is perceived and its place in the collective imagination. This is because the moral project involving (middle-class) self-governance in relation to parenting manifests itself in an intensified anxiety about how parenting will be judged by *others* (Warner, 2015, p.104).

Whilst Warner's focus is child protection the themes and dynamics she identifies have a particular resonance for adoption practice. Kirton (2013a), working from a similar critique argues that the New Labour modernising agenda in adoption mobilized a paradox. New Labour both increased regulation and raised suspicions of those tasked with the regulation (i.e. social workers). Adoption assessments would be more rigorous, but there would be stricter timescales and agencies would be more closely monitored. The promotion of greater surveillance was accompanied by an anxiety about that surveillance. There would be micro-management at all levels. The Performance and Innovation Unit (2000) described the adoption assessment process as 'very demanding' and as 'intrusive' (cited in Kirton, 2013a, p.98). The subtext here, according to Kirton, is that middle class families should not be subjected to 'intrusive' scrutiny' (ibid). Barn and Kirton (2012) argue that underpinning policy is a dominant narrative related to the prevalence of professional 'rigidities' (p.31) that produce barriers in the system. Professionals are increasingly and 'widely regarded with suspicion and often disdain' (Kirton, 2013a, p.104). The imposition of timescales has become central to government policy as a way to challenge 'rigidities' (ibid) and poor performance. In the Statutory Guidance on Adoption Chapter 4, titled Matching and Proposing a Placement, *the first* heading is 'Timescales' (Department for Education, 2013, p.81). In making a new family practitioners are directed first towardstime.

Time is not on the side of the child and a delay in placing a child with a new family can damage their development, contribute to further emotional harm, reduce their chances of finding a permanent family or increase the chance of adoption breakdown (p.83).

Government initiatives have focused on reforming the initial linking process and have introduced measures which will enable approved adopters to directly access information related to available children. This program of reform is often referred to as adopter-led matching and involves adopters taking the initiative for identifying the child or children they feel could be a match (Department for Education, 2013). Aspects of the reform include giving adopters direct access to the Adoption Register, a national database through which social workers have been linking children with adopters since 2001 (Department for Education, 2015a). Adoptive parents are increasingly positioned both as partners and as drivers of change.

Barn and Kirton (2012) argue that with the reform agenda social workers are positioned as obstacles to change. Political discourse and media coverage accompanying the debates surrounding the Children and Family Act 2014 put forward the view that practitioners '...are

preoccupied with the blood tie and in seeking a (near) 'perfect ethnic match', they contribute to the rejection of white prospective adopters' (p.25). Barn and Kirton argue that these claims are unfounded. They note that the care journeys of black and minority ethnic children are highly variable and 'on timescales, there are, for the most part, few significant differences related to ethnicity' (p.26). They also note that in the political discourse the body of work that highlights the complex issues faced by people who are transracially adopted is ignored. Amidst widespread opposition from the research and practice community the Act removed the requirement that social workers should give due consideration to ethnicity when matching a child. Barn and Kirton compare the legislation to a similar movement in the US which amounted to 'a legally enforced colourblindness' (p.28). The policy change in the US had a 'very modest' effect (ibid) and the authors suggest that, 'there is little doubt that the scale of interest is exaggerated by proponents' (p.28). They also note the tension evident in policy initiatives which simultaneously question the effectiveness of social work practice but continue to uphold the responsibilities and role of social workers within the process.

All adopters will still need professional advice and support on this process and social workers will still have a crucial role to play. The final decision whether the adopter is suitable to adopt the particular child will remain the responsibility of the adoption agency (Department for Education, 2017, p.2).

The basis, the focus, the pace and the implications of the adoption reform agenda are subject to a growing critique (see Kirton, 2013a; Featherstone et al., 2018; Willow, 2018). Kirton (2013a) suggests that 'the evidence base for reforms is weak and there is a strong sense of 'manufactured crisis' fuelled by media and government' (p.104). The critique is about both what is at the centre of policy and what has long been completely absent. Jones (2013) argues 'there has been little attention to the long-term needs of birth relatives following adoption' (p.91). For many critics there has been no state attention to their needs prior to adoption either (Featherstone, 2014). Jones notes how the 'invisibility of birth parents in the adoption process is apparent in the Evidence Pack produced in relation to the Children and Families Act 2014' (p.91). This pack reports on a range of statistics relating to adoption and clearly states that researchers do 'not collect any information on the characteristics of the birth parents of adopted children' (Department for Education 2013, p. 10, cited in Jones, 2013, p.91).



## Research Questions

There could not be any more significant a professional task than to assess and then make a prediction of what is likely to happen if prospective carers are approved and then a have a child or children placed with them (Simmonds, 2015, p.10).

Social work practice is central to the formation of the contemporary adoptive family and to this research. 'Social workers are the professionals charged with analysing, making decisions about and pursuing with urgency the right permanence option for children' (Department for Education, 2016, p.15). For Simmonds the process in which an adoptive family is made is *the* most significant professional task in relation to social work. Permanence is the conceptual framework which underpins the social work role. The pursuit of permanence is the pursuit of a stable future, yet the future is to a large degree unknowable. The social work role in adoption is to perform confidently and ethically 'in the face of uncertainty' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.162). This paradoxical injunction is central to the social work role. It has always been thus.

The focus of this study is specifically on the processes involved in the formal construction of an adoptive family in contemporary England involving children placed through the domestic care system. In research and policy guidance this process is often referred to as matching (Quinton, 2012). Concerns with 'matching' are driving the regionalization agenda and there is a high level of political interest in speeding up the process. The formation of the adoptive family is central to the policy agenda and yet 'research evidence is lacking - not just sparse, but virtually absent' (Quinton, 2012, p.1). In her review of the literature, Thomas (2013) notes a lack of conceptual clarity and suggests that 'there are no agreed definitions' (p.34) around which the process of making a family through adoption is understood. These gaps in theoretical understanding and empirical data are 'extraordinary' not least because this is 'an era that has seen an explosion of official data gathering' (Barn and Kirton, 2012, p.31). The suggestion is that the demand for measurable outcomes and a focus on delay has narrowed the research scope. In this instance policy and research attention is almost entirely focused on the initial link between a child with a placement order and approved adopters. In this study I consider what happens *after* a child and adopters are linked. Through the following research questions this study seeks to illuminate the practices involved in the making of the contemporary adoptive family.

- RQ1. What happens in matching and in the making of an adoptive family?
- RQ2. What practices are mobilized in this making?

Quinton (2012) notes the 'lack even of good descriptive accounts' of matching and notes that 'there are remarkably few studies that directly address the process of matching' (p.77). He calls for more accounts of practice 'if knowledge in this area is to advance' (p.109). Through these research questions I engage with this call. RQ 1 foregrounds an exploratory approach and begins by asking what happens? This is a different starting point to the mainly process and outcome focus of other matching research (see Dance et al., 2010). The aim here is not to test a hypothesis or examine the effectiveness of a specific approach or policy related to matching, it is instead to consider and analyse everyday practice in order to illuminate those practices.

This is a social work orientated study – it derives from practice and aims to better understand practice. However I also understand that matching is not just a site of professional practices and as such the research lens is not solely focused on social work. Hart and Luckock (2004) use the concept of 'a community of adoptive family practices' (p.40) to develop their analytic frame. They suggest that adoptive family life could usefully be understood, 'as a joint practice bringing together parents, professionals, children, relatives and friends' (p.52). This approach draws on sociological and anthropological theories through which family life is understood as constructed, not through blood ties, but through day-to-day activities, action, imagination and emotional interactions. Furthermore I understand matching to be a generative process, one that seeks to result in 'the making of an adoptive family'. This focus on the 'doing' of family *and* the 'doing' of social work highlights their respective and intersectional dynamic and relational features. This study is alert to practices and their intersections. The research questions are underpinned by an understanding that 'it is through practices that social relations and institutions happen, and through practices that subject positions and identities are performed' (Rose, 2010, p.18). RQ2 recognizes that this phenomenon (matching and the making of an adoptive family) takes place through a confluence of practices. This research is curious about what those practices might be, how they come to be and what their effects might be as they intersect with the 'doing' of social work.

### **Summary: Research aims and organisation of the thesis**

In this introduction I have highlighted a series of specific events during a specific time-frame and suggested that adoption practices take place in a climate of heightened uncertainty. The onslaught of rapid and radical change across administrative and political systems, the increasing visibility of the impact of austerity and the highly public political divisions focused on adoption are the current backdrop to practice. These tensions are both emergent and long standing and reflect ‘...wider political struggles, relating to class, ethnicity, sexuality and the politics of the family’ (Kirton, 2013a, p.101). Public debates and critiques have focused on the meso/macro level political, policy and law agendas in relation to adoption. Empirical research on matching has focused on agency processes and outcomes. In this study it is the intricacies and intimacies of ordinary everyday practices that receive top billing.

In overviews of the literature matching is understood to be a successful process (see Quinton, 2012; Thomas, 2013; Simmonds, 2016) yet there are no studies of matching which begin from a premise of success. The most cited studies in the UK context are all focused on problems related to delay, poor practice or disruptions (see Dance et al., 2010; Randall, 2013; Boswell and Cudmore, 2014; Selwyn et al., 2014; Farmer and Dance, 2015). Weegar (2000) argues that a default deficit orientation is evident across the canon of psychologically orientated adoption research and is due to cultural bias against the adoptive family (see also Leon, 2002; Herman, 2002, 2008). In this study I am not attempting to construct a story of success in order to counter a dominant negative narrative but I am open to the generative potential of adoption practices.

I understand the conditions under which this research came to be as 'dynamic, contingent, dialogic, and context specific' (Dunne et al., 2005, p.166). I have drawn attention to my own subjectivity through the lens of practice and as a mother. I have suggested through my account of bathing Noah/Paul that the boundaries between inner and outer worlds and between subject positions are fluid and dynamic. I understand that 'subjective experience is simultaneously individual embodied, relational and social' (Hollway and Froggett, 2013, para 4.14). In providing this reflexive account I also want to highlight the, '...impossibility of separating the researcher from the researched, and of stepping outside the temporal flow that encompasses the whole research enterprise' (Thomson, 2010, p.6). In making these links between temporal processes I am also beginning a process of constructing the field of study. The premise of this study is that a significant and specific phase of the adoption process has been overlooked amidst the emotional politics surrounding the field.

I understand too that adoption is 'loaded with emotions, beliefs and fantasies' and is 'forged through the various discourses of family life and the social injunctions of what a family should be' (Treacher, 2000, p. 11). When the intention is (as mine is) to:

...explore feelings, experiences and emotions, in the context of social forces (the full psychosocial realm) techniques to research theses need to be evolved from practices where these are theorised and worked with, psychoanalytic observation and therapeutic practice being one such domain (Hingley-Jones, 2016, p.114).

This study is concerned with methods that engage with 'the full psychosocial realm' (ibid). My ambitions chime with those underpinning adoption practices described by Herman as 'at once arrogant and utopian' (2002, p.340) and I draw my epistemological approach from a suitably arrogant and utopian discipline; psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis has been subject to sustained criticism for psychological reductionism, reactionary politics and for its claims to know. For Frosh (2012) 'at its best psychoanalysis is curious and provocative' (p.14). In this thesis I try for the 'best'. The aim is to employ a psychoanalytic sensibility which I understand to be:

...a rigorous practice of thinking that cannot be rushed, that demands time and patience, and that is based on a kind of ethical assumption that it is worth pursuing what one might call a 'truthful' approach to living even if this is difficult and at times painful to do (ibid).

I construct the object of inquiry, (matching and the making of an adoptive family) as a process not an event and I use methods that specifically attend to 'temporal processes' (Thomson, 2009, p.2). This approach is taken forward in the structure of the thesis. I try to show how methods, data, ideas and analysis are generated as the research process unfolds. The thesis is structured 'through a process of revelation rather than explication' (Thomson, 2009, p.2). I also understand difficult and disruptive spaces as both constitutive of the field and as potentially productive of insight. The hope in opening up and attending to these spaces is to produce something new, 'to articulate the generative, surprising and unexpected' (Baraitser, 2009, p.4). The intention of this research can be summarised in the following research aims:

1. To explore the practices involved and mobilised in making a family through adoption and to use these empirical findings to contribute critically to permanence policy and social work practice.
2. To explore the capacity of practice-near methods and transdisciplinary approaches for researching social work practice.
3. '...to introduce the knowledge formed in practice to the academic word and to further improve the theoretical basis of social work as a subject matter' (Saurama and Julkunen, 2012, p.59).

The 3-act structure is used to organise the thesis. 'The first act is where all the main characters of the story are introduced, plus the world where they live in' (Moura, 2014, n.p.). Act I includes this chapter, the literature review, the theoretical framework and the methodology chapter. In the literature review I consider the features and practices that are understood to constitute a matching process. This review is an analytic and thematic narrative review of the existing social work literature on matching. Chapter 3 is the theoretical framework and here I suggest that the psychosocial hybridity of adoptive family life is one of its defining features. I draw on transdisciplinary approaches within the field of psychosocial studies to build my epistemological approach. Chapter 4 sets out a methodological framework for the research. The chapter moves incrementally through the ways in which this specific inquiry has been conceived, adapted and put into practice. I document my analytic practices and locate this work in a hermeneutic and phased approach to analysis. These chapters together provide the premise, 'the reasoning and the logic of the story' (Moura, 2014, n.p.). This is Act I, the Set-Up.

In Act II there are 3 distinct analysis chapters which I conceptualise as novellas. Act II is the Confrontation, where '...the protagonist shifts from *reacting* to conflict to *actively* pursuing it' (Kieffer, 2016, n.p.). Substantively and stylistically discord shapes this Act. I hone in on moments of provocation and consider their significance in relation to the research questions. There is across the chapters some slippage with the dramatic terminology. For example people are sometimes actors, as if in a play, and other times characters, as if in a novel. I have not attempted to align genres, terms or smooth over the differences. I move between different registers and use dramaturgical resources as an enthusiastic amateur and in their broadest sense - as storying telling devices. Confrontation does, after all, involve the active pursuit of conflict and is synonymous with 'tangle, skirmish, collision...' (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.a). I take this to mean that discord must be encountered. Chapter 5 works with the provocations provided by the social practices generated by a photograph. I argue that these social practices illuminate troubling and paradoxical areas of matching practices. Greco and Stenner's (2017) concept of a 'liminal hotspot' is used to frame the analysis. Chapter 6 uses Baraitser (2009) and Rose (2003, 2004, 2010) to examine the multiple imaginative and material practices illuminated by the data. The transformation required in becoming a mother through adoption is shown to be enriching, disorientating, performative and hugely risky. Chapter 7 develops the themes of the preceding chapters. Secrets, care, work, suffering and hope are encountered.

Act III is the Resolution and comprises 3 chapters; the discussion, the conclusion and the afterword. In the discussion chapter I continue to move the focus outwards and adopt an 'experience-distant' approach to writing. I consider the aspects of the social revealed by the conflicts experienced at the level of the personal. I critically engage with my analysis through a hermeneutic and recursive approach congruent with the commitment to reflexivity set out in Act I. I review the research practices and highlight innovations and limitations. In the conclusion and in line with the practice orientation of this work I state the implications of the study for practice, policy and research. My psychosocial research practices are underpinned by a disciplinary structure (funding, supervision, access to the field). Through this 'positive' structure and these 'negative' psychosocial research practices this study seeks to attend to 'process and becoming' *and* 'identify what something is, how it has come about and how it might be made better' (Redman, 2016, p.76). In this conclusion I specifically address the requirements of a social work doctorate and suggest ways 'it [social work] might be made better' (p.76, my brackets). In the afterword I move to an 'experience-near' approach and offer some final reflections based on my experiences of the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

In this chapter I use an analytic thematic approach to map the existing knowledge-base related to matching. I review the development of key concepts across the policy, practice and academic literature. Having established the beginnings of a conceptual framework I consider further the premise underpinning the practices and the practices themselves. The literature included in this review is predominately drawn from social work scholarship and also includes practice guidance, evaluations, reports and policy documents. Social work draws on a range of disciplinary resources and as such work from psychology, sociology and psychoanalysis are referenced. The social work focus could be considered a narrow one for a review within a transdisciplinary study. My rationale is partially based on pragmatics. There is 'a voluminous' (Thoburn, 1990, p.4) adoption literature which would be too large to critically review. I engage with different literatures later and throughout this thesis but for now I stay within the confines and expanse of social work knowledge. This approach enables me to hone in on the object of inquiry because it is only in the UK social work literature that matching as a concept and a set of practices is explicitly addressed.

Thomas in her overview of the Adoption Research Initiative (ARI) suggests that 'the term "finding a family" describes the process of how a child with a plan for adoption achieves a permanent placement' (p.34). She notes that terms including linking, matching and family finding are used interchangeably and inconsistently to describe different stages of the process and that 'there are no agreed definitions' (p.34). She maps their usage and then proposes a four-stage description of the overall process.

1. assessment of the child;
2. family recruitment – the process of finding potential adopters able to meet the identified needs of children for whom adoption is the plan;
3. linking – the process of identifying a particular family as a possibility for a particular child;
4. matching – the social work process that confirms particular potential adopters as having the "parenting capacities" to meet the "needs" of specific children (ibid).

Thomas understands 'matching' (which she describes as 'the social work process') to be the fourth stage of the finding a family process. It is this stage that constitutes the object of my inquiry. Simmonds (2016) in a recent review of the literature suggests that:

...matching is a process not an event and a process that extends prior to placement, through the authorisation to place and then introductions, moving and settling in. (p.57).

In this review I use and explore the literature relating to 'matching' and draw on Simmonds' explication, whilst recognising that the concept does not quite suffice as a descriptor for the phenomenon under investigation. The framing of 'matching' as a temporal process underpins the literature (and this study). Taking forward this attention to temporality I start by looking backwards. The review begins with a historical overview and the emergence of 'matching' as a phenomenon related to the changing nature and purpose of adoptive family life.

### **The emergence of matching and the professionalization of social work**

According to Lewis, 'Adoption has been seen as the answer to very different kinds of problems since the first legislation passed in 1926' (2004, p.237). Lewis suggests that the purpose of adoption changed after the Second World War and 'adoption became largely seen as a service for infertile couples' (p.238). The huge societal and cultural shifts brought about by the advent of birth control and the development of social security systems dramatically altered the cultural and economic landscape in England. These factors contributed to the decline of domestic baby adoption. According to Quinton (2012) in the post-war years the process through which children and adopters were brought together was largely based on proximity, religious affiliations and physical resemblance. This process was often initiated and brokered by family doctors. Matching at a practice level was largely driven by pragmatics and was completely unregulated.

The 1970s saw radical changes and the beginnings of 'professional and state control of all adoptions in England' (Lewis, 2004, p.236). The Houghton Committee set up in 1972 considered adoption practices at a time when according to Lewis (2004) there was 'faith in government planning' (p.236). She argues that 'the Houghton Committee clearly saw the future of adoption belonging to well-trained social workers and local authorities' (p.236). The resultant legislation, the Children Act 1975 and Adoption Act 1976, sought to both professionalise social work *and* regulate adoption work (Sales, 2015). This legislation was intended to underpin the development of an integrated childcare service in which local authorities would be central. Whilst independent adoption agencies would still function they would now be regulated by local authorities.

Across practice, policy, legislation and academia adoption practices and social work practices are closely associated with each other in the English context. Across the literature



the legislation of the 1970s is noted as historically significant both for social work and for adoption (see for example, Sales, 2015). This era saw ‘...the emergence of the ‘professionalization’ of adoption’ (Sales, 2015, p.152) and ‘an emboldened social work profession’ which embarked on a drive to develop itself as ‘a science of child placement’ (p.151). This notion of ‘a science of child placement’ connects the ‘professionalization’ of social work with the burgeoning of research and scholarship across a range of disciplines associated with children, childcare and family life. In her study of adoption practices in the US Herman notes similar trends and develops the concept of kinship by design to consider the state’s investment in adoption.

Kinship by design allowed agency workers to distinguish themselves from both commercial and humanitarian child placers. They recognized love and belonging as precarious, manipulable resources rather than natural facts outside the bounds of human intervention. They aimed to predict and control the ingredients of intimate solidarity. The premise of standardization was that public safeguards should be elevated over private interests, and that values associated with consumption and blood should be subordinated to children's emotional welfare (Herman, 2002, p.354).

One of the ways that professionals sought to ‘predict and control the ingredients of intimate solidarity’ (ibid) was through the application of attachment theory. This body of work closely associated with Bowlby highlighted the importance of continuity and attuned emotional care in relation to child development. Bowlby theorised and then evidenced through his empirical work the centrality of relationships in human life. Children and particularly infants were shown to actively seek proximity to a parental figure and to need the care of this primary attachment figure (discussed in Howe, 2011). If a child failed to receive consistent, attuned and secure care in early childhood the consequences could be catastrophic and affect all future intimate relationships. It is through early relational responses that infants go on to develop an internal model through which they understand themselves in relation to others. This model of relating then acts as a blueprint for all future relationships. The body of work arising from Bowlby’s initial theorising is enormous and hugely influential (reviewed in Howe, 2011). In 2015 attachment theory was officially endorsed in England with the publication of NICE guidance (2015).

Kirk’s (1964) work in the US and Canada is widely cited and identified in the literature as contributing to a paradigmatic shift in adoption practices (discussed in Wegar, 2000; MacDonald, 2013; Sales, 2015). Kirk suggested that the adopted subject’s dual background

is potentially problematic both for their identity and for family formation. He argued that adoptive parents had to engage with the difference of their family constitution.

In order to really claim the adopted child as theirs, adoptive parents needed to be able to identify with the child and their background. They needed to align their 'fate' with that of the child's through talking to the child about his/her history, thus creating a 'shared fate'. Both these formulations tie adoptive kinship to biological kinship; the former must be shaped by the latter (Sales, 2015, p.151).

Research from the 1960s and throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s considered the impact of difference and its acknowledgement in adoptive family life. The secrecy that had long been practiced in adoptive families was shown to be psychologically damaging and the wellbeing (of children and parents alike) was increasingly felt to depend on 'openness' (Brodzinsky, 2006, p14). In the UK according to MacDonald (2013) the introduction of the Children Act 1989 reinforced this notion of openness. The Act charged practitioners with duties relating to the maintenance of birth family relations for children looked after. In adoption practice the fact that 'many children adopted from care arrive in their adoptive placement with some knowledge of their circumstances, and existing relationships with birth family' (MacDonald, 2013, p.20) further stimulated a change in regards to openness. Agencies and practitioners increasingly promoted the belief 'that honesty about birth family origins and a willingness to discuss adoption-related issues' (ibid) should be integral to adoptive family relationships.

In adoption the concept of openness further developed through the 2000s. Families were encouraged to consider 'arranging indirect and direct contact' with birth families following adoption (Smith and Logan, 2004, p.20). Questions arising from these open adoption practices are repeatedly raised in the literature and there is considerable 'uncertainty about whether contact is demonstrably in children's best interest' (Smith and Logan, 2004, p. 20) and further whether '...open practices help or damage the formation of adoptive attachments' (Sales, 2015, p.152). How to attend to other relationships (including with foster carers and their families) is a key challenge in adoptive family life (Neil 2009; MacDonald, 2013).

### **Legislation, Policy and Practice - Constructing the Reparatory Family**

Most children adopted from care 'will have been significantly harmed in the care of their birth parents, or been at risk of harm because of the quality of that care' (Hart and Luckock,

2004, p.17). For most of these children there will ‘...have been multiple disruptions and discontinuities in their lives and care situations’ (Hindle and Shulman, 2008, p. 265). ‘Statistics show that 71% of these children have experienced neglect or abuse’ (Department for Education, 2016, p.10). It is now accepted that the impact of these experiences is damaging and potentially catastrophic (NICE, 2015).

‘Adoptive family life is expected to compensate explicitly for previous family and parenting failures’ (Hart and Luckock, 2004, p.59). Adoption policy does this through ‘replicating family’ (Luckock 2008, p.9). It seeks to promote normality and security for vulnerable children within an autonomous family unit. The aim is for adoption to replace and replicate family and here the legal recognition afforded by the Adoption Order, which severs the child’s legal relationship to their birth family, is of primary importance. The family, in order to be socially recognised and to function fully, must also be autonomous from the state. The model of family to be replicated had always been the heterosexual married couple but legislation now recognizes a greater diversity of family models. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 legislated for the rights of same sex couples to apply to be adoptive parents. In 2007 the Secretary of State for Education Alan Johnson argued that, ‘...family policy must be bias free ... It’s not who the parents are, it’s what they do’ (cited in Luckock, 2008, p.14). Here Johnson draws attention to the ‘doing’ of family. It is in the reparatory ‘doing’ of family that positive change is made. The harm caused by poor relational care can be repaired by good relational care and so family is understood to be both the problem and the solution.

#### Assessment of the Child – The Child Permanence Report (CPR)

In Thomas’s review the assessment of the child precedes and is the basis of matching. This assessment is formalised in the production of the Child Permanence Report (CPR) which is a ‘descriptive and evaluative report’ focused on the child’s welfare (Quinton, 2012, p.80). The report written by the child’s social worker should contain the child’s history since birth (including relationships, experiences, presentation, development, identity, wishes and feelings) and an analysis of this information in respect of permanency planning. Because ‘adoption may be identified as a possible permanence option during the course of, or sometimes before the commencement of, care proceedings’ (Department for Education, 2013a, p.36) the ‘compilation of the CPR itself is not a fresh piece of work, but for the most part a bringing together of information that has been gathered already over a period of, probably, several months at least’ (ibid).

...when making a decision on matching, the local authority must consider the child's welfare throughout his or her life, and have regard to a range of matters including the child's needs, wishes and feelings, and his or her background, including religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background, among other factors, where relevant (RIP, 2014, p.4).

There are widespread concerns about the quality of CPR's (discussed in Thomas, 2013) and there is a lack of research evidence in relation to how children's needs are assessed in practice. 'No reports have been found on the quality and reliability of assessments of children's needs and development' (Quinton, 2012, p.87). Quinton (2012) notes a key difficulty in the analysis of children's needs is the very young age of most children being placed for adoption. Issues specifically around development and attachment difficulties may not emerge until later in childhood. Furthermore, assessments are often taking place at a time of considerable stress and uncertainty for the child which will inevitably affect their presenting needs. The CPR is understood to be a highly significant and complex piece of work:

...it will not only form the basis on which decisions are made about whether the child should be placed for adoption but will also assist the agency in matching the child with an appropriate prospective adopter, and will be the source of the information about the child on which the prospective adopter will rely. In due course the child, on reaching adulthood, will be able to request a copy of the CPR under the AIR and may have to rely on this document as the principal source of information about their pre-adoption history (Department for Education, 2013a, pp. 47-48).

This report must be written by or under the supervision of an experienced social worker. It has to fulfil a range of roles and will be considered by a range of audiences at different times, including (possibly) the child as an adult. Where adoption is the recommendation the CPR is used both as a key source of information in a matching process and to present the case for adoption to 'a statutory panel of experts and lay persons fulfilling the requirements of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005' (Quinton, 2012, p.79).

Changes to matching practices in relation to the assessment of children's needs were introduced in the Children and Families Act 2014. In the midst of highly contentious debates the Act 'repeals the requirement for councils to give 'due consideration' to children's racial, religious, cultural or linguistic background when matching them with adopters' (Donovan, 2015, n.p.). These changes were driven by research which suggested that black and minority ethnic children wait significantly longer before being matched (discussed in Department for Education, 2016). Whilst recent highly charged debates (discussed in Kirton,

2016) have focused on the role of ethnicity in matching ‘a range of other matching criteria to consider is indicated across the literature’ (RIP, 2014a, p.3).

These include: the age of the child, dis/ability, contact needs, gender, carers’ extended family arrangements, location, educational continuity, siblings (in terms of being placed together, or in terms of continued contact), ethnicity, heritage, language, community, impact on birth children, the fostering experience of the family (ibid).

#### Adoption Assessments – The Prospective Adopter Report (PAR)

The change in the purpose of adoption and a strong evidence base developed predominately through attachment theory (NICE, 2015) has meant radical changes in the parenting skills needed by prospective adopters (discussed in Quinton, 2012). Attachment theory and theories of developmental trauma underpin practice guidance on adoptive parental assessment. In their edited volume Alper and Howe (2015) present a theoretical framework for assessment drawing predominately from attachment theory. In her chapter Selwyn identifies four key assessment areas from the literature; ‘(1) parental hopes and expectations; (2) parental sensitivity; (3) management of stress; and (4) support networks’ (p.48). Adoptive parents must be able ‘to tune into a child’s feelings and to take a child’s perspective in order to better understand what is motivating a child’s behaviour’ (Alper, 2015, p. 175). In his scoping review of the literature Rushton (2004) concluded that adoptive applicants should be able to demonstrate ‘child centeredness, warmth, consistency, flexibility, tenacity, a sense of humour, a capacity to reflect on problems and their origins’ (p.91, cited in Alper, 2015, p.69). In subsequent chapters contributors build on these themes and suggest practical interventions to assess and build on parenting capacity.

In legislation, policy and across the literature it is widely acknowledged that caring for adopted children can be complex and demanding. Cairns describes the phenomenon of ‘secondary traumatic stress’ (2016, p.92). In this model the experience of caring for a child who has been traumatised has a traumatising effect on the parents. Cairns argues that the task of parenting a child who has experienced trauma is ‘a professional level task’ (2016, p.92). She sets out a framework for support involving education and therapeutic intervention prior to placement and ongoing. Adoption support is frequently discussed in the context of the adopted child’s trauma. For example, the Department for Education (2016) argues that the ASF has ensured adoptive families have access to ‘therapeutic interventions that are so vital in helping children to deal with past trauma and [enable them

to] thrive in a nurturing, stable placement' (Department for Education, 2016, p.13, my brackets). Adoption support assessment and provision is now central to policy and practice.

Adcock (2010) in her review of the literature suggests that adoption approval assessments bridge a number of relationships, fulfil different tasks and have a strong educational element. Assessment should facilitate mutual learning and development (Hindle and Shulman, 2008). Practitioners have been found to align 'testing the capabilities of the prospective adoptive parents' with helping applicants become better prepared and are described as having 'dual professional identities: that of helper and of gatekeeper' (Noordegraaf, et al., 2008a, p.310).

Noordegraaf et al., (2008a, 2008b) describe how during matching the formal assessment of prospective adopters (of the pre-approval stage) moves into a new phase, where the assessment process is less overt. The matching stage provides a first opportunity to move from a hypothetical assessment of parenting capacity to one based on concrete and observable evidence. It is here that prospective parents encounter a real child and a child encounters the real prospect of new parents. Simmonds (2016) argues that social work assessment during the matching phase involves an ongoing analytic assimilation of existing and new information by a range of practitioners. New information about the child's experiences, needs and preparedness for permanence may emerge through disclosures or in the observation of behaviours. Similarly, assessments of prospective adopters should be ongoing and responsive to change as prospective parents encounter a child and are observed by foster carers and other practitioners. Social workers are required to use their knowledge (of child development, attachment theory, safeguarding, adoptive family life, the specific adults and children involved) and apply it to the future.

The Children and Families Act 2014 enabled approved adopters to access the Adoption Register for the first time, and there has been a significant growth in the use of adopter-led matching through National Exchange Days and Adoption Activity Days where prospective parents and children can meet face to face in a fun and friendly environment (Department for Education, 2016, p.13).

Whilst government policy promotes a greater role for adopters and claims that '...adopters are now empowered and encouraged to take a much more active role, exploring for themselves the children waiting for adoption'(ibid), it is also made clear that the suitability to adopt a specific child cannot be 'established by the adopters themselves' (Department for Education, 2013, p.34). For Quinton (2012) matching includes 'an ongoing process o f

assessment and specialist support through which emergent problems can be identified' (p.89). 'Social workers also need to consider how the prospective adopter's parenting capacities can be supported and developed alongside the child's changing needs' (Department for Education, 2013, p.85). In a matching process the social work task then is to assess, transform and support prospective parents over time, as they encounter a child and build a family.

#### Matching: The Adoption Placement Report (APR) and Panel

Thomas (2013) suggests that 'the process of finding a family has evolved into specifying the child's developmental needs and identifying the family resources that are needed to address them' (p.35). Dance et al., (2010) found that 30 per cent of agencies allocated a specialist family finding worker to a child following the granting of a placement or care order. Family finding workers are usually adoption practitioners who work alongside the child's social worker specifically to co-ordinate the family finding. Farmer identifies gaps in knowledge and also notes variance across local authorities in respect of policies and procedures in relation to matching (Adoption Research Initiative, 2012). The linking process is both highly variable and influx currently as the sector undergoes significant re-organisation related to the regionalization program of reform.

Once a link has been made the child's CPR and the adopter/s PAR are considered together. There is no body of work that examines how 'assessments of children and adopters are brought together in the matching process' (Quinton, 2012, p.77). Once a match has been identified adoption agencies are required to carry out an assessment of the proposed match formally in the form of the Adoption Placement Report (APR). The report is shared with the prospective adopters who should agree to its contents before it is considered by an adoption or permanence panel (Department for Education, 2013a). Panels are 'intended to be multi-disciplinary bodies with a considerable element of independence from the agency' (p.18). Panels make recommendations in three areas relating to adoption, in relation to a child's care plan for adoption, the suitability of adoption applicants and the suitability of a specific match. The statutory guidance notes that panels 'must not be the "bottleneck" in the decision-making process' (p.20). Currently panels 'play an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice' (p.18). A panel can only recommend a decision; it is the 'agency's decision-maker [who] must make a considered and professional decision on the proposed placement' (Department for Education, 2013a, p.91, mybrackets).

...it must carry out (if it is a local authority) an assessment of the support needs of the adoptive family – the child, the prospective adopter and any other children of the prospective adopter - in accordance with the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005. The agency must also consider the arrangements for future contact between the child and appropriate members of their birth family or other people important to the child (Department for Education, 2013a, p.89).

The Adoption and Children Act (2002) 'requires that local authorities take a planned and co-ordinated approach in meeting their duty to arrange adoption support services' (Hart and Luckock, 2004, p.67). Adoption support assessment and provision is now central to policy and practice. Legislative changes have expanded universal benefits and introduced adoption specific support (Department for Education, 2016). As part of the matching process social workers will make an assessment of the support needs of the adoptive family which will be revised and reviewed at key points during the process. The APR also includes the 'proposed arrangements for exercise of parental responsibility' (Department for Education, 2013a, p.84). A support plan will include 'the objectives, the services to be provided, the timescales, the responsibilities and roles in implementing the plan' (Quinton, 2012, p.100).

Once the match is approved the planning process will involve a planning meeting (sometimes referred to as the introductions planning meeting) which will include the prospective adopters, their social worker, the foster carers, their social worker and the child's social worker. It may also include supervisors or managers from one of the respective teams. Any further information relating to any of the parties should be shared at this meeting. Contact plans between the adopters and the birth family will also be reviewed. The primary focus of the meeting will be on the arrangements whereby the child and the adopters will meet. In the statutory guidance matching is understood to include 'introductions' (Department for Education, 2013a, p.94).

### Introductions

Introductions will of course vary depending on the age of the child, and all the circumstances. In some cases a lengthy series of introductory meetings of increasing duration will be needed. It is essential that everyone involved is clear about what is planned, how they can discuss with the agency whether the arrangements are working in a way that is helpful to them and how any changes to the plan will be made if necessary. It will be especially important for the foster carer's own social worker to be part of the meeting if the foster carer is going to be involved in a protracted period of introductions. What is important is that both the child and prospective adopter feel well prepared before the placement and are happy with the pace of the introductions and the date of placement (ibid).



An introductions process involves the emotional and physical transference of a child from one family setting to another. Attachment theory underpins the practice approach and the use of transitional objects and transitional practices are routinely integrated into planning (Burnell, et. al., 2009). These include providing babies with an item of clothing from the new family to help them become familiar with their smell and playing a recording of their voices. The aim is also to recognise that grief will play a part in the process of forming new attachments and that new relationships are built alongside existing ones. The work of Fahlberg is frequently cited; she argues that during introductions by ‘...focusing on facilitating the grief process we help counteract factors that work against developing new attachments’ (cited in Hindle, 1998, p.24). The aim is to be alongside the child in this process and to encourage the expression of feelings however painful. The transfer of care should be managed very carefully (Burnell et al., 2009).

Predictability of people, places, and time enables a child to develop a subjective and objective sense of security - a base from which they can negotiate new experiences, the unexpected and the challenging (Simmonds, 2016, p.42).

Selwyn et al., (2015) discuss how in their interviews with adopters (particularly women) many of the women had noted an acrid smell emitting from the child during the transition. The researchers speculated ‘that perhaps the acrid smell was a chemical indication of the child’s level of stress’ (p.300). The impact of transition is still an emergent area of interest in empirical adoption and practice research (see Wakelyn, 2012). In Lanyado’s (2003) work the introductions are conceptualised as a catalyst for a mourning process for all that has been lost by the child. It is through a grieving process that the individual can also, paradoxically, be seen to have grown emotionally as a result of what they have been through’ (p.345). The mourning process is both necessary and extraordinarily stressful.

Practice initiatives have been influenced by writers working from attachment and trauma orientated perspectives (particularly Fahlberg, 1994 and also Hughes, 2011 and Golding, 2013). Much of this work originates from direct practice and from the experiences of therapists and adoptive parents.

Matching should be viewed as a process to be worked at together, rather than a single event. The quality of the relationships between everyone in the team around the child is likely to impact on the outcomes for the child. Understanding each other’s roles and perspectives during this process is essential (RIP, 2014, p.1).

The team around the child is understood to always include the prospective adopters, foster carers and social workers. It may also involve other people who have important relationships with the child, foster carers and adopters including family members, friends, teachers and support workers. Matching is widely understood to be a relational process. Scholars drawing on psychoanalytic theories offer further insight into what those relational processes might involve (see Katz and Treacher, 2001; Lanyado, 2003; Shulman and Hindle, 2008; Boswell and Cudmore, 2014). Through this literature the ways in which human emotions and relational trauma emerge, collide and are navigated are understood to be complex and to a large extent unknowable at the point of matching.

In this process foster carers are understood to 'have a crucial role in facilitating the introductions to the adoptive parents' (Randall, 2013, p.194). In the Selwyn et al., (2014) study the support of the foster carer was also identified as key to a successful transition. In this study 'the majority (61%) of adoptive parents described the foster carers as welcoming' (p.276). Foster carers worked with adopters to help them 'understand the child's routines' and they 'prepared the child well for the move and held celebration parties and events to mark the transition' (p.276). Simmonds (2016) highlights a number of key areas for practitioners in relation to the foster carer during introductions. These include support for the foster carers in enabling introductions and moving the child and afterwards support for foster carers and their children through the loss and separation. He also notes the need for skilled relational practice particularly when foster carers highlight concerns about the prospective adopters.

There have been few studies on the impact on foster carers of their work in relation to moving children to adoption (one such study is Wakelyn, 2012). Selwyn et al., (2014) identifies this gap in knowledge and calls for more studies, particularly studies exploring the strategies foster carers employ to protect themselves; 'how do foster carers who specialise in caring for infants provide love and stay attuned to the infant's needs knowing that the infants will soon leave?' (p.277). Randall (2013) suggests that foster carers are the key to successful transitions but that 'sometimes they hinder the process' (p.195). Selwyn et al., (2014) reported that in their interviews with adoptive parents 30% of foster carers were described as obstructive. The researchers described situations where foster carers had;

...prevented the adoptive parents visiting or caring for the child, or withheld important information, or who set the timetable for introductions based on their own agenda and not the child's needs', or who made the move to the adoptive

family fraught and highly emotionally charged created a highly stressed transition for child and adoptive parents. Adoptive parents gave examples of foster carers who told them the child was unlovable, or at the other extreme had clung to children sobbing, as the child left the foster home...Other children arrived in their adoptive families without personal possessions or toys, even though they had spent several years in care. (Selwyn et al., 2014, p.276).

Boswell and Cudmore (2014) also found that the emotional experiences of the process are routinely downplayed and that children are not being adequately supported. They noted very little contact between the child and the foster family post-placement and suggested that the collective focus was on the child making a fresh start with adoption. Their study also suggested that children were being moved too fast: 'the transition tends to take place within a tight timeframe, usually between seven and fourteen days' (p.1). Randall (2013) highlights similar concerns about the timeframe in which children are moved. He describes 'rushed introductions and doubts about how far the children's wishes had been heard and how well they had been prepared' (p.194).

### Placement

In the policy and practice guidance the process following introductions is referred to as placing or placement, whereby a child is physically transferred to the care of their prospective parents. The new family is also commonly referred to as a placement. Family and placement are used interchangeably across the literature. 'A child who is placed for adoption remains a looked after child' (Department for Education, 2013a, p.95). A series of reviews chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer will take place following placement (Quinton, 2012). Children must live with prospective adopters for a minimum of 10 weeks before an adoption order application can be made and during this time parental responsibility is shared between the local authority and the prospective adopters.

As Quinton notes: 'it is hard to know how particular adopters and particular children will get on once they are living together' (2012, p.98). Research suggests that difficulties may emerge fairly quickly and 'the risk of a placement disrupting is highest during the first few weeks' (Department for Education, 2013a, p.100). In attachment orientated literature the role of the foster carer within this period is understood to be vitally important for the child and for the new parents (Burnell, et al., 2009). The carer should be available to support the new family and to help the child settle.

During a placement adults and children begin adjusting and adapting to life together as a family. In the literature this phase requires enormous adjustment and the reconciling of experience and expectations (McKay et al., 2010; Jones and Hackett, 2011; MacDonald, 2015; Tasker and Wood, 2016). It is also highly variable and dependent on past experience and completely new dynamics.

For each individual also there is an internal shift from a sense of identity as a daughter, sister, wife or partner to being a mother and a similar shift to being a father, and as a couple, they must make a further adjustment to include a third. If these are the developmental tasks for every new family, the process of adoption adds another dimension to what is already a challenging life experience (Hindle, 2008, p.151).

...it is exceptionally difficult for adopted children 'to get a grasp on what a mother, father, brother or sister is, when they have such a patchwork of experience to draw on' (Rustin, 1999 cited in Hart and Luckock, 2004, p.148).

Tasker and Wood (2016) suggest that the family formation process can be additionally complicated when children move together as siblings. Research and practice guidance material stresses the importance of sensitive care, stability and routines in establishing the foundations of family life (Burnell, et al. 2009). The ongoing impact of abuse and neglect is understood to complicate grieving and to impact on transition. The transition to a new family represents an extraordinary challenge for the contemporary adopted child. The parental relationship may have been experienced as a source of fear and hurt and the ways children respond to the prospect of a new family will inevitably be impacted on by early experiences.

In this dynamic and complex context support for the embryonic family is understood as an essential part of the matching process. Quinton (2012) suggests that adoptive parenting should be seen through the lens of '...an ecology of parenting [whereby] agency capacity is part of parenting capacity' (p.101, my brackets). A match 'is just the beginning of the story – it also has to be maintained and capacities and skills supported and developed as the adoption progresses' (ibid). Here support services and interventions are understood to be part of the parenting. Similarly Hart and Luckock (2004) drawing on family practices scholarship describe the formation of adoptive family life 'as a process of action and imagination' (p.36). They put forward the concept of a 'community of adoptive family practices' (p.167) which they define as;

...a concept of adoptive family practice and support as something based in collaborative allegiances between everyone involved, rather than as simply a set of external professional interventions. In this way family members, friends and agency workers are together best seen as the practitioners of family life in adoption (p.167).

Hart and Luckock propose that this community of practice is explicitly mobilised by the professional network prior to matching to ensure support is in place for the new family.

### **Information Practices**

Information sharing is understood to be essential for decision making and in preparation for adoptive family life. There is (in the UK context) a consensus that prospective adopters should be fully informed about the child they are being matched with. This focus on sharing information reflects the shift away from confidentiality towards an expectation of openness.

It is essential that agencies make available to the prospective adopter all material facts about the children that may be placed in their care (Department for Education 2013, p.88).

Problems with information 'are a pervasive theme in the literature' and this has 'implications for the success or failure of a placement' (RIP, 2014, p.1). Children, birth parents, foster carers, adopters and social workers have all reported a lack of information during matching (Sinclair, 2005; Boddy, 2013; Randall, 2013; Selwyn, et al., 2014). Randall (2013) found evidence 'that the needs of the children placed were deliberately being played down' in order to improve a child's chance of being matched (pp.193-194). Practitioners were found to be 'sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally – not disclosing the full details of what was on record' (p.198). Practitioners have also been found to be 'stretching' too far adoptive parents' expectations about their own capacity to parent specific children (Farmer and Dance 2015). It is also suggested that problems in information sharing 'increases risks of disruption' in later life, post-adoption order' (Selwyn, et al., 2014, p.289) and that 'problems are more likely to arise if the focus is on the *event* of matching rather than the *process*' (RIP, 2014, p.1). All those involved can focus too much on achieving a match and lose sight of the bigger picture i.e. that lives that must be lived not just in the present but in the future. In research exploring adoption disruptions the matching process is understood to provide a lens into the future. These studies are written in hindsight and here Randall acknowledges the complexity of decision making amidst a confluence of

factors and asks 'How much was intrinsically unknowable until after the child was placed?' (2013, p.196).

Simmonds (2016) also acknowledges the inherent uncertainty in the pursuit of permanence. The central question, he argues is 'how do we use what we have come to reliably know to make decisions that are complex in their delivery and huge in their impact?' (p.48). This question of what is knowable emerges throughout the literature. Selwyn et al., (2014) found in their study that '...parents wanted to know whether they could expect their child to be able to live independently as an adult' (p.277). Conversely social workers want to know how well adoptive parents can cope with not knowing.

#### Children's rights and information

Concerns about children relating to their rights and needs in relation to information sharing and participation in decision making at the point of matching are repeatedly raised in the literature. The Care Inquiry (2013) found that all children, not just children moving to adoptive families, were routinely excluded from decision-making relating to permanence. They also note the particular exclusion of disabled children and children with learning difficulties in decision making. Hart and Luckock (2004) draw attention to the complexity of the context in which information and decision-making in relation to permanence takes place;

...we do not intend that distressed and vulnerable children should be further burdened by responsibility for determining their own future, under some pretence that real choice and control does or should apply in their situation. The way in which children are enabled to participate is the central issue, not whether they should have a right to do so at all. This right is foundational (p.188).

Through this lens children's rights are considered alongside a duty of care in relation to permanence. The sensitivity required in these practices is also recognised in the guidance;

In seeking the child's views, the agency should not give the child the impression that they are being asked to bear the weight of the decision that needs to be made about their adoption (Department for Education, 2013, p.38).

Hart and Luckock (2004) suggest that information practices are an integral preparation for adoptive family life. This is an articulation of an established view (evident in practice and policy guidance) that information should be part of a storying (and therapeutic) process which explicitly seeks to help a child make sense of their past, present and future relationships. This storying process should be an integral part of the care of looked after children. Watson et al. (2015) use the term 'narrative coherence' in their study of practice

approaches which enable children to make sense of their life story. This term is used across the literature. Narrative coherence can be understood as 'the attempt to put thoughts, fantasies and events into words, and to make a coherent account out of lived experience' (Katz and Treacher, 2001, p.20).

Children who have experienced significant disruptions in their early lives may have difficulty in gathering together their experiences in a way that can be made sense of, symbolised, played out or remembered so that the beginning of a narrative and a sense of coherence can emerge (Hindle 2008, p.150).

Humans 'gain their verbal and non-verbal languages for narratives from the social and familial systems that they inhabit' (Katz and Treacher, 2001, p.20). During the matching process the child's social and familial system expands and consequently 'narrative coherence' has to expand to include the new family. Eventually as parental responsibility is transferred, the adoptive family gain primary responsibility for development of a shared family narrative which unites them to the child (Katz and Treacher, 2001). Hart and Luckock (2004) consider the 'pain and complexity of supporting adopted children to move on from, yet stay connected to, their very difficult histories' (p.191). They highlight how adoptive parents are required to 'develop a shared family narrative into which shared understandings of past legacies of both children and parents become embedded' (p.191). There is a dearth of empirical studies examining this work and there are very few accounts from the perspective of children (noted in Thomas, 2013). In one study and in their analysis of retrospective accounts from the perspective of adoptive parents researchers did find;

...examples of very creative work with children, books written especially for individual children and calendars with pictures that had been made for children to help them understand the introductions process (Selwyn et al., 2014, p.263).

The research highlighted the role of skilled practitioners who had 'ensured that every child had a life storybook that the child and their adoptive parents would want to use' (p.263). A minority of adopters also reported retrospectively that children 'did not understand what was happening to them or why they could not live with their families at the time they were placed for adoption' (p.291). Researchers noted considerable variation in practice between agencies. Katz and Treacher (2001) suggest that in direct work with children attempts can be made to gloss over difficult and traumatic information and feelings, '...life story books can silence the difficulties experienced for the adoptee' (p.20).

Research indicates that in the post approval stage prospective parents are 'very vulnerable... because of their own needs and desires' (Selwyn, et al., 2014, p.277). Lewis et al., (2013) also suggest that;

...the optimistic and positive approach they need, the excitement of having a child, the desire to form as a new family and to distance themselves somewhat from the Adoption Service (having 'earned' the right to autonomy) all make it difficult to take in information fully (p.57).

### **Social work, systems of care and organisational practices**

Openness and honesty during matching is understood as necessary but difficult to achieve, dependent as it is on contradictory drives within a highly dynamic context. There is an indication in practice and policy guidance that the specific role and wide remit of the adoption practitioner makes them better placed to recognize and navigate these complex drives. Drawing on focus group discussions with practitioners the brief produced for the Department for Education (RIP, 2014) suggested that 'the child's social worker will not...instinctively think about seeking out or handing over what might turn out to be vital information' (p.4). This study suggested that an experienced adoption social worker will have a more developed understanding of the importance of information across the life-course. They;

...will have detailed and empathic knowledge about a foster or adoptive family and will be able to see where potential conflicts might arise. They will also have a good idea of the impact on the rest of the family, including any birth children of the foster carers or adopters (p.4).

In her review of the research produced through the Adoption Research Initiative Thomas also noted that;

...the vast majority of adopters in their samples were highly satisfied with the support provided by the family placement workers from local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. Post-placement adoption workers received particularly positive feedback from adopters. Adopters, however, had more mixed experiences of children's social workers and adopters related their dissatisfaction to delays in the provision of support and inaccurate paperwork (2013, p.56).

Farmer and Dance (2015) also concluded that:

...the involvement of experienced adoption workers, who do not need to defer to children's social workers - who inevitably have less experience of adoption - improves the quality of the matches made (p.987).

In this literature the adoption practitioner is understood to be more knowledgeable as they will often encounter adoption and adoptive family life as it is lived, experienced and practiced across the life span. Adoption practitioners may have experience of counselling



adopted adults in respect of their records, of managing contact arrangements and of providing adoption support to families. The ways in which practitioners encounter a matching process is considered through the lens of professional experiences and knowledge of adoption. Are these issues driven solely by professional experience and expertise? 'Children's social workers often strove to find what they saw as an 'ideal' family type for children, particularly in relation to finding (heterosexual) couples' (Farmer and Dance, 2015, p.989). Why some social workers might be more influenced by heteronormative ideas than others is not explored further. Is the inference that this is about team cultures or work pressures? Simmonds (2016) also suggests that social workers will be influenced and shaped by their own familial experiences. He notes the complete absence of literature exploring the intersections and impact of social workers' parental and relational experiences on the matching process. Simmonds argues that practitioners need to reflect on these intersections and the impact of their own biography on their practice and calls for more reflective spaces in practice.

Critical reflection and reflexivity in practice are central concerns across social work. Payne (2009) defines critical reflection at its most basic as 'thinking things through' (cited in Turney, 2014, p.6). Social workers are required to continually think about their decision-making, their actions and to review them. Critical reflection is about re-visiting hypothesis and testing them out with the acceptance that ideas may have to change. This type of practice has also been described as 'tacit knowledge' or professional intuition. The role of tacit knowledge within assessment is a source of considerable debate. Turney (2014) suggests that critical reflection puts too much emphasis on the individual worker and demands of them a constant interrogation of their own subjective responses which;

...tends to leave responsibility for change or improvement with the particular practitioner and downplay the importance of the broader environment of practice, with its resource limitations, staff shortages, and frequent re-organisations and so on. Workers do not operate in a vacuum and failing to acknowledge the impact of these external factors risks locking the worker into self-blame (p.6).

The research has shifted towards a systems approach whereby the organisation's capacity for reflexivity is understood to underpin the practitioner's capacity to carry out their role reflexively (Turney, 2014). Taking such an approach Hindle and Shulman (2008) suggest that in a matching process;

...the particular constellation of unconscious forces and dynamics in the child, the parents and the professional system can militate against – and sometimes create

formidable obstacles to – knowing and being in touch with the reality and complexity of the adopted child's inner world, and of their emotional pain and experience (p.271).

Lanyado (2003) also suggests that the impact of this work can be 'profound'. She posits that 'the anxieties projected into the system by the children are unremitting' (p.347) and that these are amplified during transition. The ways in which workers and carers defend against these stresses can become problematic and include denial, splitting and blaming of others;

...even the most competent of inter-professional systems can unwittingly be spurred into action, the consequences of which are not sufficiently thought through for the child. Splits develop in which professionals blame each other when things go wrong – mirroring the ways in which society likes to point the finger of blame and avoid responsibility for the poor care of its weakest members (p.347).

Lanyado (2003), Hindle and Shulman (2008) and Wakelyn (2012) are working with a framework of concepts developed by Melanie Klein and later applied by Isabel Menzies Lyth (discussed by Cooper, 2010). Klein's work and specifically her concept of the depressive position have been used extensively in psychoanalytically orientated studies into organisational practices. Klein argued that the depressive position is a key developmental task for infants where they learn 'to tolerate conflicting feelings' (Ruch, 2016, p. 30). As a concept it is 'representative of a healthy, integrated and balanced emotional stance' (ibid). In Lyth's classic study of hospitals she used Klein's conceptual work and developed the idea of 'the organisation as container of professional anxiety arising from the nature of the primary task' (Cooper, 2010, p. 237). She argued that the anxieties created by caring for sick people was organisationally managed by establishing routinized work, a rigid hierarchy and fixed psychological roles. Through these defensive practices the hospital was able to diffuse anxiety *and* responsibility from the nurse to the system. She found that humane practices were hampered by the use of primitive defences of splitting, denial and projection (discussed in Cooper, 2010). Lyth argued that to avoid abusive practice organisations and their workers had to work with an 'understanding of the underlying contradictions of what they are being asked to do' (Dartington, 2010, cited in Cooper, 2010, p. 237). Simmonds (2016) is working with this frame of reference when he describes the professional network during a matching process as experiencing '...hope and expectation, love and commitment, uncertainty, anxiety and fear. And in addition the primary issues of separation, loss and grief' (p.58). The task for the worker and the organisation is to tolerate and not to deny or defend against the anxieties raised by the inherent conflicts in their primary task.

In relationship-based social work practice models reflective supervision and structures that encourage safe and containing thinking spaces are understood to be integral to ensuring humane practices in the context of high anxiety (Ruch, 2016). Practitioners require 'an agency culture that will accept 'not knowing' (Taylor and White, 2006) and encourage an attitude of 'respectful uncertainty' (Laming, 2003, cited in Turney, 2014, p.9). There is no body of work which examines the use of tacit knowledge, the role of supervision, uncertainty, or practices of reflexivity in matching and there are no studies which explore the role of adoption agencies as organizations in relation to socio-political forces.

### **Summary**

In this review the initial process in which an adoptive family is made in the pursuit of permanence is understood to be 'an intrinsically complex task' (Randall, 2013, p.195). Matching '...extends prior to placement, through the authorisation to place and then introductions, moving and settling in.' (Simmonds, 2016, p.57). I understand that matching is a process but that it ceases at the point of the adoption order. Through the adoption order the family is formally recognised and the assessment of its capacity to provide permanence ceases. Family formation continues but it does so (post-adoption order) without official scrutiny.

Matching is understood by Thomas as 'a social work process' (2013, p.34) and yet there is also a general recognition that matching is a collaborative process (RIP, 2014; Department for Education, 2013). Matching involves individual children, prospective adopters, foster carers and their families, social workers, supervisors and senior managers. Matching practices rarely involve birth family members beyond limited information sharing (RIP, 2014). The process also involves supervisory, decision-making and monitoring forums (Quinton, 2012). This is a site where power is communicated and experienced (Hart and Luckock, 2004). Social workers and their agencies are understood to be responsible for the exercise of power. Birth relatives, carers, adopters and children are generally understood as being subject to power (RIP, 2014). Assessment in matching is understood in the literature to be relational, to involve information practices, predicative analysis, critical reflection, decision making, preparation, support, training and education (Alper and Howe, 2015). There is no body of work which explores the practices of assessment during matching (an absence also noted by Quinton, 2012).

In social work literature there is a notable absence of what Simmonds (2016) describes as 'the relational component' (p.52). Psychoanalytic studies do explore aspects of the process through relational and experiential perspectives (see Lanyado, 2003; Wakelyn, 2012). In this work the focus is on how transition is experienced. Relational risk is foregrounded but the generative potential of the process is also recognised. For children, the process of transition and placement is understood to be inherently stressful (Burnell, et al., 2009; Wakelyn, 2012). Not surprisingly research also indicates that working collaboratively in these conditions can be difficult (Randall, 2013; Selwyn, et al., 2014; Boswell and Cudmore, 2014).

This chapter has mapped out the knowledge on matching through a review of the social work literature and on the small body of psychoanalytic work that is also referenced in this literature. The purpose of this chapter has been to map out the knowledge base that directly informs practice and to do so through a thematic narrative review. I have highlighted the widely acknowledged gaps in the knowledge base (noted too by Quinton, 2012; Barn and Kirton, 2012; Simmonds, 2016) and in the introduction to this chapter I also noted the lack of conceptual clarity highlighted by Thomas (2013). In the following chapter I explore these gaps and absences through other disciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I set out to map the existing knowledge base relating to the making of an adoptive family in the English context. In this chapter I now work towards establishing an epistemological framework on which to build this study. I begin with a brief discussion of a brief academic initiative in the 1990s as a way to introduce the central themes of this chapter. A key issue in the field (and this study) is how to engage critically with different perspectives in order to make use of a wide range of knowledge sources. Social work as a discipline draws from a diverse pool of theoretical resources and 'needs hybrid approaches' (Ruch, 2016, p.19). In order to work with a notion of hybridity I draw on work in the field of UK psychosocial studies to re-consider 'matching'. In this chapter I explore the possibilities afforded by a transdisciplinary approach to research in the field.

#### **Transdisciplinarity**

The Centre for Adoption and Identity Studies (CAIS) established in the 1990s 'was originally founded as a research centre for the study of the interrelationship between individual and social identity and experiences of adoption and fostering' (Cooper, 1998, p.7). The Centre's ambition was explicitly to think expansively and publicly across experience whether that be located in personal, professional or disciplinary spaces. Cooper notes the difficulties involved in fulfilling those ambitions.

There are many hidden stories, and much unrecognised grief in the lives of those who in various ways are touched by separation and the effort to repair and reconstruct 'family life'. Any one such story always implies several others, and it is this sense of extreme complexity and the intertwining of 'hidden histories' which makes the total experience both very hard to think about, and a site of unending surprise, ambiguity and uncertainty (ibid).

Cooper is writing from multiple positions, he is a social work academic, a trained psychoanalyst and an adoptive father. In this extract he draws attention to the multiplicity of stories and lives and 'the intertwining of hidden histories'. Later in the article he acknowledges the intersectionality of the subject positions he occupies in relation to the field. CAIS and Cooper are consciously and deliberately locating the field of interest in 'a hybrid psychosocial space' (Stenner and Taylor, 2008, p.431). Cooper describes how CAIS sought to explore 'experiences of adoption and fostering' (ibid). Yet CAIS uses adoption in its name as opposed to any other type of family life and fostering is not mentioned at all.

Why not The Centre for Family Studies and Identity? I draw attention to this anomaly because it reveals both a disjuncture between intention and practice and the importance of context in the production of knowledge. In its naming CAIS elevates adoption both as a route to permanence and as a source of academic interest. As the centre seeks to address division it simultaneously engages in divisive practices. Writing two decades later in 2018 and reflecting on CAIS, I bring with me sensitivity to the symbolism of names in relation to different types of family placement. When I first began my collaboration with BAAF, people in the organisation talked about putting the F back into BAAF. It was felt that the organisation was too closely associated with adoption and that things needed to change: there needed to be a rebalancing. The aim now across the sector is to acknowledge and recognise ‘a variety of possible pathways to permanence that are equally valued and that share common principles in planning to meet children’s lifetime needs’ (Boddy, 2013, p.2). Times are different and that allows us different vantage points from which to view the social world. Bullock (2017) in an editorial for the journal *Adoption and Fostering*, notes the continued dominance of articles focusing on adoption over fostering. So perhaps we can say that an imbalance remains but it is now harder to ignore. Bullock reflects on Sinclair’s (2005) *Fostering Now: Messages from research*, which he argues made a significant ‘theoretical contribution by encouraging the ecological and systemic view of children and families that was embryonic at the time’ (p.213). Bullock highlights two recent studies commissioned by the Department for Education on foster care and bemoans their lack of depth. He draws comparisons with Sinclair’s work using a ‘surfing and oceanography analogy’ and suggests that the current research base is ‘limited [and the] focus is on activities above the water line’ (p.214, my brackets). Temporal, emotional and political processes shape the production of research. There are vantage points available to CAIS in 1998 and to Sinclair in 2005 that are not available now.

With transdisciplinarity we are dealing in part with that which escapes disciplinary knowledge. In other words, if interdisciplinarity were the careful setting up of trade routes between pre-established disciplines, then transdisciplinarity would be the invention of new spaces of knowledge and practice that transform the existing territory by opening it up to the new. If the former might combine, say, psychological and sociological findings, the latter would address a hybrid psychosocial space that neither psychology nor sociology adequately comes to terms with (Stenner and Taylor, 2008, p.431).

Adoption could be considered a subject with transdisciplinary features and one ‘that neither psychology nor sociology adequately comes to terms with’ (ibid). CAIS explicitly state that their intention is to think across disciplinary spaces and to open up new spaces of

knowledge. Hart and Luckock (2004) in their book exploring new approaches to adoption support practice have similar ambitions. They seek to bring into conversation developmental and psychological perspectives with anthropological and sociological work. The inference here is that these bodies of work are not in conversation. Like other adoption researchers they are interested in the lens afforded by sociological theories, particularly in reference to family practices and the everyday doing of relationships. As Jones and Hackett (2012) note, concepts of 'family practices' 'have transformed the ways in which family is understood' (p.42) and there is a large body of sociologically orientated empirical work exploring 'the social processes through which families are constituted' (p.42). MacDonald (2013) too notes the possibilities afforded by these approaches and she describes the 'near-invisibility' of adoption 'in the general sociological, anthropological or family process literature' (p.75). Logan (2013) also argues that adoption;

... continues to receive little attention from sociologists (Fisher 2003) and with the exception of the work of Judith Modell (1994, 2001, 2002) in the USA, Janet Carsten (2000, 2004) in the UK and Signe Howell in Norway (2006) – all of whom are adoptive parents themselves, there has been a similar lack of attention from anthropologists (p.36).

It seems that very 'little attention has been paid' to the everyday experiences of adoptive families (Jones and Hackett, 2012, p.42). Social work scholarship itself occupies a somewhat liminal academic space (Lorenz, 2012). It draws from more established academic disciplines (psychology and sociology) and as such it might be expected to make use of different bodies of work to consider the matching process. Yet the 'virtually absent' (Quinton, 2012, p.1) literature and the limitations of the concepts available seem to suggest that matching has escaped 'disciplinary knowledge' (Stenner and Taylor, 2008, p.431). Why would that be? Kirton (2013a) suggests that the demand for measurable outcomes and a focus on delay has narrowed the research scope in the field. Matching brings into play many different elements and subjects with different roles and investments, who have 'complex and interlocking experiences' and as Cooper argues this 'makes the total experience very hard to think about' (ibid).

Thomas (2013) highlights how concepts in relation to matching are blurred and terms used interchangeably in her overview of the Adoption Research Initiative. By looking at the way 'matching' is framed in Thomas' overview we can also see evidence of this lack of conceptual clarity and the consequences of it. Thomas's overview summarizes the findings of the seven studies commissioned within the Adoption Research Initiative (ARI). These

studies are described as being the most *comprehensive* explorations of the process in the English context. One study;

...mapped adoption agencies' policies and approaches to linking and matching children to prospective adopters. It described and classified agencies' current approaches and compared their relative effectiveness, outcomes and costs. In addition, the study identified the indicators of a good match and suggested ways in which matching can be improved. (Dance et al. 2010, p.9).

The premise of this study was to examine the effectiveness of matching practices and the research 'aimed to assess the relative effectiveness of different approaches' (Thomas, 2013, p.38). In her overview Thomas highlights the findings of the study related to 'Assessment, preparation and recruitment' (p.38). The studies were particularly interested in the use of standardized tools in assessment practices. 'Approaches to finding a family' (p.41) are then mapped. Thomas then discusses the findings related to the various techniques used to link children with prospective parents. These include information exchanges and advertising. 'Quality of the matches' is the next section in the overview.

Using only the knowledge available when the match was made, two of the Family Finding study researchers independently assessed the quality of the matches. They did so by rating the extent of compromise on the matching requirements for both the child's and the adopters' preferences (p.44).

A clear association was found between the quality of the match (i.e. the extent to which a child's needs and adopters' preferences were congruent) and the stability and quality of the placements (p.44).

Assessment is framed in relation to the assessment of a child's 'needs and development' (p.39) and the congruence of the match with the adopters 'preferences' (p.44). Immediately following this discussion on quality the overview turns to 'Finding a family placement outcomes' (p.45) and Thomas describes how these 'studies considered the types and stability of placements recorded at various points in time after family-finding activities' (p.45). All of these 'various points in time' take place after a child is placed. In Thomas' overview there is no indication that this is a process in which a family is being made or that foster care might be involved. Practices and experiences related to introductions, placement, settling in or adaption to family life are not mentioned. Foster care is mentioned only in the context of foster carers who are subsequently approved as adoptive parents. Assessment is highlighted as significant for a 'quality' match but it is only discussed in the context of the stage before a child and adopters meet. The notion that an assessment



would continue *after* a child and adopters were linked *and* throughout the process *and* any sense of what that assessment might consist of *and* who it might involve is not addressed.

Through these critiques we might say that matching as a state intervention which is also a relational, experiential and processual phenomenon is excluded from attention. Instead, reform and research on 'matching' is focused on speed, cost, and the use of standardised measures, 'on activities above the water line' (ibid).

### **Suspicious Subjects**

Baraitser (2015) offers another lens through which we might consider both the dearth of scholarly research and the possibilities afforded by a transdisciplinary approach. She argues that transdisciplinary work should be concerned with disjuncture or embarrassments. These are concepts or practices that have fallen out of fashion or raise feelings of discomfort within a discipline.

I'm thinking here of 'society' for sociology, or 'the unconscious' for psychology, or even 'hysteria' for psychoanalysis, all of which are routinely referred to as outmoded, superseded, or simply medically discredited (p.210).

In Baraitser's formulation a transdisciplinary approach engages with points of departure from the norm and seeks to re-engage with such 'embarrassments' through new perspectives. In her own work Baraitser suggests that motherhood poses specific challenges for the disciplines she works with. Describing herself as a feminist, a psychoanalyst and someone who comes to philosophy 'as a willing amateur' (2009, p.19), she draws on different theoretical resources to explore her specialism and argues that there are limits to each. Park (2006) also uses tensions around motherhood as a site for theoretical work. Park argues that in Western culture where family life is still premised on blood ties and women are positioned through their reproductive capacities the adoptive mother is a queered subject. Her status and identity is questionable from the start. Is she a real mother?

...the queerness of the adoptive maternal body makes it a useful epistemic standpoint from which to critique dominant views of mothering. In particular, exploring motherhood through the lens of adoption reveals the discursive mediation and social regulation of all maternal bodies, as well as the normalizing assumptions of heteronormativity, "reprosexuality," and family homogeneity that frame a traditional view of the biological family. As participants in motherhood who resist "repro-narrativity," "reprosexuality," and essentialism, adoptive maternal bodies have the potential to both queer our notions of normal mothering and normalize our notions of queer mothering (Park, 2006, p.201).

Using and working with queer theory allows Park to trouble normative notions of mothering. She uses the discomfort generated by a non-reproductive female body that mothers to generate insight into gender practices. She shifts the focus from is she a real mother to what is a real mother, and further who decides and how is the mother constructed? Luckock (2008) also uses distinctive features associated with adoptive family life as a way to explore wider issues. In his paper the focus is on policy implications related to the ambivalent role of adoption in society. Gender is not the focus but the questions raised are similar to those worked on by Park (2006). Is this an ordinary family or an extraordinary family? Is it a normal family, a legitimate family? Should adoptive families qualify for additional state support and if so what does that mean in terms of their status in society?

Hart and Luckock (2004) also note that despite changes, which suggest that ‘...the norm of procreation in the context of heterosexual marriage is losing its overwhelming dominance’ (p.39), in respect of public perceptions of family life ‘values associated with blood’ have remained ‘tenacious’ (Herman, 2002, p.369). Herman (2002) argues that blood is still widely considered to be the central determinate of ‘real’ family relations. For Herman at constant play in adoption practices are ‘dilemmas as ancient as they (are) enigmatic. What is a family? Who belongs there? Does adoption make one just like any other?’ (p.370). Luckock and Hart (2005) and others have argued that ambivalence about adoption underpins the entire policy framework in England.

An Adoption Order creates an autonomous family who traditionally have had no need of public support (Lowe, 1997), yet child welfare policy views adoptive families as providers of therapeutic parenting to vulnerable children (MacDonald, 2013, p.19).

There are other tensions and ambivalences to bear in mind. As Sales (2015) notes, the practice of open adoption which is enshrined in practice thinking is premised on another ‘dual and contradictory’ (p.150) issue. She suggests practice is centred on a concern ‘with the matter of the adopted child’s ‘first’ or prior life, whilst also focussed on achieving a new and secure substitute family for that child’ (p.149). It seems that for everyone involved adoption creates paradoxes. For the adoptive parent an ‘adoptive child is at the same time one’s own child (through adoption) and another’s child (by birth)’ (Rosnati, 2005, cited in MacDonald, 2013, p.47). Miall (1996) summarises the advice given to adoptive parents as, ‘You are their real parents. When will you tell them that you aren’t?’ (cited in Wegar, 2000, p.367). For the birth parent they are ‘*a* parent but not *the* parent’ (Fravel, cited in

MacDonald, 2013, p.46). Hart and Luckock (2004) suggest that ambivalence is particularly prescient for the adoptee who maybe 'culturally ambivalent' and 'emotionally ambivalent' (p.153). Alongside the impact of abuse and neglect, children may be subject to 'competing calls of class, ethnicity and kinship' (p.153), because for the child the legal process in which she/he joins their new autonomous family and through which ties to their birth family is legally severed is a fiction:

...it does not accurately reflect the social and psychological reality that the child does have another family in which they originated, with whom they experienced kinship to varying extents, and which does not cease to exist after adoption (MacDonald, 2013, p.45).

In a matching process the embryonic adoptive family also encounters foster care. The foster carer role and responsibilities are also a source of contemporary debate and much of this debate concerns the inherent ambiguities of the role. Can you be paid to love a child? Is a foster carer a professional? Does professionalization detract from family life? What is it like to be a child for whom family life is shaped by payment, skills and training? Foster carers have to be able to move across roles because 'children need skilled carers, but they also need loving parents' (Schofield et al., 2013, p.54). Schofield et al. suggest that these are age old 'role ambiguities [...] intrinsic to the concept of foster care' (p.47). Kirton (2013b) explores the way that foster carers and the debates about paying for familial care generate concerns about 'mercenary motivation' (p.665). He suggests that '...among those who work with children, foster carers are uniquely placed under suspicion' (ibid). In Warner's (2015) work it is the figure of the social worker that is deeply suspicious. Working with the same premise Samsonsen and Turney (2017) suggest that '...social work in England has become something of a 'pariah profession' (Green, 2006) with low perceived academic and professional status, and a lack of external credibility' (p.121).

Could we say then that the matching process brings together questionable subjects engaged in questionable practices? There are it seems multiple examples of paradox and ambiguity for *all* those involved in the constitution of a new adoptive family. In the 1990s CAIS sought to create a public space where the '...interlocking experiences of all those impacted by adoption, fostering and life in reconstituted families can be articulated and explored in their various interconnections'(Cooper, 1998, p.7). Twenty years later questions are being asked in relation to this public space. At the January 2018 Coram BAAF research advisory group, members reflected that the levels of distrust and division amongst adoption practice stakeholders and the research community were disturbing and unprecedented.

Group members were responding to the publication of the BASW Inquiry which called into question the model of contemporary adoption practice (Featherstone et al. 2018). Academics at the meeting shared concerns about the misuse of evidence and what was perceived to be an anti-adoption agenda by BASW. Also in January 2018 the influential Donaldson Institute for Adoption Research announced its closure.

After more than twenty years of providing leadership to improve the lives of children and strengthen families, the Donaldson Adoption Institute (DAI) will be winding down our operation [...] DAI's board and leadership concluded that the challenge of raising sufficient funding to run and grow the organization was no longer feasible and thus, we have made the difficult decision to close (The Donaldson Institute for Adoption Research, 2018, n.p.).

This American based institute provided a unique space within the US for adoption researchers. A concern in these times of institutional demise and radical change is that the multiple ambivalences generated by adoption become even harder to work with as the suspicion grows 'that adoption is being used as a palliative measure to respond to the social dislocations arising from neoliberalism and welfare retrenchment' (Kirton, 2013a, p.104). The worry is that as intellectual spaces shrink the only positions available are binary and defensive. Are you for adoption or against adoption? For innovation or against innovation? For social work or against social work?

### **Psychosocial perspectives**

In the preceding chapter I located contemporary adoption practices as part of the rationalisation and modernising project of the post-war era (Herman, 2008). This project has shaped the way knowledge is produced, the constitution of the adoptive family life and the shape of social work practice. It is premised on a notion of progress, incremental but forward facing, 'rooted in a belief of progress, scientific method and the certainties and stabilities of human reason' (Lorenz, 2006, p.459). Science afforded us the notion of 'the effectiveness of rationality as the principle to which decisions could be referred as opposed to a previously established, often metaphysical authority' (Lorenz, 2012, p.492). Through this philosophy we accrue knowledge in order to build a better world. Knowledge will free us from the horrors of irrational human behaviour and yet here we are.

Things are bad, times are hard, madness seems to be pervasive; lies, manipulations and violence certainly rule the day ... it is worth noting how strongly issues of boundaries, walls and nationalist restrictions have come into play... It is exhausting to watch and even more so to contest, to keep on pointing out that the barbarians are already here, they reside in each of us; there is no 'good inside' versus 'bad outside', but only a muddled reality with which we have to deal (Frosh, 2017, p.2).

Frosh is not specifically describing the Foster Care Review (2018) or the current state of play in social work or adoption research. He is commenting on world events from his perspective of a psychoanalytically trained scholar in 2017. He is engaging with the promises and the failures of the modernist agenda, of liberal democracies and an epistemology that posits the human subject as objective and rational. In this paper a notion of the stability 'of human reason' is systematically undone. Frosh notes the resurgence of nationalist ideas, ideas that were widely thought to have had their day, and of history repeating itself. He alerts us to the role of the past and 'how it leaves traces' (2017, p.7). Drawing on critical hermeneutics Lorenz (2012) explores similar tensions. His interest is on the development of European social work and its roots in the enlightenment project and he notes that:

...at the core of the enlightenment project lies a dialectic (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) that at on one hand holds the promise of emancipation and freedom, and on the other the threat of ever more efficient domination and the reduction of human beings to the state of objects to be subdued, manipulated, instrumentalized, and eliminated (Lorenz, 2012, p.492).

For Lorenz this dialectic is the central tension that social work will always have to negotiate and navigate. He uses the example of the development of German social work 'to illustrate the promises –and pitfalls – of the privileging of humanist theory frameworks' (p.492). In Germany under the Nazis and across Central Europe social work was complicit in the implementation of brutalizing and murderous state policy. Lorenz locates the profession's failure to mobilise against fascism within its intellectual heritage. He suggests that this failure stemmed from the belief in the 'scientific neutrality of objective truths about human behaviour' (p.498). Lorenz explores how the post-war development of social work in Europe failed to address the dialectic even as progressive forces sought to render fascism obsolete. As a consequence he argues, 'the standard model of social work throughout Western Europe' has been developed 'on the basis of a positivist conception of science' (p.496). Lorenz alerts us to two issues. First is the importance of context: 'social work theories and methods always need to be evaluated with reference to the social policy context in which they operate' (p.492). Second is the tension that lies at the heart of social work; a tension that has always been there and one that will always have to be critically addressed. How do we exercise power ethically? Frosh (2017), engaging with the same tension in relation to his field, argues that 'psychoanalysis is both part of the political problem and part of its solution' (p.3). He suggests that this tension '...is part of the intriguing nature of psychoanalysis as it struggles with its own history, its own inhibitions and pressures towards

freedom' (p.3). For Frosh and Lorenz the task is to continually hold in mind the foundational tensions underpinning their disciplines. This approach is premised on a critique of 'a positivist conception of science' that disavows the context and conditions through which knowledge is produced.

Thomas (2013) in her overview of research also calls for 'a greater understanding of the realities of adoption in the early 21st century' (p.88). Indeed, but how and from where do we form our understanding of 'realities'? Jones et al. (2010) acknowledge that the adoptive family will be '...affected by the attitudes and beliefs of their relatives, significant others and the general public' (p.2). How do we understand and approach the study of 'attitudes and beliefs'? An enduring critique of both developmental psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives is that too often they fail to take account of social projections and promote 'political, gender and social normativeness' (Frosh, 2017, p.2). The challenge in the field is to produce research that attends 'to the complexity of social problems and acknowledges the value of inter-subjectivity in producing useable and ethically grounded evidence' (Shaw and Lorenz 2016, p.308). Lorenz (2016) notes too in relation to social work research that 'we do not find ourselves alone or marginalized with the dilemmas we face' (p.459). These are questions which reflect 'a general crisis of epistemology' and speak to fundamental aspects of 'social interaction and the human condition in modernity, as such' (ibid).

Traditional models of human rationality which opposed reason to passion are being challenged. The preoccupation with language and cognition has started to give way to an equal interest in emotion and affect. The familiar split between 'individual' and 'society', psychology and sociology, is now recognized as unhelpful to the study of both (Hoggett, n.d.).

In the UK, 'psycho-social studies has emerged as an embryonic new paradigm in the human sciences' (Hoggett, n.d.). For Rustin (2014) 'psycho-social studies has provided a location in which contemporary concerns with the spheres of subjectivity and emotions' (p.198) can be considered and engaged with. The definition and boundaries of the field are a source of debate (discussed in Redman, 2016). For Hoggett it is psychoanalysis that provides the foundation for psychosocial exploration. He notes the importance of Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently* as offering 'a new approach to social research and social policy, which begins with the complexity of the individual's experience of change' (n.p.). In this seminal text the authors developed a new methodology directly applying psychoanalytic concepts in the generation and analysis of data. Hollway and Jefferson posited a different approach to subjectivity and a radical re-working of the

notion of reflexivity. The researcher is positioned as an 'instrument of knowing' (Hunt cited in Elliot, 2011, p.1) and 'subjectivity' is understood '...as a resource for the production of knowledge, yet not an unproblematic resource' (Thomson, 2010, p.9). Here researcher and researched were understood to be engaged in the co-production of meaning. Hollway and Jefferson argued for a new understanding of the research subject;

...one whose inner world is not simply a reflection of the outer world, nor a cognitively driven rational accommodation to it. Rather, we intend to argue for the need to posit research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and whose experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world. This research subject cannot be known except through another subject; in this case, the researcher. The name we give to such subjects is psychosocial (p.4).

With this understanding of subjects and research the authors and the many researchers inspired by their work sought to develop methods which would seek to 'document and interrogate subjective responses' (Thomson, 2010, p.9).

Within the psychosocial field 'psychoanalysis is not the only game in town' (Redman, 2016, p.79). There exist different dialects within the field (see Baraitser, 2015) and not all of them work with psychoanalysis. For Baraitser the field is 'concerned with the irreducible relation between psychic and social life' (2015, p.207) and there are many different theoretical resources which can be drawn on in psychosocial endeavours. It is in this space that the notion of transdisciplinary work emerges. The ambition of transdisciplinary thinkers is to keep the psychosocial field as open as possible to encourage dialogue across disciplinary borders. I am drawn to transdisciplinarity both because it fits my world view and because it is entirely congruent with the field of adoption:

...since adoptive identities are dependent on recognising the constitutive function of difference, might it not be better to make a virtue out of necessity and encourage adoptive parents and children to recognise that the different parts of their adoption story will never fit neatly together into a single shared plot around the classical unities of time, place and subject? (Cohen, 1995, cited in Treacher, 2000, p.22)

## Summary

My intention in this chapter has been three-fold. First I sought to build on the literature review and to further develop my construction of the object of this study, the making of a family through adoption. I have explicitly situated matching at the crux of multiple fault lines intellectually, theoretically, economically, politically and psychologically.

...we are witnessing increasing strain on the lives of vulnerable children and families as a result of changes to the benefit system and, through public sector budget restraints, a serious reduction in the ability of local authorities to discharge their duty of care to such vulnerable children and families (The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.2).

This is the backdrop to contemporary permanence practices and this is Cooper's 'rough seas' (ibid). Adoption and the making of an adoptive family through a 'matching process' is located in the swell of these seas. I have suggested that the site of this study touches on fundamental aspects of 'social interaction and the human condition' (Lorenz, 2016, p.459) and provides a unique epistemic lens into key contemporary social work concerns. Second I sought to highlight the ways in which knowledge creation can be understood as political, relational and temporal. In discussing the formation and ambitions of CAIS I drew attention to the context through which research is approached and the disjuncture between intention and practice. In the mid-1990s the founders of CAIS are subject to the same dynamics that have resulted in the creation of hierarchies of permanence *and* they are simultaneously attempting to think critically about social forces and their interactions. Through this discussion I sought to develop an understanding of human subjects as both 'objects and agents of power' whose relationships and inner worlds are 'populated through absorption of, and dynamic interaction with, social forces' (Frosh, 2017, p.60). I locate my research identity and positionality within the critical realist approach articulated by Bhaskar (1998). I understand that knowledge formation is always context dependent, subjective, socially constructed and that there are no absolute truths. I also believe 'that though it is far from transparent, there is a relationship between people's ambiguous representations and their experiences' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p.3) and that there exists a social reality in which we all live. I believe that all our lives can be enriched by humane relational practices and that whilst we 'are subjected to forces ... we also have force and impact; we can change the things around us just as they might change us' (Frosh, 2017, p.2). My study seeks to improve social work practice and the critical realist paradigm is congruent with this aim.



Finally I have suggested that the psychosocial hybridity of adoptive family life is one of its defining features. It is constituted differently and 'it is its very distinctiveness that makes adoption such an instructive example' (Luckock, 2008, p.13). In taking a transdisciplinary approach to adoption research I am seeking 'to make a virtue out of necessity' (Cohen, 1995, cited in Treacher, 2000, p.22). The aim then is not to fit things - theory, time, place and subjects - 'neatly together' (ibid) but instead to, seek out and explore tensions and points of divergence. In taking forward a psychoanalytic sensibility I understand difficult and disruptive spaces as both constitutive of the field and as potentially productive of insight. The hope in attending to these types of places/spaces is to produce something new, 'to articulate the generative, surprising and unexpected' (Baraitser, 2009, p.4).

In England foster care, adoption and social work generate ambivalence that is both historical and of this era. As I write they are not completely discredited but questions relating to their status and to their legitimacy are animated. Baraitser describes concepts ripe for transdisciplinary study as those that are seen within a discipline 'as outmoded, superseded, or simply medically discredited' (2015, p.210). My argument is that matching 'is ripe for transdisciplinary study' (ibid).

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I move through the ways in which this inquiry has been conceived, adapted and put into practice. I explain my 'actual research' (Redman, 2016, p.16) and I follow Redman's provocation that '...a better understanding of the psychosocial will be reached if we approach it incrementally through actual research' because some '...questions are better resolved through concrete investigation' (ibid). I discuss what I did, the tools I used and why. I begin by discussing my data collection methods. Included in this discussion is an explication of my use of group processes which I locate both within the infant observation paradigm and in the work of Alfred Lorenzer (as interpreted by psychosocial scholars). I then discuss the sampling and recruitment strategies and their outcomes followed by a synopsis of experiences in the field. Through this discussion I also illustrate 'the radical reflexivity of subject positions that means that as information is produced, so the situation changes' (Frosh, 2017, p.5). Finally my analytic practices are discussed. The first is a thematic analysis drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), through which the data set is organised and codified. I discuss the practices through which themes emerge so as to clarify aspects of the interpretative process. The second analytic practice uses literary conventions, depth hermenutics and writing as a method of inquiry. I explain how I have drawn on different but congruent approaches to analytic writing. The first approach draws on anecdotal theory as explicated by Baraitser (2009). The second draws primarily on Hollway and Froggett (2012) and Froggett et al., (2014) and their work developing Lorenzer's conceptualisation of the scenic as an analytic practice.

### **Data Collection Methods**

From 2003-2008 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded 25 research projects in the programme 'Identities and Social Action'. These projects drew together academics across disciplines to investigate four main themes relating to change and identity. In the development of this research design I have drawn from two of these studies. The Making of Modern Motherhood (MMM) study and the Becoming a Mother Study (BAM) set out to examine identity change in relation to becoming a mother. Researchers sought to document and make available for analysis the multi-form nature of their research practices. In these studies and their related scholarship the specific 'interaction [between] philosophical-theoretical and empirical-practical sources of inspiration' was highly generative to the development of my research practices (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018, p.13). I have drawn directly on these studies and from scholarship informing and arising

from them. This influence can be seen in my choice of methods and in my approach where I have sought to be collaborative, adaptive and reflexive in my research practices.

The focus of this study is social work practice and other convergent practices involved in matching. Following a psychosocial approach I was seeking to get close to the object of inquiry and to use methods of data collection which would enable me 'to explore feelings, experiences and emotions in the context of social forces' (Hingley-Jones, 2016, p.114). Social work researchers concerned with understanding practice encounters are increasingly using a variety of methods to understand the lived experience of practice. Roy (2017) notes the emergence of an approach to social work research where scholars seek to:

...animate the everyday professional experience of social work, through vivid descriptions of the small daily details, rituals, movements and habits of practice which constitute the lived experience of social work and its everyday interactive order (Roy, 2017, p.9).

There are different approaches to ethnographic research. I needed an approach where I could work explicitly with emotion and inter-subjective dynamics. For Hingley-Jones such approaches 'need to be evolved from practices where these are theorised and worked with, psychoanalytic observation and therapeutic practice being one such domain' (p.114). Infant observation was originally 'devised as a pre-clinical educational opportunity' (ibid) for trainee psychotherapists. It was developed by Ester Bick in 1948 and has been adapted in recent decades as a research method (reviewed in Urwin and Sternberg, 2012). Trainees would recruit a parent about to have a baby and visit the parent and baby regularly (usually weekly) at their home over the course of 2 years. Students were encouraged to hone their observational skills, paying attention to non-verbal communication between infant and carer and the ways in which the relationship developed over time. No notes or recordings were made during the observations. The student would make a record of the observation from memory following the observation. The seminar group, led by a trained psychoanalyst, would then consider in detail the observation notes. Students were encouraged to write their notes descriptively without referring to theory. Both observer and the group are directed to pay attention to the nuances of experience and communication. In a year or more spent observing, time is given that allows both the relationship and thoughts to unfold. Alongside building an understanding of infant development 'in the context of family life, students begin to learn about how to learn from their own emotional responses' (Hollway, 2012, p.23). Over the past 70 years infant observation has produced a body of empirical work that has contributed significantly to understandings of infancy, relationships

and developmental processes (reviewed in Urwin and Sternberg, 2012). The method has been recognised as offering an innovative approach to qualitative research across a diverse range of fields and settings. Infant observation can be understood 'as a form of' ethnographic research (Price and Cooper, 2012, p.58) and it is premised on the exploration of singular cases. Ethnographic, psychoanalytic and social work research traditions (and pedagogy) frequently use 'cases' and case study research methods are well developed in these fields. For David (2009) 'the utility of case study research lies in addressing complex relationships that cannot easily be reduced to simple causal models or statistical tests' (n.p).

... case studies investigate real-life events in their natural settings. The goal is to practice sound research while capturing both a phenomenon (the real life event) and its context (the natural setting). One strength of the case study method is its usefulness when phenomenon and context are not readily separable... Another strength is that the method enables you, as a social scientist, to address how and why questions about the real-life events, using a broad variety of empirical tools (Yin, 2004, p.xii).

Taking forward the understanding that 'phenomenon and context are not readily separable' the case study approach is congruent with the object of inquiry, the exploratory ambitions of the study and the data-collection methods.

In the planning stage my intention was to adapt the infant observation method to observe a practice-relationship for nine to twelve months (to fit the time-frame of the PhD) in whatever setting this took place. This practice relationship would involve an approved adopter/s and their social worker during a matching process. I would seek to occupy a non-obtrusive observer stance and refrain from taking notes or using a recorder. I would then write the notes up as an observation record using a descriptive style. A selection of these records would then be taken to a seminar group for reflection.

In addition to this method I incorporated two other data collection methods into the research design: interviews and reflective field notes. These were methods used together in the BAM study which drew on the Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) model. In this model the psychoanalytic concept of free association is applied to try and engage participants' unconscious thoughts and feelings, the premise being that, '...in constructing a story of their lives research subjects will provide insight into both the social and psychic conditions of their lives' (Thomson, et al., 2011, p.284). This approach to interviewing involved two interviews in succession (over a relatively

short time period) whereby participants were asked to tell their story related to the object of inquiry. Interviewers would then pay close attention to the associations made by the respondents and frame subsequent questions around these. Respondents were given the space in which to create a narrative that was not directed by the researcher's interests. In the analysis of these interviews researchers pay close attention to what is said, how it is said and also what is not said. The focus shifts to what is evoked and where the links are made in speech. Analysis looks for the presence of affect indicated by gaps in speech, inconsistencies, incongruence, hesitancy and repetition.

I also incorporated reflective field notes as a data-collection method. Thomson (2010) describes how in the MMM study 'researchers [were] encouraged to document the emotional dynamics of research encounters and their personal reactions to fieldwork situations' (p.8, my brackets). This method builds on ethnographic traditions and in these notes researchers document 'access, setting, appearances, emotional dynamics and emergent themes' (Thomson et al., 2011, p.285).

The observations would provide the temporal structure of the study. I would organise the seminar groups to take place at three time-points which would be close to the initial, mid-point and end-point of the observations. I would undertake FANI based interviews with the participants of the observations towards the end of the research. The reflective field notes would be made after every encounter with the field. I was working with three different but congruent data collection methods which I adapted to the needs of my study. For example in the design some features would remain fairly true to the infant observation method whilst other elements would be different. I would not be in control of when or where the observations took place. I would not be able to determine the duration of the observations nor the length of time between them. The original methodology sought to replicate the consistency and bounded (in time and space) features of a psychoanalytic clinical encounter. This framework would not be available to me as an observer. Instead, I would need to adapt and respond to the practice encounter as it happened. I would not have access to a weekly seminar group. The participants I intended to recruit to the study would not be able to commit to weekly meetings. I planned that the group would meet three times across the duration of the study. Regular monthly supervision would provide an additional thinking space.

Trainee analysts undergoing their infant observation training are supported by an educational institutional framework and have access to a structured and established support network. Similarly the BAM researchers were part of a large research project and had access to funds in which to support the development of a support network (including weekly seminars and individual access to psychotherapeutic support). Research informed by infant observation is, according to Rustin (2012), most effectively operationalised by observers trained in the method. I had not had any specific training in the method. As a social work practitioner I did have experience of observing interactions for assessment purposes. To try and build some understanding of the method I read numerous case studies (drawn from the *Journal of Infant Observation*). I undertook a pilot in which I observed a new mother and her baby six times over three months. My two supervisors (both experienced in using the method as an educational tool in social work training) met with me to teach and demonstrate how a seminar group would work in relation to my observation records.

The specific methodology used in this study is reflective both of the constraints of a singular PhD project and the flexibility of a transdisciplinary approach. There was not the time or money available to undergo a full training in infant observation, or to fund a weekly seminar group, or to access independent psychotherapeutic support. Whilst I made attempts to familiarise myself with the principles and practices of the infant observation methodology I did not seek to develop expertise in its application. Nor is this study one which seeks to directly apply psychoanalytic concepts or analysis. In that respect my engagement drew on the group processes undertaken in the MMM study (Thomson, 2010). Here researchers inspired by the infant observation methodology incorporated reflexive tools and practices. The group process helped researchers notice their 'interventions and aspects that we had taken for granted' and afforded access to 'a multiplication of perspectives' which helped enrich 'interpretation' (Thomson, 2010, p.10). This is a different approach from research groups which focus on 'collaboratively untangling the presence of projections within interpretations' (Thomson, 2012 et al., p.312). The group process is used both to generate and analyse data. For Price and Cooper the use of collective associative thinking 'is less a matter of supervisory 'expertise' and more the provision of 'thinking minds' (2012, p.64). The process of interpretation is slowed down as the group over time examines 'different possibilities inherent in the described behaviour, using several sources of information, before ascribing meaning' (Urwin and Sternberg, 2012, p.6).

In recent years psychosocial scholars interested in the use of group processes ‘for the analysis of affective communications’ (Thomson, et al., 2012, p.318) have been building on the work of the German cultural theorist Alfred Lorenzer (see Bereswill, et al., 2010). Lorenzer working in the field of cultural analysis and depth hermenutics developed the notion of the ‘scenic’. The scenic is understood as ‘an “autonomous level of meaning” through which as yet unsymbolized affect may find expression’ (Bereswill et al., 2010 cited in Thomson, et al., 2012, p.317). He argued that it is in groups (or interactive forms) that subjective and societal processes are encountered and become accessible. In this approach ‘scenic material can be encoded within and communicated by texts’ (ibid). Researchers working with the infant observation methodology are exploring the possibilities afforded by the rich textual material generated through observations, group processes and the concept of the ‘scenic’ (see Froggett, et al., 2014; Hollway and Froggett, 2012; Thomson, et al., 2012). In this work the ‘scenic’ is being used as a conceptual bridge between cultural analysis and psychoanalysis.

I locate my approach within this emergent and exploratory work. I have sought to adhere to the principles underpinning the infant observation methodology and depth hermeneutics (slowing down, observing over time, the use of groups, recursive engagement) and I have tried to take forward a psychoanalytic sensibility. I have used the features of the infant observation method that were workable and tried to be creative in using the resources I have had access to. Serendipitously, a number of the group members were both psychoanalytically trained and familiar with the infant observation methodology.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

The sampling frame operationalized in the study has been purposive. The opportunities afforded by my position as a ‘practice-near’ researcher undertaking a collaborative PhD with BAAF provided me with access to settings and participants through which I could realize the principles I set out in the introduction to this chapter. Simply translated this involved 1) gaining access to a practice relationship, which I could follow over time in order to get close to practice and 2) building in-group work both to expand the analysis and to bring in a polyphony of perspectives.

The practice-relationship: Gaining access to a practice relationship involved considerable time and effort. I approached a number of practitioners and teams across four localities in the South of England. The sampling criteria included the caveat that social workers should

be working with applicants who had been approved as adoptive parents. To this effect I sought to recruit a small number of social workers (between one and four) in the South of England working with adopter/s during the post-approval stage. I hypothesized that adopter/s might be more open to the study once they had been approved. They would have an established relationship with their social worker and perhaps feel less anxious about their route to parenting having achieved approval from the agency. The potential for drop-out from the study also seemed less likely post-approval. Whilst a family might not be formed during the field-work practice encounters would take place and specific children might be discussed. I could then access a relationship over time and during a specific time-period when a family would probably take shape (at least imaginatively if not materially), offering a potentially rich source of data in which to examine ideas and practices of permanence.

I spent five months trying to recruit to the study. Negotiating access to local authority teams proved difficult. After a period of negotiation with four teams across the South of England I was invited to meet two of those teams. I presented my research design and explained the study at their respective team meetings. From those meetings, out of approximately 30 practitioners, four indicated they would like to be part of the study. Subsequently the manager from one of the teams declined to allow any of the practitioners in her team to be part of the study. This left me with two potential recruits. I also contacted directly two independent practitioners and two sets of adoptive parents who for a variety of reasons either did not meet the sampling criteria or did not want to proceed. Through feedback and in encounters with practitioners it had become clear that the field of inquiry was beset by diverse and significant change, pressures and anxieties. The nature of the study (psychoanalytically informed observations) seemed to produce further anxiety related to exposure and scrutiny.

In January 2016 I recruited Claire, a senior practitioner, who was working with Debbie, a single prospective adopter, who had been recently approved. Debbie was being matched with Lily (an infant in foster care) and planning work was underway (all names have been changed). The agency in which Claire worked was also the agency in which I had practiced as a practitioner, located in the town in which I became a mother. Claire and Debbie were keen and committed to being part of the study. As participants they met the sampling criteria and the location of the study was suitably (conceptually and geographically) 'practice-near'.



In March 2016 and in consultation with my supervisors we decided to stop any more recruitment strategies. It seemed that after seven months and contact with 35 potential participants the chances of recruiting further suitable participants were slim. In supervision we clarified that a single case analysis would generate the required data. The risks of a single case study of this type rested on its sustainability. If participants withdrew early into the study there could be insufficient data on which to base a PhD. We went ahead after careful consideration of the relational foundations of this specific case. This decision was based on three features. First, we had committed and informed participants with an established relationship. Second, they were about to embark on a matching and placing stage (this had a forward momentum). Third, we had support from the agency (established relationships with senior managers and team). Given the originality of the study and the level of access afforded to me as a researcher, the opportunities for generating new data in the field were such that we deemed the risk of a singular case study worth taking.

The Groups: For the group to function as a containing and reflective space, participants needed to be engaged, reflective and open to associative work. I approached colleagues at BAAF (at this point Coram BAAF) and recruited four senior members of the Policy and Development Team. These participants were not only senior members of the Coram BAAF team but held considerable expertise in adoption and permanence research and practice. All were widely published and respected in the field. Two colleagues had received OBEs for their services to the adoption community. I recruited two further members for the group, both social workers undertaking PhDs using psychosocial methods. Of the six participants, five were trained as social workers and two worked as social workers, one of those in adoption practice. One participant was an adoptive parent and had just become a grandparent, one was an adopted person. Four of the group were familiar with infant observation as a pedagogical practice, having undergone training in it as social workers. One member of the group was black British and the rest were white British. Five were women and one was a man. One group member, experienced with infant observation as a training method, agreed to act as facilitator.

I was delighted to have engaged these particular participants in this study. The breadth and depth of knowledge of social work and adoption held within the group meant that these specific 'minds' could bring distinctive experience and expertise to the study. At a time of rapid change and uncertainty in the field (and later in the research) this group functioned as

and symbolized a source of containment and continuity. This group not only had a vast array of experience in the permanence field but over half of them could be said to have shaped the field itself. Two group members could be understood as being able to speak from service-user perspectives (the adoptive parent and adopted person). Yet by and large the group (which I will call the Many Minds Group, MMG), were firmly located in social work practice, research and policy. This seemed appropriate and important for a study concerned with improving practice.

In line with my commitment to gathering a polyphony of voices, I also wanted to engage collectively with other perspectives. Through my practice experience I knew of a group of adoptive parents who had been meeting to support each other in family life for over 20 years. The group had originally been facilitated by a social worker but had for many years been self-supporting. Some of the group members had become grandparents. This group seemed to me to offer something special to the study. First, they had all experienced the operationalization of permanence in the locality in which the case study was situated. They would be able to bring their experiences to the research. Second, they were an established group who were familiar with each other and with being in a group setting. They were used to talking about family life with each other. I surmised that they were likely to bring an honesty and criticality to the research from an adoptive parent perspective. They were all established as parents and might be able to reflect openly on their experiences having moved beyond a dependency on the agency.

I approached a member of the group who I knew through the local adoption community. She contacted the group on my behalf. The group, which I will call the Adoption Support Group (ASG), agreed that I could visit on an evening which was already arranged as a group 'get together'. The group consisted of six women, all white British. Five had parented as part of a heterosexual couple. One was a gay woman who had parented with her female partner. It was unclear as to how many of the women were grandparents but during the meeting two participants referred to their grandchildren, one of whom discussed how she had sought a special guardianship order for her grandchildren and was now raising them. Through my practice knowledge, and re-affirmed by my contact with the group, I was aware that group members had all received adoption support services from the local authority. They had all shared and supported each other through tough times and had emerged as a group through a shared identification with being a parent (more specifically with being a mother) through adoption. I hoped that their practice of meeting and talking together over

time indicated a shared belief in the benefits of collective reflection, which would encourage openness to this method of talking together in a group. In many ways (like the MMG) they represented an expert group.

Whereas the MMG was established more or less in line within a structured and established methodology and could function in line with the model developed through the BAM study, the ASG was approached differently. The women of the ASG were allowing me entry to a private space which they had carved out of busy lives in order to give and gain support from each other. I was sensitive to both their generosity and the privilege afforded by this access. It was unclear as to whether I could meet the group more than once and I decided to see how the first meeting went before deciding on whether to approach the group again. I also decided against an outside facilitator in order to work with the group's existing informality and dynamics. I planned to read aloud an observation record to stimulate discussion and to provide a focus for the group. I hoped that by using a record in which Debbie and Claire were the focus the group could explore aspects of the adoption process without necessarily divulging their own personal biographies.

The two groups (MMG and ASG) had different functions in respect of the study. The MMG were established in order to operationalize the infant observation methodology. The ASG were recruited to the study in order to realize my ambition of drawing on multiple perspectives and to enhance the critical reflexivity of the study. Combined, the groups brought twelve other minds to the study and an enormous wealth of experience in relation to a diversity of professional and personal adoption practices.

### **Experiences in the Field**

I began my observations of Claire and Debbie on 9th February 2016. My last observation took place on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2016. I conducted seven observations during that time. Drawing on the FANI model I conducted interviews with Claire and Debbie in July 2016. I held three MMGs. The first took place in April, the second in July and the third in December 2016. I held one ASG which took place in April 2016. I was also given access to email communication between Debbie and Claire (between 12<sup>th</sup> February and 16<sup>th</sup> March). I kept field notes of all my physical encounters with the field (not following email exchanges). I was also given an 'Intro Plan 2' which was two A4 pieces of paper detailing the planned move of Lily (an infant) to Debbie. I also had a short report from Debbie which was attached to an email. The table below details the data set.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Research Encounter</b>	<b>Type of Data</b>
<b>Feb 2016</b>	09.02.16 Observation 1. Debbie and Claire at the social work office (SWO) Email Correspondence x 17 1 Report contained in an email	Observation record (Ob1) Field note (F1) Email transcripts Report
<b>Mar 2016</b>	08.03.16 Observation 2. Permanence Panel (SWO) 09.03.16 Observation 3. Introductions planning meeting (SWO) Intro Plan 2 14.03.16 Observation 4. Debbie and Claire (SWO) Email Correspondence x 12	Observation record (Ob2) Field note (F2) Observation record (Ob3) Field note (F3) 2 A4 docs (attached to an email) Observation record (Ob4) Field note (F4) Email transcripts
<b>Apr 2016</b>	14.04.16 Observation 5. Review Meeting (SWO) 12.04.16 Adoption Support Group (ASG)  21.04.16 First Many Minds Group	Observation record (Ob5) Field note (F5) Audio and transcript of group meeting (ASG) Field note (F6) Audio and transcript of group meeting (MMG1) Field note (F7)
<b>May 2016</b>	19.05.16 Observation 6. Debbie and Claire home visit (HV)	Observation record (Ob6) Field note (F8)
<b>Jun 2016</b>	16.06.16 Observation 7. Debbie and Claire (HV) 08.06.16 Interview with Claire (SWO)  06.06.16 Interview with Debbie(HV)	Observation record (Ob7) Field note (F9) Audio and transcript of interview Field note (F10) Audio and transcript of interview Field note (F11)
<b>Jul 2016</b>	11.07.16 Second Many Minds Group	Audio and transcript of group meeting (MMG2) Field note (F12)
<b>Aug 2016</b>		
<b>Sep 2016</b>	Email Correspondence x 3	Email transcripts
<b>Oct 2016</b>		
<b>Nov 2016</b>		
<b>Dec 2016</b>	12.12.16 Final Many Minds Group	Audio and transcript of group meeting (MMG3) Field note (F13)

**Table 1. Data-set**

At the point I began to observe practice in this case, Debbie had been matched (informally) with Lily. Over the next six weeks the matching process progressed and information was shared and discussed. This time period was characterised by an intense period of work between Debbie and Claire and by other professionals within the agency. During these six weeks I made four (of the seven) observations. Two of the observations took place in the same week during formal processes of the matching process (Permanence Panel and a

planning meeting). Two were of Debbie and Claire meeting at the social work office. During the two formal processes, Debbie and Claire had contact with Lily's foster carer, a social worker from the fostering team, Lily's social worker and panel members (approximately eight professionals from the agency and lay people). Debbie's friend Katy attended the panel to support her. During the observations held at the office (Observations 1-5) I tried to recollect all the encounters and incidents taking place before and after the meetings, in and around the social work building. In these encounters other professionals, service users, bikes, trains, a photograph and a dog called Lucky become part of the field.

I was included in 19 emails between 12<sup>th</sup> February and 16<sup>th</sup> March. The match between Debbie and Lily was formally approved by the agency decision maker on 16<sup>th</sup> March. Debbie met Lily for the first time on 17<sup>th</sup> March. On 23<sup>rd</sup> March new information emerged about Lily's health and the match was suspended pending further information and reflection. At this point the pace of the field-work and the flow of data slowed (mirroring the practice). I undertook three observations over the next three months (compared to four within the first five weeks of the fieldwork). Debbie withdrew from the match with Lily on 17<sup>th</sup> May. In June I conducted the first of what I had hoped would be two interviews with Debbie and Claire. Due to changing circumstances, Debbie declined a second interview and I decided not to undertake a further interview with Claire. The final observation took place on 16<sup>th</sup> June. With Debbie's permission, Claire emailed me on 26<sup>th</sup> September with an update on their work and the suggestion of a further final observation. On 27<sup>th</sup> September Claire emailed me to advise that on reflection Debbie did not want me to attend their meeting. I stopped all data collection regarding Claire and Debbie at that point.

The group processes held a more predictable pattern as envisaged in the research design. The first groups were organized in April. I read aloud whilst the groups read Observation Record 3 at the ASG and the MMG1. This approach generated two group reflections of the same material which has subsequently provided opportunities for a multi-layered analysis. In July MMG2 was held and that group considered Observation 6. A final Many Minds Group was held in December. This group contained only four members compared to the previous seven participants. At this group I played the audio recording of the first 15 minutes of the interview that I had undertaken with Claire. The MMG3 and the accompanying field note (F13) are the final sources of data for the study.

Rather than thinking of cases as stable and defined simply through existence I understand case study research as a flexible analytic practice that responds to the complexity of the social realm (Ragin and Becker, 1992). As David (2009) notes 'attendance to change, transition and adaptation is characteristic of case study research' (n.p). The unpredictability of the process (matching and placing a child with an adult) and the changing features of the social realm (biographical, relational, institutional, cultural and societal) necessitated a flexible and adaptive approach in all aspects of my research practices.

On entering the field I understood the object of inquiry to be a practice relationship which had reached a significant moment in its work. Claire and Debbie were on the cusp of realizing the ambition of their work together, the creation of a new family. For them as individuals this was an exciting and intensive period of work. This followed an assessment period that for Debbie had begun in 2014. I understood that for the agency too, the joining of Debbie and Lily as a family represented a significant and defining moment in the realization of permanence. In matching Lily with Debbie the agency was seeking to fulfil its duty (and its promise to this child) in respect of permanence. It was beginning a process that would see it hand over its parental responsibility for Lily to Debbie. At the point I began my observations, the actors involved in this process (individuals and agency) were moving rapidly towards the creation of a family and then, through a series of twists and turns, to a rapid dissolution of that family. So what was this a case of? This question emerged throughout the field-work.

Casing the field: I had anticipated that for the most part observations would involve Claire, Debbie and me in probably no more than two settings: Debbie's home and a room in the social work office, probably the same room. I had considered the potential involvement of other professionals during the field-work (and saw this as adding breadth to the study) but I had not anticipated that the observations would move so rapidly from an observation of the dyad (Claire and Debbie) to the involvement of so many others across so many different spaces. After the first observation, I asked for and was given access to other sites in which I could get close to the relationship. I was given permission to observe Debbie and Claire at the two inter-professional formal settings (Panel and introduction planning meeting). I also asked for access to email communication. This approach was prompted by feedback I received during my attempts at recruitment. A number of social workers had commented that much of their contact with adopters took place via email. I mentioned this to Claire and Debbie at my first observation and followed this up with an email request.

In these requests for access to additional sites and data sources, I was seeking to adopt a flexible approach to the field consistent with social work ethnography (Ferguson, 2016). The relationship, which I had set out to study, was moving in ways I had not anticipated. I was trying to respond to this mobility. I was also testing out the scope of the research. The research practices and negotiation around the inclusion of the email exchange within the data set can also be understood as an example of casing, i.e. my concept of a relationship changed on entering the field – I became aware that in contemporary adoption practice digital communication is also part of the relationship. This negotiation of consent in relation to emails is also illustrative of a specific insider positioning I occupy at times during the study. I am approaching Claire as though (as social workers) we are partners or a team in relation to research. My contact with Debbie is mediated through Claire at this point. Identifications change throughout the study and the research participants actively engage with these issues: see below.

Claire then said 'Louise can you give Debbie your number so that if she ever feels like not having you along to a meeting she can text/email herself, that means she's got more control rather than coming through me?' We agreed that that was a good idea and exchanged information (Observation 1).

Claire forwarded me emails dating from 12.02.16 and my inclusion in email correspondence ceased after the match was halted on 23.03.16. I was not informed that this would occur but I respected the agency of these participants and understood the reasons why they might want to re-establish unobserved spaces in which to communicate. Issues of consent are always at play in ethnographic and longitudinal research (Thomson, 2010). Ethics, consent and participation were addressed throughout but were always 'alive' as issues. I learnt that this was always 'an active process' (Hingley-Jones, 2016, p.122). I had tried to be 'upfront' as to the nature of the research and I had explained the methodology in detail. Claire had been trained at the Tavistock and had more of an understanding of infant observation than I did. This was also true of the MMG (only one group member had not been trained at the Tavistock). Debbie spoke to me at length on our first meeting about her experiences both in counselling and with friends who were researchers. She and Claire were enthusiastic about being involved. Conversations with all the participants about the research and their involvement had been followed up with participant information sheets and informed consent was acquired throughout the process. For example at each observation my presence at the next observation was discussed and negotiated. Issues of

consent were navigated relationally in response to events, data, encounters and the dynamics of the field. Leaney's (2016) experiences chimed with mine, whereby consent:

...required an affective labour on both my part and theirs. These research relationships were formed over time, with the burden of negotiation shifting between myself and the participants as we learnt about one another and censored ourselves accordingly (p.79).

In some ways it seemed that consent was easier to negotiate in the field. Debbie and Claire would say no to my presence on occasions and I felt comfortable with these dynamics. During the post-fieldwork stage this affective labour became mine. I had learnt of difficult and painful experiences in the lives of my participants and the ethics of what to do with this information became more present as I began to write (I return to issues of consent and representation in the discussion chapter).

In the first 5 weeks of the field-work there was a flow of information from a range of sources which at times felt over-whelming. The inclusion of the emails (which began flowing into my inbox in February and early March), encounters in the reception area, interactions with other actors and the changing settings of the observations introduced an intensity and instability to the case which was amplified by temporal dynamics. Decisions were being made and they were being made quickly in relation to both big and small things. Dates and venues of meetings were decided and sometimes changed with little notice.

From, Claire

Sent, 24 February 2016 11:07

To, Debbie

Cc, Louise Sims

Subject, RE, paperwork (protect)

Thanks for the CRB update thing, Debbie – I'm sure we have to do them ourselves as an agency – but it's helpful to know. We just need to make sure that once you come to Adoption Order stage all your checks are still in date. There isn't a rush right now – your DBS with us is dated November 2014, child protection checks and medical are dated September 2014. It's likely you will put in an adoption order application in August, but if it looks like this is going to be later, then we should redo your CP checks (should be very quick) and do a medical update. That's great that Katy can come to panel with you! At the moment I don't know the time slot we have, but I think it will be morning. I'll let you know ASAP. Yes, you're right, it's tricky with timings to know exactly when is the right time – as I imagine you want to work as much as possible in order to save as much money as possible. The move does depend on Jane's availability to some extent – I've asked for an update from her and Sandy as to how her daughter is doing – and we will keep a close eye as we go. I'm sorry we can't be more clear at this point – the agency decision will be in by



15<sup>th</sup> ..., so we cannot do anything before then. Jane's daughter's baby as you know is due on the 17<sup>th</sup> – so if the baby does come on that day, we'd probably begin intros on the 21<sup>st</sup> – if the baby comes sooner, we could begin intros on the 16<sup>th</sup> potentially. If you want to talk this through more, let me know. How is the bedroom looking?

Claire

From, Debbie

Sent, 24 February 2016 16:45

To, Claire

Cc, Louise Sims

Subject, RE, paperwork (protect)

Thanks Claire- no problem I have told work the panel date then said we will know exact date on 9th March- it will be Easter anyway the near the dated you mentioned s hopefully it will all work out nicely to finish work just before.

I'm painting the spare room today so I can put all my lampshade gear in there!

Baby's room is all painted just needs the stuff in it now- I've been offered lots and will wait until after 9th to have stuff brought over.

All is ticking along nicely!

Many thanks, Debbie

From, Claire

Sent, 25 February 2016 10:13

To, Debbie

Cc, Louise Sims

Subject, RE, paperwork (protect)

Great to hear, Debbie – Jane has just told me that Lily is crawling!

Claire

In the exchange above attempts are made to pin down time and to predict events. The discussion moves from the past to the present to the future, i.e. Debbie's DBS check has been completed in September 2014; if Lily moves as planned and an adoption order is made after August 2016 the DBS will need to be updated. This planning all depends on a series of events which are inherently unpredictable. Jane (foster carer) has a daughter who is about to give birth and the date of that birth will affect plans. Time as Debbie comments is 'ticking'. On the 25th February, we find out that Lily is moving too.

The parameters of the field were shifting as was the object of inquiry. To keep up I had to develop more expansive conceptualizations of the different actors and their work. From Ob2 onwards I began to consider permanence practice as an intricate constellation (perhaps even a collision) of relations across multiple sites. Many of these relations (and some of these sites) were themselves in transition. Like everyone else, I just tried to go with the flow.

### **Analytic Practices**

Braun and Clarke (2006) draw a distinction between deductive and inductive approaches to analysis. In a deductive approach data is approached with the aim of fitting it into a pre-existing theoretical framework. That is not how I have approached data collection and matching here. This study is not designed to test any specific theory of permanence or matching practices. Neither, though, do I come to the data analysis theory-free, as suggested by the Braun and Clarke framing of an inductive approach. In my discussion of specific research practices (i.e. the negotiated access to email exchanges) I have sought to show how 'data constitution and analysis are shaped by the entanglement of the researcher within their specific social-material-discursive arrangements' (Danvers, 2016, p.100), and that this is an on-going practice. Simply put, data analysis is not a distinct process that happens during a specific stage of the research. Within this constructivist framework the approach taken in this study is more akin to the notion of abduction as put forward by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018), who argue that '...how we interpret phenomena is always perspectival and that so-called facts are always theory-laden' (p.4). The methodology seeks to address the entangled, affective and processual nature of analytic practices through the use of field notes and group processes. The data generated by these methods shows how I (and with others) begin to develop an analytical framework in relation to the field and the data. In this ongoing work of analysis the aim has been to keep open '...a deconstructive space of interpretation' (Webb, 2014, p.80) for as long as needed to meet the aims of this study. In that sense this is a pragmatic approach. The analysis is exploratory up to the point that matching practices are sufficiently illuminated for the purpose of contributing insight and understanding.

In this section, I detail specific analytic practices that have taken place in the time during the latter stages of field-work and then following the end of data collection. The key points to emerge from this interpretive process are mapped out. This discussion provides a frame for the analysis chapters that follow and for the kind of insights that can be drawn for the development of permanence theory and practice.

### Thematic Analysis

Whilst I do not subscribe to the binary of deductive or inductive categories advanced by Braun and Clarke (2006) I have found their technical advice in undertaking a systematic thematic analysis to be helpful. I have followed stages 1-5 of their stage guide. For Braun and Clarke stage 6 is the interpretation and representation of the data analysis and it is

here that I use the free associative writing approach which I discuss in the section titled writing practices.

Stage 1: Familiarizing myself with my data: Observations were written up immediately after fieldwork encounters as were the field notes. I also transcribed the interviews and group meetings over the course of the study. The MMG and the ASG processes had also provided opportunities to go over specific observations (and in MMG3 Claire's interview) in detail and line-by-line. I thus had some familiarity with the data set at the point the data collection stopped. Between July and December 2016 when the final MMG was held I had time to begin working with the data. During this time, I began a process of reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas. I listened to all the audio recordings multiple times and checked the transcripts back against the original audio. From this stage I developed a list of ideas. These ideas were generated by reading the data through a psychosocial lens and with the 3 research questions in mind.

Stage 2: Generating initial codes: After a full immersion in the data set I began 'producing initial codes from the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.88). Codes 'refer to the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (Boyatzis, 1998, cited by Braun and Clarke 2006, p.88). I coded relevant features of the data, across the entire data set and collated data relevant to each code. I a) coded for as many potential themes/patterns as possible, b) sought to code inclusively by keeping surrounding data and c) sorted extracts into multiple codes, i.e. the same unit of text could be included in more than one category (p.89). Figure 2 shows an example of codes applied to a short segment of data.

Data Extract from Observation 2	Coded for
Claire comes back with 2 coffees (one for her and one for Debbie). She sits next to Debbie and touches her arm 'did you manage to sleep ok?'	1. Women working together 2. Care 3. Coupledness 4. Intimacy 5. Public/Private Spaces

**Figure 2**

This process involved using the colouring function on Word to mark every segment of data (all now typed and saved in Word files). I then opened a series of Word document files and copied/pasted the corresponding coloured segments into these documents. Data that could not 'be assessed in a meaningful way [in relation to] the phenomenon' (p.88, my brackets)

was ascribed a colour and collated into a further Word document. I tried to remain open to contradictions within the data. For example, 'pressure of time' emerged as an important code in terms of its prevalence across the data set and what also emerged (less frequently) was a seemingly opposite construct 'time standing still'. Through this approach I worked through the entire data set seeking to give 'full and equal attention to each data item' (p.89). By the end of stage 2 all data had been ascribed a code. This exercise produced 70 codes.

Stage 3: Searching for themes: Following this coding I began analyzing and 'collating codes into potential themes and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.88). I approached this stage initially through a process of writing and cutting out pieces of paper with each code written on it and moving the papers into theme-piles. I then used mind-mapping on large sheets of paper as a further visual representation technique. Over time I produced two mind maps. One was a thematic map relating to permanence (understandings and practices). The second map was produced in relation to other practices mobilized in this process. To explicate my analytic practices I have used the work involved in developing one of the five themes, 'maternal practices', as an example, to show how, over time, themes were 'combined, refined and separated, or discarded' (p.91).

In this 'searching for themes' stage, 'maternal practices' did not constitute a fully-fledged theme. I had gathered codes together in a thematic pile which I called family practices. At this stage, maternal practices formed a sub-theme under a main theme of family practices and codes are linked to one or both of these themes. As I worked through the data I grappled with questions about how far could a theme be stretched. That is, could all the work associated with permanence be understood through the lens of family practice? The agency did hold parental responsibility for Lily and social work duties were framed within this function. Other adoption researchers and family practice theorists had theorized adoption practices through this lens (as set out in the literature review). The prevalence of codes relating to family practices was thus unsurprising given the field of inquiry. The question arose as to whether 'family practices' constituted a theme in this data set or a context for permanence work. Could it be both? Within this mapping a sub-theme had begun to emerge in relation to family practices, which I had labelled 'maternal practices'. Again its emergence as a sub-category seemed highly probable given three important features of this study. First the specifics of this case study in which Debbie, a prospective single mother, was in a process of becoming a mother to an adopted child, would (likely)

produce data related to mothering. The existing literature on matching and adoption practice suggested that this specific stage involved an active and imaginative process of becoming and transforming into a parent. It was also a process that involved the practitioner in a complicated supportive and assessing capacity. In my case study this involved the transformation from a single woman to a mother. Second the methodology, infant observation, originated in and had developed through close attention to mother and baby communication. Contemporary applications of the methodology had focused on the processes involved in becoming mothers. This travelling methodology brought with it sensitivity to the experiences of mothers. Third, (as discussed in the introduction) my biography as a social worker who had become a first-time mother whilst working in adoption and then a second-time mother whilst formulating this study meant that mothering would feature as a (conscious and unconscious) dynamic in these research processes. In the framework of a practice-near study these aspects of my biography were not problematic in themselves but they required ongoing critically reflective thinking. Fenwick and Edwards (2013) suggest that knowledge practices, such as thematic analysis or critical thinking:

...can appear to be settled, perhaps even immutable, (yet are) teeming with a myriad of everyday human and material processes, interests and politics. The task is to avoid foreclosing these difficult controversies for the sake of determining what is authoritative 'knowledge'... to keep them visible and to hold them critically multiple (cited in Danvers, 2016, p.104).

In using the formation and development of 'maternal practices' as an example in this section I am seeking to make visible my knowledge practices and 'to hold them critically multiple' (ibid). Figure 3 is an example of a data extract in which the codes 'judgements about/in relation to mothering' and 'maternal encounters' feature. This data extract is also later categorized as significant in representing an example of maternal practices, not, as it is at this stage, an example of 'family practices'.

Data Extract from Observation 4	Coded for
Debbie says 'Oh I've had a great time its' been like playing, but I've left the caption blank, I've brought my pens. I didn't know what to write, should I call myself Mum or Mummy or Debbie?' Claire says 'Mummy. You are going to be her Mummy. Mummy I think not Mum, she's only little'. Debbie says 'Yes Mummy. I'll write it in'.	1. Women working together 6. Making a family 7. Judgements in relation to mothering 8. Asserting authority 9. Being subject to authority 10. Power relations 2. Coupledness 3. Intimacy 4. Public/Private Boundary 11. Imaginative work 12. Creative work 13. Uncertainty 14. Time 15. Authenticity 19. Hope 20. Identity 21. Maternal Encounters 22. Discomfort

Figure 3

Observation 4, from which this data extract derives, had been taken to both the ASG and the MMG1 for group reflection. In both groups this piece of text became a focus of discussion. Field note 4 also referenced this encounter between Debbie and Claire. As such I had three other data sources which directly spoke to this extract. See Figures 4, 5 and 6.

Data Extract from MMG1	Coded for
Marie: Yes, I mean, that makes me think as well about my experience of giving birth and immediately being addressed by a health professional as mum. And thinking that they were talking about somebody else. And realizing that they were talking to me, and feeling oppressed by it. Like I've got a name. I've got a name. I'm not mum. I'm certainly not your mum. But just that idea that someone else, placing a label on you and making you someone that you didn't ever think you were going to be, all of a sudden, you know	6. Making a family 7. Judgements about/in relation to mothering 8. Asserting authority 9. Being subject to authority 10. Power relations 3. Intimacy 4. Public/Private Boundary 13. Uncertainty 14. Time 15. Authenticity 16. Ambivalence about mothering 20. Identity 21. Maternal Encounters 22. Discomfort

Figure 4

Data Extract from ASG	Coded for
<p>Gail: That was a bit I didn't like, she said mummy. I think it's got to be the mother's choice.</p> <p>Andrea: Yes, I thought that was odd.</p> <p>Gail: I don't think they even discussed it. It was like, you've got to call mum mummy, I mean, and that's the ownership thing, isn't it?</p> <p>Edwina: Yes.</p> <p>Andrea: Yes, I thought that was bizarre.</p> <p>Gail: So yes, mummy's probably the one that you'll end up doing, but there should have been a discussion around that.</p> <p>Edwina: What you're comfortable with.</p> <p>Andrea: Yes.</p> <p>Gail: She should have been saying, well what do you want to be called?</p> <p>Edwina: Yes, exactly.</p> <p>Jenny: It's a funny one, I can understand [inaudible], but you put your name [inaudible], it's really weird isn't it.</p> <p>Edwina: Yes.</p> <p>Andrea: The whole thing's really weird</p>	<p>1. Women working together</p> <p>6. Making a family</p> <p>7. Judgements about/in relation to mothering</p> <p>8. Asserting authority</p> <p>9. Being subject to authority</p> <p>10. Power relations</p> <p>3. Intimacy</p> <p>4. Public/Private Boundary</p> <p>13. Uncertainty</p> <p>15. Authenticity</p> <p>16. Ambivalence about mothering</p> <p>18. Weird</p> <p>20. Identity</p> <p>21. Maternal Encounters</p> <p>22. Discomfort</p>

Figure 5

Data Extract from Field note 4	Coded for
<p>The whole meeting was surreal at one point I felt like I was a witness at a ceremony in which Claire named Debbie 'Mummy' and then Debbie wrote the name over and over. I left smiling.</p>	<p>1. Women working together</p> <p>7. Judgements about/in relation to mothering</p> <p>8. Asserting authority</p> <p>9. Being subject to authority</p> <p>10. Power relations</p> <p>3. Intimacy</p> <p>4. Public/Private Boundary</p> <p>2. Coupledness</p> <p>11. Imaginative work</p> <p>12. Creative work</p> <p>18. Weird</p> <p>19. Hope</p> <p>21. Maternal Encounters</p>

Figure 6

The extract from Observation 4 is an example of data that could be thought of as a 'hot spot' in that it had provoked the attention of group members and evoked strong feelings (MacLure, 2013, p.173). Using Lorenzer's conceptual framework the emergence of affecting

data in group forums is revelatory because 'the latent elements of scenes are collective in nature' (Thomson et al., 2012, p.318).

In the extracts of data from the ASG and MMG1 participants draw attention to power relations, identity and authenticity in this naming of Debbie and how there is something weird about this process. My response captured in Field note 4 also speaks to this notion of weirdness; the word used here is 'surreal'. Power and authority are also coded as present in this extract, 'Claire named Debbie' yet the affective register is different. In both group extracts participants are critical or disturbed by this naming, Gail says 'That was a bit I didn't like'. Marie's response is to recall a time when she 'felt oppressed by' being named Mum. In Field note 4 in which I reflect on Observation 4, the reference to the naming is immediately followed by 'I left smiling'. Positive codes such as 'Hope', 'Creative work', 'Imaginative work' are applied alongside 'Asserting authority', 'Being subject to authority' and 'Power relations'. These positive codes are not applied to the extracts featured in Figures 4 and 5. Simply put I was excited by this naming and group members were disturbed. These differences in coding became important in thinking about subject positions, the object of inquiry (permanence work) and an aspect of the field of inquiry (specifically the ambiguous role of social work in society). These features are explored in the analysis chapters. In this stage of 'searching for themes' I developed a large set of preliminary themes. Some of which overlapped as in 'family practices' and 'maternal practices'. One theme, 'women', was so broad it could pull in most of the data. 'Timeliness' and 'waiting' as separate themes were, even at this stage, crying out to be combined. With this caveat of a partial mapping, the data set was now organised through codes and tentative themes. The next stage involved critically engaging with the conceptual underpinnings of all the themes and sub-themes in relation to the entire data set.

Stage 4: Reviewing themes: Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest there are 'two levels of reviewing and refining' (p.91) the themes that have begun to emerge. Level 1 involves checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts. This involves reviewing all the collated extracts and assessing as to whether together they could be seen to 'form a coherent pattern' (p.91), a pattern which would constitute a theme. In Level 2 the researcher considers 'the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set' (p.91) in order to generate a thematic 'map' of the analysis. Through this initial mapping process the theme of 'family practices' was positioned as a significant theme and maternal practices a sub-theme (see Figure 2). It became apparent through this mapping that codes with a



connection to mothering had prevalence (almost to the same level as family practices) across the data set. These codes could also be seen to 'form a coherent pattern' (p.91) sufficient to constitute a theme. The process of separating these themes highlights the role of theory within analysis. In my data set fathers and male workers are a notable absence. It is relationships between women and between women and children that feature, almost exclusively. Could these encounters, through which ideas about relations between children and women emerged, be understood as a maternal practice? Some fitted this label easily while other extracts and codes were more ambiguous and less obviously maternal, i.e. caring for children. Was that not better located as a family practice? I worked with and through the literature during this mapping. In her review of the literature relating to motherhood Baraitser (2009) draws attention to two 'accounts of the maternal' (p.19). The first focuses on maternal work:

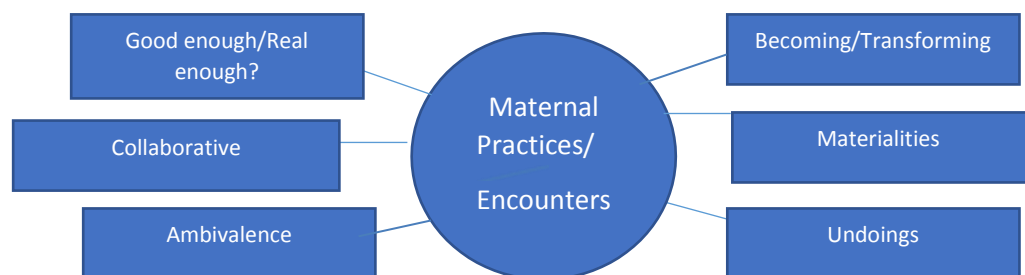
...thought of as a coherent set of ethical tasks and functions that center around the preservation of a child's life, the fostering of their growth and the development of a capacity for social acceptability (Ruddick, 1989) and accounts that focus on unconscious intersubjective dynamics (Hollway, 2001), and the mutual development of 'mother' and 'child' through another kind of maternal work that entails containment and reverie... and managing both the child's and one's own ambivalence (ibid).

Drawing on these different accounts Baraitser sets out a concept which refers to a 'whole range of embodied, social and cultural meanings, practices and structures' (p.19) through which maternal encounters emerge. Drawing on Park (2006), Baraitser also argues that maternal practices cannot be reduced to a biological relationship or pregnancy. Women's bodies are subject to cultural expectations related to the maternal regardless of whether they are biological mothers. Ruddick (1997) argues that 'maternal and paternal practices remain distinct' (cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Parenting '...denies the history and current practice of female mothering – including women's disproportionate responsibility for childcare' (ibid). The argument here is that men parent and care for children but they are not subject to the same cultural expectations. It is in this context that 'the maternal subject is understood ... as a gendered subject' (Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Park (2006) argues that the adoptive experience amplifies cultural expectations of mothers and 'she advocates using the way adoptive maternal bodies are rendered 'queer'...to critique dominant views of mothering' (Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Whilst research, to date, has not focused on gender in adoption practices, it is generally understood that 'it is still most often adoptive mothers who take on the main care-giving responsibility' (Luckock and Hart, 2004, p.37).

If worked through the lens advocated by contemporary maternal theorists, the adoptive parent in UK policy is transformed from an asexual politically neutral figure, through which permanence and family life can be built, to a gendered maternal subject. Through this lens the subsuming of 'maternal practices' under a broader category of 'family practices' would deny the prevalence of maternal work across the data set. This was not an easy or comfortable decision. I was mindful of the risks of reifying the role of mothers in family life and of reading the data through my own subject position. But being uncomfortable was not a legitimate reason to take a more established pathway i.e. 'family practices'. The validity of my interpretative work is not undermined because I have my own psychosocial relations. I understand that these relations:

...are continuously at work in all the choices I make, and fail to make. There is no outside of these experiences, and they deeply affect the ways I read theory, and understand and hear the experiences of others (Baraitser, 2009, p.23).

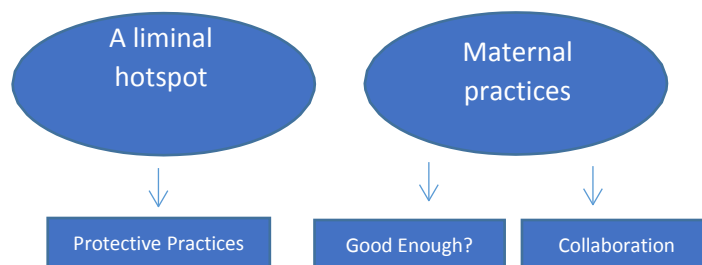
Through this lens my fears and hesitancy were productive, compelling me to keep interrogating my decision making and recursively testing out theory with the specificities of this data set. Both Park's (2006) work on adoptive maternal bodies and Baraitser's (2009) concept of maternal practices (expansive in its inclusivity of mothers through birth, fostering, adoption) were found to be theoretically robust in respect of this data. In the ASG, it is mothers through adoption who, in response to my observation record, bring into play issues of authenticity, power and weirdness. In the MMG1 Marie, reflecting on the same extract of data drew on her experiences post birth to highlight the same issues. These themes are noted in the literature as being features of the experience of becoming a mother (see Thomson et al., 2011; Hollway, 2015). In this respect the theme 'maternal practices/encounters' is given further credibility conceptually and as a significant theme by its prevalence (across the data set) and by its emergence as a 'hot spot' through the group processes. By the end of this stage 'family practices' had been discarded as a theme.



**Figure 7: Thematic Map**

This example of developing a theme from codes, in conjunction with literature and through reflective practices, is a recursive and abductive approach in which 'the development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work, and the analysis that is produced is not just description, but is already theorized' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.84). The methodology provided opportunities for reflection and through multiple perspectives. It allowed data from different sources to be brought into conversation with each other. Having developed four main themes through this approach I re-read the entire data set to ensure 'the themes work in relation to the data set' and 'to code any additional data within themes' (p.91). There was some re-coding at this stage but generally the thematic map fitted the data and I had some sense of the story the themes were telling about the data.

Stage 5: Defining and naming themes: This stage continued the analysis 'to refine the specifics of each theme' (p.92). To do this I wrote an analysis of each of the four themes in which I sought to define scope, specificity and sub-themes. Of the four themes, 'vulnerability' and 'togetherness', had too much of a conceptual overlap with the other themes and four became two. Each theme was considered in relation to the research questions (some themes addressed a single question whilst others had relevance for both).



**Figure 8: Final Thematic Map**

I now provide a synopsis of the second main theme, a 'liminal hotspot'. Liminality is a construct associated with anthropology and I was introduced to it by Danish anthropologists when I presented a paper. My Danish colleagues were in consensus; this matching stage in which children are matched with new parents could productively be thought of as a liminal space. The term liminal (I learnt) is associated with the work of Turner (1969) and refers to the middle stage of a rite of passage. Rites of passage exist in all human societies and are understood as a series of processes which mark the transition from one significant psychosocial stage to another. These are psychologically, culturally and socially significant transitions (and would include a first job, moving from childhood to

adulthood, a significant bereavement, marriage, divorce, becoming a parent). There is a definite 'before' and 'after' to these processes. Greco and Stenner (2017) use the notion of circles of activity to elaborate the differences between minor transitions in everyday life and significant life transitions through which liminal rites come into play. Each category (i.e. being an adult, a child, a single person) 'refers to a circumscribed circle of social activity' (p.149) and whilst transitional events take place within these categories we can:

...distinguish "pivotal" movements *within* circles from "liminal" movements *between* circles. With respect to the latter, a typical three-phase pattern that begins with rites of separation (the ceremonial death of the previous status), and ends with the rites of incorporation (whereby a new status is ritualistically adopted)... the liminal rites are transitional, and thus emphasise paradoxical "betwixt and between" qualities in which the rules and conventions usually at play in a circle of activity are temporarily suspended, enabling the new becomings (pp. 149-150).

This matching stage had distinctly liminal features. I had been thinking (before the Danish nudge) about spatiality, temporalities and transition as separate themes; liminality provided a way to think of them together. Liminality it seems is underpinned by a psychosocial orientation. Transitional events are understood as processual and as having psychological and societal features and functions. Thomassen suggests that for:

...change to be sociologically real, it requires a social *recognition* of the new skills and qualities of the neophytes. ... It also requires that the change is not just an externally imposed categorization, but involves a foundational involvement and stirring of human sentiments, dreams and fantasies, touching the core of what it means to be human (cited in Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160).

Through the case study constituted in this research I had observed practices (permanence practices) designed to bring something into being, a new family. These practices involved imagination and social recognition. Debbie and Lily would have to be recognized as a family (by actors in the agency) before they could become a family. Data from the ASG suggested that this recognition was also entangled with societal norms about mothering and subjective recognitions of themselves as mothers. Debbie would have to demonstrate her attunement to Lily, to actually show that a psychological change, a foundational shift, was underway. This process and the practices I had observed fitted with the notion of 'a liminal phase', something which:

...is designed to maximise the propensity for becoming affected, so that old identities may be relinquished and new ones acquired, and so that personal

dispositions may be aligned with the requirements of the individual's new role (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160).

The presence of 'hot spots' of affective and affecting data could be understood within this liminal construct. This matching process had to produce opportunities for being affected in order for something new to be made. This is recognised in the introduction planning process whereby the gradual transition from foster care to adoptive family life is understood to generate affectivity as well as familiarity between the new parent and child. Debbie and Lily's emotional responses to each other and attachment behaviours are being observed and analysed within this process. It is also a time for saying goodbye to identities. This emerged powerfully in my data set specifically for the foster family and child, where, through these permanence practices, 'old identities' and existing relationships have to 'be relinquished' (ibid) and the existing foster family is fundamentally realigned. Liminality, in its anthropological use, refers to forms of process, socially recognized transitions, which produces a *temporary* ontological disturbance. However my data set alluded to forms of process which had an enduring and affective disturbance. A multitude of codes could be fitted into a theme of disturbance including uncertainty, precarity, illness, physical and mental collapse, loss of memory, 'flashbacks', vulnerability, movement and transformation. These codes were present in multiple 'hot spots', encounters where heightened affectivity featured. These codes featured in extracts of data drawn from observations of Debbie and Claire but also in extracts drawn from the groups. There were many examples in which 'disturbing' codes had been applied and with reference to a range of my research participants (including social workers, foster carers and adopters). There were notable temporal and spatial dimensions as some of these codes referred to data which took the form of recollections from the past (sometimes 20 years or more). It seemed that time did not temper the affectivity for those involved in these matching practices. Did this process then, have the potentiality to produce an *enduring* ontological disturbance for those involved?

Greco and Stenner (2017) have developed the construct of a 'liminal hotspot' which they link to "'troubled" becoming' (p.154) and it is this construct that I use in the analysis. A liminal hotspot has the features of a liminal phase (i.e. a transitional psychosocial process and an 'event of becoming' p.148) but it has additional features which include 'paradox, paralysis, polarisation' (p.155). These features, although not named as specific codes within the data, were nevertheless present in and across the data set (elaborated on in the next chapters). In liminal spaces which also feature 'paradox, paralysis, polarisation'

(p.155) there is also high affectivity. Greco and Stenner (2017) argue that liminal affectivity is indicative of a 'liminal hotspot' and 'emerges when potentiality is at a maximum and actuality at a minimum' (p.160). The data extract below (which is featured earlier in the chapter) is an example of a situation or event which has multiple potentialities and little in the way of certainty. Here Claire is trying to plan in the context of multiple potentialities.

Yes, you're right, it's tricky with timings to know exactly when is the right time – as I imagine you want to work as much as possible in order to save as much money as possible. The move does depend on Jane's availability– I've asked for an update from her and Sandy as to how her daughter is doing – and we will keep a close eye as we go. I'm sorry we can't be more clear at this point – the agency decision will be in by 15<sup>th</sup> March, so we cannot do anything before then. Jane's daughter's baby as you know is due on the 17<sup>th</sup> – so if the baby does come on that day, we'd probably begin intros on the 21<sup>st</sup> – if the baby comes sooner, we could begin intros on the 16<sup>th</sup> potentially (Email from Claire to Debbie 24.02.16).

In this brief discussion of the construct of 'liminal hotspot' and in the earlier elaboration of 'maternal practices' I have tried to set the stage for the further analytic work that follows. These themes and their sub-themes are 'fleshed out' and woven through the next chapters.

### Writing practices

The visual metaphor of the scenic draws attention to the fact that when working with verbal texts the embedded images are activated in the mind's eye. One of the challenges in working with such data is that when transposing it into text, the process of rendering complex multi-sensory experience in words, "thins out" the experience, or abstracts those elements that can be verbalized giving an overly discursive view, so that unconscious social and emotional processes which often present themselves through imagery become difficult to see (Froggett, et al., 2014, para.3.1.18).

The writing practices taken forward in the next three chapters seek to address this challenge. To help in this work I have approximated both Baraitser's anecdotal theory and Lorenzer's visual metaphor of the scenic. These approaches underpin the chapters stylistically, theoretically and structurally. In this work I have been helped by an object which appears repeatedly in and across the data set. This object, a photograph, an A4 canvas print of Lily, first appears in Observation 3 when Jane, Lily's foster carer, gives/gifts it to Debbie, Lily's prospective Mum. Later on during the same observation it is brought out in a social work office and is looked at by Debbie and her social worker, Claire. A little later Debbie and I look for a way of protecting it from the rain, it is placed in a bag on Debbie's bike and I watch as Debbie cycles away. A week later in Observation 4 Debbie tells me how

she has hung the photograph in a bedroom she is preparing for Lily. Four months later in Observation 6 I see the photograph, just as Debbie described, on a wall in a bedroom made ready for Lily. I observe as it is taken off the wall and passed from Debbie to Claire. Later it is placed on the back seat of Claire's car and driven back to the social work office. Weeks later it is spoken about in MMG2 and described as 'symbolic'. As the analysis progressed and I traced the journey of the photograph I was prompted to think about what was done with this photograph and the consequences of those doings in relation to permanence practices. I came to understand the photograph as productive. It seemed to have a transactional role (between foster carer and adopter, adopter and social worker), it was used for transformative purposes (Debbie used it to practice and perform becoming a Mum) and it was used to symbolize the end of the match between Lily and Debbie (it was removed and taken away by a social worker). The people in my study did work with it and through it.

The photograph and this emerging interpretative work was energising and generative in respect of my research practices. In reading and re-reading data the photograph proved to be useful in articulating and bringing to mind the texture of the specific research encounter. The photograph enabled me to re-engage with specific field encounters. I could read the paragraph in which it appeared and instantly recall the encounter and the feelings generated by the encounter, feelings which included embarrassment, anger, excitement and sadness. As I mapped its appearances in the data set I noted how it moved across the data set and through social relations, 'loaded with situated affect and conveying emotional dimensions that extend much further than a particular incident' (Thomson, et al., 2012, p.320). In 'a mass of observational material' (ibid) this photograph caught my imagination. Possibly because of the imaginative space it occupied in my mind I found it had a second function in respect of my research practices. I could use the photograph in telling the story of the research to others. I could describe its movement through the data and people understood what an adoption matching process might look like. It seemed that they could also engage with what it might feel like. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) note that '...if an interpretation 'works' the ripples reverberate through the rest of the analysis... [illuminating] other data beyond their starting-point' (p.60, my brackets). The photograph and its associated qualities (particularly its affectivity and mobility) had 'a synthesizing capacity' (Froggett et al., 2014, para.4.54) and as such functioned as 'a tool for sense-making' (Hoggett cited in Froggett et al., 2014, para.4.54).

Cooper (2009) suggests that practice-near research, whilst offering the promise of relational depth, is often accompanied by 'confusion, anxiety and doubt about who is who and what is what' (p.429). In this study unsettling experiences in the field had produced a sense of confusion and anxiety which I also brought with me to the analysis. In this context finding a 'tool for sense-making' (ibid) seemed wonderfully serendipitous.

The thematic processes did provide a way to organize the data and to gain some distance which was helpful but I was mindful that this practice-near study should not result in an analysis which offered 'an overly discursive view'. The photograph seemed to provide another way to render 'experience inter-subjectively communicable' (Froggett et al., 2014, para.5.55). Froggett et al. (2014) use scenic compositions to capture the emotional resonance of fieldwork encounters. These compositions (written by different members of a research team) use a variety of forms of writing including poetry, rap, novelistic and fantasy fiction. For these researchers the aim is to undergo a psychosocial analysis, to render data 'communicable' and to find ways of working with the (inevitable) anxiety produced by this type of practice-near research. In their discussion of the methodology they argue that:

...it is clear that when faced with the need to distil impressions that were disparate, elusive, and anxiety provoking, the literary genres enhanced the containing aspect of the compositions, thus rendering experience inter-subjectively communicable (Froggett et al., 2014, para.5.55).

As part of my PhD program, and in order to develop ways of making research 'communicable', students present at annual Research in Progress seminars. In February 2017 I presented and shared my emerging thoughts in respect of Lily's photograph and its role in permanence practices. A number of colleagues approached me afterwards with references to follow up. These interactions and exchanges are very much part of the format. What was slightly different from other seminars I had presented at was the number of people who came to talk to me afterwards about their own family photographs. A colleague told me that a team working with young people with autism always brought a photograph of the young person to meetings when they themselves could not be present. She spoke to me in the context of her own son and her dismay at the inconsistencies in services. Another colleague talked about the death of her mother and the practice and politics of putting a photograph on the coffin in her Nigerian culture. A colleague reflected on her work in printing and sending photographs of her children to her in-laws and wondered why she had taken on that task (for 20 years) instead of her husband.



I enjoyed hearing these stories and began a quasi-experiment where if I was in a situation where I had to explain my research I would use the photograph's journey to do so. I did this with family members, at a conference, in my book club and with friends. It seemed to work. On one occasion my Dad listened and then told me about a black and white British film based on the journey of a Rolls-Royce through different owners. The car was used to chart the social history of post-war Britain. We had the conversation in Ikea as my children climbed over furniture. Later that night we looked at photographs of his younger sisters, my aunties, both dead through suicide; a complete change of domestic scene, from the mayhem of Ikea to a silent living room. We passed the photographs between us and I used my camera-phone to photograph the photographs. As we sat bereft and bewildered the photographs were something solid to cling onto. Talking, looking and holding photographs was/is both evocative and grounding across all sorts of spaces.

Rose's work (2003, 2004 and 2010) explores family photographs in relation to social practices. I began to see the photograph of Lily in this context, as a family photograph operating in and producing social relations. Rose is concerned with the feelings and subject positions produced as family photography is done, through photography practices. If I followed the photograph through this lens I could map permanence practices through an intersection of actors, I could examine the work of this photograph and the changes its movement produced. Rose's work is located in the tradition of family practice scholarship associated with the work of Morgan (1996, 2011). Luckock and Hart (2004) draw on this scholarship to theorise adoptive family life, as a community of practices. They argue that in Morgan's work two perspectives in respect of 'the way in which family gets constructed' (p.36) are useful to thinking about adoptive family life. First the process has to be seen as a practical matter, 'a focus on the everyday... and on routines and regularities of family living in a social context'. The second main point about 'family practices' is that 'the process is one of both action and imagination' (p.36). Lily's photograph had both of these features: it was an 'everyday' item (ubiquitous and embedded in family life) and it was a site of 'action and imagination' in the data set (it moved, it provoked feelings, people did stuff with it).

For Rose the significance of photographs and viewers is that they do not pre-exist their mutual encounter but are brought into existence through specific practices: 'things have no meaning apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with' (Appadurai, cited by Rose 2010, p.18). Rose (2010) argues that family photographic practices are both gendered and maternal; 'Family photography practice has

three key effects in terms of the subject positions and relations it produces: familial togetherness, domestic space and ambivalent mothering' (p.57). All three 'effects' had a symmetry both with the concept of permanence (which could be understood as the pursuit of 'familial togetherness' and the creation of a 'domestic space') and also with a key element of my thematic analysis (maternal practices, including ambivalent mothering). Rose's work explored the emotional resonance of family photography and her research participants were, like mine, women from the South East of England. This work offered a literature and concepts which chimed with important elements of my research. Thomson et al. (2012) describe how researchers can experience the:

...thrill of "intuitive leaps," when resonances emerge between incidents or processes that earlier seemed to be unrelated, or when one line of analysis begins to converge with another (p.319).

Thinking about photographic practices through Rose's work I experienced this 'intuitive leap' and concurrently found a source of containment. I had both ground beneath my feet and wind beneath my wings. Froggett et al., (2014) in their reading of Lorenzer, draw on the concepts of containment and transitional phenomena. Working with the links between Winnicott, Bion and Lorenzer they note the importance of the original function of containment. It is containment that:

...allows for the development of "transitional phenomena" in the infant. This engenders a feeling of trust that allows children to play and is later elaborated into the organisation of aesthetic forms which contain the transitional phenomena of cultural life (para. 4.54).

In my analytic practices, through the containment provided by theory and literature and the transitional work of the photograph, I could access an imaginative space. I could play. This included experimental and excitable storytelling to diverse and sometimes interested audiences, vociferous reading – a book a day at one point, including the wonderfully provocative 'What Do Pictures Want?' (Mitchell, 2005). I also tried to channel Latour through an ironical writing piece. Writing about the photograph with a free associative style altered my relationship to the data set. I became 'alive to tropes, metaphors and imagery' (Froggett et al., 2014, para. 3.2.21). Through this playing, it seemed, a space could be created where others might access their own experiences, something akin to 'shared playing' (Froggett, et al., 2014, para.4.54). 'There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences' (Winnicott, 1971, cited in Froggett et al., 2014, para.4.54). My quasi-

experiment chimed with Winnicott and with Lorenzer's concept of interaction forms. Both theorists understand the inseparability of subjective and cultural experience. When people did respond to the photograph and its scenic journey through my data they did so with scenic descriptions of their own. These responses used the photograph as a shared cultural resource. Like a play, Lily's photograph provided provocations that rendered the gestalt of a story communicable. There was a dramatic quality to its appearances in the data set. When I plotted out its appearances capturing the data around it I had five separate scenes.

- 1) Jane gives the photograph to Debbie in the reception.
- 2) Debbie looks at the photograph with Claire and they smile.
- 3) We try to keep the photograph out of the rain. I watch as the photograph is cycled away.
- 4) Debbie describes how the photograph is now on the wall in a bedroom ready for Lily.
- 5) I watch as Debbie takes the photograph down and hands it back to Claire.

In theatrical terms these data extracts seemed to both work as expositional devices (introducing important plot lines) and as foreshadowing devices (hinting at what was to come). They worked symbolically and metaphorically (the photograph's movement between key protagonists symbolizing the matching process when a child is handed from one family to another). In dramatic terms the photograph was a recurring motif (Literary Devices, n.d.). Froggett et al., (2014) produced scenic compositions from an immersion in the gestalt of their data. In following this object I found my scenic compositions already composed.

Froggett et al., (2014) use a variety of literary genres to produce their scenic compositions, including rap and poetry. The form I use is an anecdote. Anecdotes are not usually considered a literary or textual genre and are more associated with oral story-telling (Baraitser, 2009). Baraitser draws on Gallop's (2002) work and uses what she describes as an approximation of anecdotal theory. She uses anecdote to develop a genre of writing that examines 'the lived experience' of motherhood (p.12). For both scholars, the combination of theory and anecdote offers something new, the hope of 'theory with a better sense of humour, theorising which honours the uncanny detail of lived experience' (Gallop, 2002, cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.12). Anecdotes, Baraitser argues, are rarely published and thus have a connection to secret histories, 'histories that remain private, unpublished and possibly unspeakable because they are resistant to codification in language' (p.15). The thematic analysis organised and codified this data set; perhaps anecdotal writing could develop the analysis.

Rather than attempting to animate limp writing with the force of the personal, creative or vital, I am interested in literary forms in which the personal makes an appearance, but also remains rather suspect – failed, deviant even – while also being put to work for theoretical ends (Baraitser, 2013, p.148).

I follow Baraitser not to dramatize, but to hold onto the generative potential of things that are ‘suspect – failed, deviant’ (ibid) and I try to put anecdote to work. Anecdotes are inherently scenic (in the prosaic sense). They have to be in order to work. An anecdote must capture the imagination in a short space of time. Scenic composition as a writing method is explicitly conceptual and is grounded in an applied psychosocial method. An anecdote is something much less weighty. I am approximating Baraitser’s approximation of Gallop’s (2002) work and juxtaposing it with an approximation of Hollway and Froggett (2012) and Froggett et al.’s (2014) interpretation of Lorenzer’s work. I use three segments of data which include the photograph to begin each chapter, like an anecdote. From this beginning the photograph is used as a scenic compositional tool to frame the analysis that follows.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I have mapped my data collection and analytic methods and experiences in the field. I have adopted a case study approach within ‘an overall strategy that focuses upon complex interactions by means of multiple data-collection techniques’ (David, 2009, n.p). Methods have been adapted in order to fit the purpose and meet the needs of this study. The contribution of group processes and the use of other minds across academic and non-academic spaces have been central to the development of this study. My approach to group analytic practices has been located within exploratory psychosocial and transdisciplinary work. I have introduced the ‘scenic’ as theorized by Lorenzer and adapted by others but I have also used the term prosaically, i.e. as in portraying a scene. Thomson et al. (2012) acknowledge that in their paper exploring Lorenzer’s work there is also ‘slippage between the two meanings’ (p.320). I address this slippage and other issues relating to conceptual clarity in the discussion chapter.

I have discussed the thematic analytic process and introduced the two central themes that have emerged from that analysis. Issues of knowledge construction and subjectivity in research practices have been highlighted. In mapping out my casing practices I have documented my attempts at responding to the complexity of the social realm as I have experienced it in the field. In what I understand to be a transdisciplinary psychosocial approach I have ‘actively’ sought to explore and account for the ‘points’ when the framing

of this case study meets its 'conceptual limits' and begins to change or 'transition into something else' (Stenner cited in Redman, 2016, pp. 82-83). Fortuitously, this study provided numerous points where limits were met (conceptually, practically and emotionally). In this casing I am also seeking to demonstrate the research sensibility (collaborative, adaptive and hermeneutic) and my attempts to keep 'alive to meaning as it is concretized through particular experiences in specific settings' (Thomson, 2010, p.32). I introduce new theory and literature in this chapter. Reading and writing are integral to my analytic practices and these practices 'are unbounded' (Thomson, 2010, p.9), taking place throughout each stage of the research. The next chapters take forward the themes introduced in this chapter. The aim is to render 'complex multi-sensory experience in words' (Froggett et al., 2014, para.3.1.18).

# Act II

## Chapter 5: Making Families and Breaking Families

Jane says congratulations to Debbie and hands her a canvas photograph of Lily. Debbie takes the photograph and says 'Wow! Look at her, she's beautiful'. Jane says 'I've had one made for her birth mum too, so you can both have one'. Debbie says 'oh yes great how kind, thank you so much' (Observation Record 3).

They walked into reception and Jane immediately handed over the photograph and said 'I've had one made for her birth mum too'. It's a public area! There are other people there. This is Jane's first contact with Debbie and the photograph is almost thrust at her. Debbie responds 'how kind'. I think 'how aggressive'. The photo then is looked at and everyone agreed Lily is beautiful. I smile at the photograph too but I'm embarrassed and angry, can't Jane control herself? (Field note 3)

These data extracts are based on a chance encounter as a group of us gather in the reception of a social work building. We are here to attend a planning meeting; this meeting brings together key actors in the planned move of a child (Lily) from foster care (Jane) to adoption (Debbie). The meeting is where the fine detail of Lily's move from foster care to adoption will be negotiated. The aim is to produce a transition plan. Debbie and I have been sitting waiting for Claire (Debbie's social worker) to collect us and take us through the building to the room where the meeting is due to take place. The reception has two rooms directly off it and other meetings are taking place. The walls are not soundproof and we can hear bits of conversation. There are other people waiting in the reception. I have been waiting with Debbie, making small talk. We are both slightly early. Sandra (Jane's social worker) and Jane arrive. There are some brief introductions and Jane hands Debbie the photograph.

This analysis begins by foregrounding a photograph and then works with the provocations provided by the social practices embedded in, and generated by the photograph. In working with these provocations, the role of a specific cast member, the foster carer, is brought centre stage. I use the concept of liminality to consider how permanence and transition are experienced and navigated. The introduction planning meeting is positioned as a stage in which the heat of a liminal 'hot spot' can be felt by other actors in the system. The meeting is also configured as a unique space in which the foster carer's maternal practices take a (momentary) starring role. In this starring role the light (and heat) generated by the foster carer illuminates the lives of other children touched by permanence practices. This analysis suggests that for actors and audience this performance and this specific space is a tricky one to be involved in. It is both restrictive and generative. Even experienced social workers,

veteran actors, are seen to struggle at times. In this chapter I argue that it is through collaborative work (underpinned by a collective commitment to permanence) that the performance is held together. These features provide both the tools and the impetus needed to navigate this particular 'liminal hot spot'.

### **Family Photography and Maternal Practices**

Jane produces the photograph and Debbie takes it. The photograph is the first tangible contact between Debbie and Lily. Following Barthes (2000), who argues that photographs (unlike other art forms) capture a trace of the person photographed, this is an object with a trace of a real child. Adoption is about forming connections and with this photograph Debbie has something real to connect to. 'There is a tactility to looking at family photos which is also about enacting a corporeal closeness between the viewer and the person pictured' (Rose, 2004, p.557). For Rose 'togetherness, in the form of bodily proximity is one of the emotional geographies of family photographs' (p.560). In her analysis it is the action around the photograph that is foregrounded: 'togetherness is made by seen and seeing bodies in interrelation' (p.557).

In this reception area, the photograph of Lily pulls us in. We are drawn into its orbit. To view it, we draw together, in a circle. What do we do, when we all look together at this photograph? We see Lily, we see 'the referent, the desired object, the beloved body' (Barthes 2000, p.7). Debbie even says 'look at her'. We are all required to look at this photograph. Debbie has to follow Jane's lead because she cannot refuse to take the photograph. She says 'look at her' and we are all following Jane's lead, Debbie showing us what to do now too. Perhaps Debbie is demonstrating her compliance and her understanding of what is needed and expected of her as a prospective adoptive mother. But surely it's more than that? The photograph is also 'a certificate of presence' (Barthes, 2000, p.87). It authenticates Lily's existence. We could read 'look at her' as an excited exclamation, evoked by a visceral connection to the trace of Lily captured by the photograph because *before* Debbie instructs 'look at her' she says, 'Wow'. These three letters express astonishment and admiration. 'Wow' understood ironically would also work to express discomfort and anger (that would be my 'Wow'). Jane immediately dilutes the connection between Debbie and Lily by saying, 'I've had one made for her birth mum too, so you can both have one'. Awkward and insensitive in the way it is done, this action is on message with the permanency project. With this photograph, with what she does with it, Jane recognizes and brings Lily's past, present and possible future together in this public



space. Her actions can be understood within the practice of open adoption, an approach which promotes the inclusion in a child's life of multiple families.

...the practice of open adoption rejects the notion that children must have only one "real" mother, refusing the logic of either/or embedded in the nature/nurture dichotomy in favour of both/and reasoning (Park, 2006, p.18).

Jane's actions with this photograph ('I've had one made for her birth mum too, so you can both have one') speak to this. For Homans 'there is a physical maternal body presupposed by adoption - a childbearing body that should not be erased or rendered invisible' (2002, p.270). Multiple mothers are rendered visible through this scene. Fathers are absent, 'rendered invisible' (ibid). By multiple mothers, I refer to Debbie and Lily's unnamed birth Mum and I include Jane in this formulation. Jane is Lily's primary carer and she has been (to date) her only primary carer. She provides care for Lily on an hour to hour and day to day basis and has done since birth. For Lily it is Jane's 'hands, smell, eyes, body, voice' that she associates with her 'primal sensations' (Rich, 2007, p.7). Jane cares for Lily in innumerable ways and takes responsibility for her day to day survival. She will not always fulfil this role but for the time being she does. For Lily, surely the designation foster carer is meaningless; is she not in a maternal relationship with Jane?

Jane is, at first glance, the intermediary in this exchange with the photograph. But really, she is so much more than that. In anthropological scholarship, gift giving is understood to be a complex social practice through which relationships are constructed and subjectivities produced. Drawing on this tradition of scholarship, Rose (2003, 2004 and 2010) suggests that it is mothers who are the active subject in the production and practices of infant photographs. In Rose's study, to be a proper mother involves managing family photography. She observed how integration was both controlled and complicated by these photography practices, 'these mothers enacted familial integration through their family photography work, but that integration was unevenly distributed among family members' (Rose, 2003, p.8). In this encounter Jane has decided how many photographs are printed and who gets the photograph. There is not one made for Lily's father. In Rose's analysis, 'family photos articulate absence, emptiness and loss as well as togetherness' (p.7). Photography practices 'produce a space that is differential. It is integrative but is haunted by fractures and absences' (Rose, 2003, p.9). The photograph makes its first appearance in the social work reception area. This is a space replete with fractures and absences. Lily is not here, nor is her unnamed birth mother or her completely unregistered/unacknowledged birth father.

There are countless missing bodies connected to this family and to this permanence project. Claire, Debbie's social worker, and my link to this 'case' are absent. When Jane and Sandra arrive, Debbie and I are sitting together, waiting. We are waiting for Claire to give us access to other spaces beyond the reception area. But even when Claire appears, she brings with her more absence, 'well here you are all together, great timing. I'm afraid Zara can't make it she has a migraine' (Observation record 3).

### **A good enough mother?**

The photograph is of Lily but, following Rose (2004), the active subject in this photograph is not Lily but Jane. Jane is the active subject and she is incredibly active. This foster home is a busy house. We learn this later in the meeting. Jane has lots of demands on her and she works hard. In amongst all her work she finds the time to take Lily to a photographer and have her picture taken. She pays for the photograph to be printed onto canvas and has at least two copies made (it is unclear as to whether she has one made for herself). This is not a requirement of her as a foster carer. She has done this off her own back. Rose (2004) noted too how her participants, all busy women, made a concerted effort to do work with photographs. It was women who decided which photographs were to be printed, which ones were to be displayed and which family members would receive which photographs. Jane can be understood to be doing integration work through her own understanding of family life, a life where mothers are in the centre of the action. In Rose's study, her participants did this work in addition to all their other work. She suggests that photographic work of infants is done by the woman because:

...it is an important part of their mothering, by which I mean not only that they do it because they are mothers, but that the doing of it – the encountering of photographs of children – is part of what makes them good enough mothers (Rose, 2010, p.58).

In the triad of mothers produced by Jane's photographic practices, she is the only one who is actively mothering Lily. She is also the only 'good enough mother', the one woman whose maternal practices have been validated by the agency (she is socially recognised as a 'good enough mother'). Lily's birth mother's maternal practices have been found wanting (we assume). Debbie's maternal practices are yet to be tested and are under surveillance. In contrast Jane's maternal practices are so good that, as a foster carer, she is paid for them. In this matching process Jane's fostering practices open up a lens into her maternal practices. She has a wealth of maternal experience (unlike Debbie). She fosters Lily and she

fosters Fay (she provides Fay with permanence). Jane has two adult daughters who themselves are mothers. She has a brand new grandchild. Motherhood is 'an arena of social life in which women can exert power and control' (hooks, 1984, p.148). Jane introduces us to her power with her actions around the photograph. Later in the meeting, she does so time and time again.

My daughter came round and said you have her I can't do this. I'm usually great with babies but I wanted to chuck her out the window. I mean I love her but god it was so hard, just constant crying...

...yes she's in that clingy stage where she just wants me. She gets so upset. I call it her storms. I've got an app that tells you about child development and she's right on course. It's totally normal. I use it to stop myself going mad (Jane, Observation 3).

Jane draws attention to her evidenced and established success with caring for children, 'I'm usually great with babies'. She also tells us how much Lily needs her, 'she's in that clingy stage where she just wants me'. She draws on her maternal work, on the stress and strain of caring for infants, eight year olds, adult daughters and grandchildren to bring to the table a vision of motherhood that is tangled and messy. Jane is familiar and comfortable in articulating her ambivalence in relation to infants. Jane lets us know that caring for Lily is hard work. Rose suggests that the time when children are most photographed is when they are at their most demanding, during infancy and the toddler years. The photograph of a cute and smiling infant is only partially Lily. In this process Jane is expected to manage the demands made of her with good grace. She must navigate Lily's needs, manage her other responsibilities and demands, grieve for Lily, teach Debbie, assess Debbie, support Debbie, love her other children and support them. She is also expected to do this again and again, to move children into the homes of strangers. In some ways it feels like Jane is working against the photograph. Jane tells us through the meeting that follows how difficult caring for Lily is. She talks of Lily's 'storms'. She explains how difficult it can be to get things done. How challenging Lily can be. She also tells us that these 'storms' are normal but that at times they bring her close to madness, only saved by an app.

Lily's photograph does not tell us anything about her 'storms' or her and Jane's relationship. It does not include Fay or her daughters or her grandchildren or any other aspect of Jane's life. It does not differentiate between paid and unpaid work. This story-telling work is

beyond the repertoire of this photograph, in part because 'family photos never show domestic labour' (Rose, 2010, p.32). In Field note 3 I describe Jane as 'controlling' and 'uncompromising', but perhaps her performance is in some way driven by the photograph's limitations? If the photograph worked harder maybe she could work less?

In this triad of mothers Jane is the only one able to express ambivalence. Debbie is certainly in no position to voice ambivalence. Voicing ambivalence as a prospective adoptive mother, in this stage of the matching process, is impossible. In the ASG discussion the inability to speak about fears relating to becoming a mother was an experience participants all shared.

Dawn: I remember feeling, you know... Because my kids were older, being four, you know. Tony, my husband, was thinking, you know, will they like me? And I was thinking will I like them? And this was this terrible dilemma, what can I do if I don't like them? And it's unbearable.

Andrea: - But you wouldn't dare utter those words.

Gail: You wouldn't say that.

Sue: No.

Edwina: No.

Andrea: No, you wouldn't say that.

Sue: No.

Dawn: Well that was my great fear. And I think these fears should be known by the social worker.

Gail: Yes.

Andrea: Yes (ASG).

Dawn's description of her 'great fear' is that of not liking her prospective children. This resonates with the entire group. They all agree that as a woman coming to motherhood through adoption, 'you wouldn't dare utter those words' (ibid). Does Debbie experience this great fear? No-one knows. What can be said, perhaps, is that in this planning meeting Debbie encounters a woman who is upfront and unapologetic about her own ambivalence in relation to children. In planning this move all of Jane's day to day relationships have to be accounted for and thought about; because in amongst all of this mothering Jane will have to share and teach Debbie her specific maternal practices in respect of Lily. During this process Jane's paid maternal practices become visible and subject to scrutiny (certainly Debbie should be paying close attention). Through this intensive process her unwaged maternal practices are also made visible.

Jane interrupts 'oh by the way I'm a grandmother!' She gets out her phone and shows photos of the baby. 'It's like buses, you wait ages then 2 come along at once.

I've had two granddaughters in 3 months. Everyone looks at the picture on the phone (Observation 3).

I use the phrase 'Jane interrupts' rather than 'Jane says'. The inference is that Jane's involvement in the dialogue does not follow the topic or direction of the conversation. In these 'interruptions' Jane makes references to her and to other maternal relationships. She repeatedly flexes her (maternal) muscles. Mirroring her initial greeting to Debbie, when she thrust the photograph at her, these contributions are similarly thrust outwards.

Jane interrupts 'I have to say you look so much like Fay's Mum, the more I look at you. That's going to be really hard for her. She might really cling to you. I've noticed when she meets women who look like her Mum she homes in on them. She's going to hook onto you. Don't you think she looks like Chloe? (Observation 3)

I experience Jane as intentionally disruptive and undermining and I don't like her. What's going on? This is a difficult and complex process, everyone is anxious. Why do I interpret Jane's performance through such a critical lens?

...the maternal subject, perhaps more than any subject position, is downright slippery. 'She' is one of those ever-present and yet shadowy figures who seems to disappear from various discourses that specifically try to account for her... just as she is on the cusp of being articulated, appears to subtly slip back into one of her traditional positions...a receptacle that conceives form but lacks form herself; as mirror, or container for intolerable feelings. A psychoanalytic reading of this tendency for slipperiness may posit that we all, as infants, have needed to conjure up an ever-present fantasy mother, a necessary ideal whose features include the capacity to find just the right balance of presence without impingement (Winnicott 1963, p.86), who is able to remain partly in the shadows, and then gradually but appropriately 'fail' (ibid., p.87) and finally fade away. We fantasize that our mothers are 'there to be left' (Baraitser and Spiegel, 2009, p.1).

The maternal subject, through this lens, is 'defined by the capacity to disappear' (ibid). Like all maternal subjects then, Jane is 'there to be left'. As a foster carer to Lily (the authorized maternal subject in a triad of questionable mothers) she is expected to achieve 'the right balance of presence without impingement' (ibid). Adoptive families are encouraged to hold birth family relationships in mind as part of a commitment to open adoption practices. Relationships with foster carers are not afforded the same importance or consideration (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014). In this triad of mothers Jane is the one who is expected to perform a 'fade away'. This introductions planning meeting is used to mobilize that 'fade away'. Jane has cared for Lily from birth but is expected to actively 'fade away' from her in a matter of days. In the planning meeting her relationship with Lily is systematically undone.

It is all too easy to see how the maternal subject, conceived of as an ideal form of disappearance, coupled with her inevitable failure to live up to even this ideal, so easily becomes an object of hate (Baraitser and Spiegel, 2009, p.1).

Jane demonstrates and articulates a refusal to fade away. There is no stepping quietly aside. She is not striving to be Winnicott's 'good enough mother', achieving 'the right balance of presence without impingement' (ibid). Her failure to live up to this ideal does indeed, generate hostility; 'I smile at the photograph too but I'm embarrassed and angry, can't Jane control herself?' (Field note 3). In her refusal to fade away quietly she makes a big impression on me. Jane is experienced as both too much and not enough.

### **A liminal hot-spot**

Moving children is constructed in permanence policy and in its practices as a task for foster carers': an important and skilled task but nonetheless a task. It is a task involving transitional practices. If we use Greco and Stenner's (2017) metaphor of circles as forms-of-process, moving a child from fostering to adoption would be understood as happening within a single circle, one that encompasses the identity and tasks of the foster carer. This might be comparable to moving jobs within the same profession, so a transition happens: things shift, some things have to be let go of and new things have to be learnt. By and by these new things are accommodated into an existing identity. Subjectivity remains more or less intact. But what if for Jane (and for others) this task (under certain conditions) sweeps her up out of one circle and pushes her into another separate circle? What if, sometimes, this aspect of her work involves an identity transformation rather than an adjustment?

Circles can also become vicious. Instead of ever widening they can be ever tightening. Instead of reaching out, our world can collapse into smaller and more constricted space/times, entrapping us into our individuality and cutting us off from our powers of action and understanding... we might say that one enters the vicious circle of a liminal hotspot when one becomes stuck in the transition from one circle to the next, unable to integrate them into a wider unity (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.149).

There is certainly a feeling of constriction in this meeting. Are we being pulled into a collapsing circle? Throughout the meeting Jane interrupts with fragments of information that suggest there is something troubled about a specific process of becoming. Her repeated references to Fay would suggest that this is the source of troubled becoming. We learn that Fay attaches herself to every woman that looks like her birth Mum, that she mourns her sister Heather (lost through adoption) and that Jane experiences anger on her

behalf; that Jane cannot be late for school pick up (ever), the inference being that this would be experienced by Fay as abandonment by Jane. Jane is meant to provide permanence and stability to Fay. It seems that for Fay and Jane permanence is still a quest. Jane invokes a vision of Fay as vulnerable and of their relationship as precarious. The troubled issue (unsurprisingly) is that the psychological transformation on both their parts is still underway. This is a long process of building trust and growing love.

Thomassen (cited in Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160) suggests that in order for a transformation to take place psychologically there has to be 'a social *recognition* of the new skills and qualities of the neophytes'. At some point the agency has recognized that Jane will and can provide Fay with permanence. But what did this involve? Research suggests that practice is patchy when it comes to recognizing the status of permanence for children in foster care (Schofield et al., 2011). Has some form of social recognition of Fay's position in this family been enacted by the agency? Was there a marker in this rite of passage? For Jane and Fay, it seems that their subjectivities are still being transformed in relation to each other yet here they are, pulled into another transformative process. What does this mean for them? Schofield et al. (2011) suggest that systems and practices routinely used by social workers can impact negatively on the lived experiences of children in the context of their relationships. Are the agency and its actors countering the psychosocial work involved in achieving a sense of permanence for Fay? Are we wilfully blind in the context of too much contradiction?

Matching practices take place across complex open systems (foster care is at the heart of this system) and liminality '...-shifts from being the exception...to something that approximates "the rule"' (Szakolczai cited in Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.150). Given her life experiences how much liminality can Fay be expected to endure? How can you achieve permanence if you are subject to permanent liminality? Is that possible? In helping Lily achieve permanence (in her fostering tasks) Jane is implicated in a process that de-stabilizes Fay. In this meeting for Jane a paradox arises; she is 'attending to the requirements of two mutually incompatible forms of process' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.155). She *is* caught in a 'vicious circle'. Are we all at risk of becoming caught? The photograph is emblematic in its paradoxical function. It is used to help create a new family and to break an existing family. Greco and Stenner (2017) suggest that in liminal hot spots:

...the paradox paralyses conduct to the extent that it confuses and interferes with the flows of experience and activity ordinarily channeled by, and into, the orthodox pattern...the paradox tends to polarise participants as they seek to escape their predicament of indeterminacy by forcing a solution that conforms to one of the forms-of-process they are caught between (p.155).

Attunement becomes impossible in these circumstances. The noise and heat interferes with the capacity to listen or to empathize. The paradox is unbearable and must be escaped.

Jane interrupts, 'Look, when is the actual move date?' Everyone looks at the papers. Claire says 'well we'll need a review meeting and...' Jane interrupts 'Look I'm going on holiday on Thursday and I'm not changing it'. Claire says 'which Thursday?' Sandra then says 'we told you this holiday was booked, it can't be changed' Claire says 'Are you sure? I don't remember being told about a holiday?' ...Sandra says 'well we did tell you about this holiday'. Debbie and Claire look at each other. Claire says 'I don't remember being told. Do you?' Debbie says 'No I don't'. There is a silence and everyone looks at the plan.... Claire says after a few seconds 'yes but Lily will need to see you. Where are you going on holiday?' Jane says 'The New Forest to the caravan'. Claire says 'well could Debbie and Lily come to meet you in the middle somewhere?' Jane says 'No'. Claire says 'Right'. Jane says 'No we have 2 weeks at the caravan. I've got the family coming down at different times. We like to be spontaneous. So if it's a nice day we'll go to Paultons Park or something. I can't interrupt our holiday and I don't drive so Mike would have to take me and then what happens to Fay? She needs this holiday' (Observation 3).

Jane will not be able to see Lily for 2 weeks. This is a child who Jane has cared for from birth and who she describes as 'in that clingy stage where she just wants me'. Jane is determined to move Lily quickly and to avoid any physical contact with her in the days and weeks following the move. She has reconfigured her family and it does not now contain Lily. Jane and her family will, on the day of the move, immediately head west to enjoy a peaceful holiday. Jane will not be around to see Lily in the days after the move, to help her settle and to support her in this momentous life event, as Lily herself moves from one circle to the next. Greco and Stenner (2017) suggest that, '...the volatility of liminal occasions refers to a heightened propensity for *becoming affected* that characterises the subject in transition (whether individual or collective)' (p.160). At the point Jane introduces her holiday plans the 'affective volatility' (ibid) threatens to de-rail the meeting. In the extract above there is a collective slipping of masks. There is now a sense of an US versus THEM. These are polarized positions: adoption versus fostering. Within this dynamic the boundaries between service users and practitioners have become blurred. My feet are firmly (and unsurprisingly) in the adoption camp. The tension is palpable. 'There is a silence and everyone looks at the



plan...' (ibid). Everything is in-flux but where will we go from here? I am (perhaps we all are) '*becoming affected*' in this liminal space.

Boswell and Cudmore (2014) argue that the importance of the foster carer's relationship to the child is repeatedly suppressed and minimized during transitions (as do Lanyado, 2003; Wakelyn, 2012). This approach helps those involved protect themselves from the huge implications of their work. Adults need to believe that children are fine and for Jane and her social worker this would seem to be the case. Sandra is also determined that Lily will move quickly and that Jane will have her holiday immediately. Twice in the meeting she interjects with 'it will be fine'. These interjections are said with a smile but also with authority. 'It will be fine. I have never had a problem with moving a child of this age. It's more difficult when they're older then things need tweaking' (Observation 3, Sandra). The fostering role in respect of Lily, as set out by Jane and Sandra, is close to completion. It involves caring for Lily and then moving her. We are told repeatedly that this will be fine.

Jane says 'well she likes her Sammy the sea lion, she has him to sleep. But I don't know where you'd get one of them. Look on eBay. She loves her mobile, its Winnie the Pooh. She can't sleep without it. I can't give it to you because it has sentimental value. It was my kids' but you can get one from Argos'. Debbie writes down as Jane is talking (Observation 3).

We learn that Sammy the sea lion and a Winnie the Pooh mobile help Lily move from one emotional space to another, from waking to sleep. Simultaneously we are told that they do not belong to her and she must do without them. Jane retains and asserts her ownership (and she is not challenged). Lily is not being gifted these precious comforting items at this critical moment in her life. She must make do with replacements from eBay or Argos. A replacement that might resemble her Sammy the Sea Lion but will not be imbued with her (Lily holds this toy to her body every night). A replacement toy would not meet Jane's emotional needs but it has to meet Lily's. In contrast Jane articulates Fay's needs beautifully. She describes how Fay needs her presence in order to feel safe. How she makes sure she collects her from school and how she ensures she is never late. She describes how she sings to Fay, the songs that her birth mother sang to her and her sister. How she and Fay sing those songs to Lily. She is a protective and loving Mum to Fay. She recognizes Lily's importance to Fay and insists that Fay's needs are met in this process. She is also clearly available to her own daughters and their children. She treasures their old toys and keeps them safe too. Jane is carrying the scars from another encounter with adoption practices.

Fay will need a proper goodbye, she never got one with Heather. They just took her and she's never seen her again. I have to say I'm burnt - I'm not going through that again. There's only a year between them and Fay has never got over it. I tell her it's wrong and that social services got it wrong (Jane, Observation 3).

There is anger and pain on behalf of Fay who is separated, by adoption, from her younger sister. The open adoption mandate has not been interpreted by her sister's adopters to include their relationship. Adopters aren't to be trusted. There is also a lack of trust in social services. They got it wrong and they could again. Jane draws attention to Fay's needs time and again throughout the meeting. This may serve to help her avoid the impending separation from Lily but it also does something else. In articulating Fay's needs in the way she does Jane highlights the injustice and inequalities in the unevenness of the operationalization of permanence. Jane bursts this bubble and it is very uncomfortable. Why should Lily have so much more attention in the context of permanence than Fay? Is one child more deserving than another?

In articulating Fay's needs and in highlighting the deficits of previous social work interventions Jane is demonstrably performing the role required of her as Fay's primary carer/mother. Jane is fighting her corner every step of the way. She is holding in mind Fay's past, present and future. But this articulation produces a binary and polarized positioning. Jane tells us clearly that her relationships with her adult daughters, her grandchildren and with Fay will take precedence over her relationship with Lily. She is drawing lines in the sand in respect of this matching process. In respect of Lily she challenges the positioning of herself as a woman and a carer who is all-giving but occupies that role for her daughters and for Fay.

'I'll warn you it's a busy house. The last intros I did they said keep the number of people down but I can't tell my children not to come round. The house is busy and I'm not keeping my kids away.' Sandra says 'well yes that's the reality of your life. But you know not to have a big event or organise a family meal or anything'. Jane 'Yes but I can't help it if people drop in, I'm not keeping my kids away' (Observation Record 3).

Jane refuses to be dictated to by Lily's needs as defined by adoption policy (and as taught to Debbie) in respect of this matching process. In their research on adoption in Sweden Lind and Lindgren (2016) suggest that assessment guidance;

...comes to serve as a catalogue of arguments that not only define good parenthood but also outline a way of life that is suitable for parenthood. This includes the stipulation that applicants should have an orderly life, a life free from distractions that could hinder a wholehearted focus on children and family life (p.53).

Jane outlines a different way of life, where multiple family relations and obligations hinder 'a wholehearted focus' on Lily. This matching process must now directly work with this life; a family life that challenges the framework on which they are striving to build a new family.

### **Collaborative Practices**

The planning meeting progresses; it is not derailed. Over 2 hours a specific and formalised togetherness is negotiated and laid out in writing (a document named as Intro Plan 2). This is acknowledged as performative and there is a script to follow. Lily is the named audience but there are many other viewers. Debbie and Jane are instructed to perform togetherness to help Lily accept Debbie in her life. They will be encouraged to show Lily that they are friendly towards each other, by talking together, eating together, being warm with each other. The plan specifies this. The other actors will have to work collaboratively too. There are 3 different practitioners directly involved in the process representing different functions of the agency; child protection, fostering and adoption. They are named in the performance (see Intro Plan 2) but they are also expected to step back and become critical viewers. In the meeting, Claire tells us that the practitioners will talk regularly to each other. We are also told that Debbie, Jane, Claire, Sandra and Zara will all meet in the middle of the process to discuss and decide when/if the move will happen. There will be a senior manager allocated to chair the review meeting and oversee the combined work. Further down the line there will also be an independent reviewing officer, not assigned to any of these teams, who will chair regular reviews following Lily's move. All of these workers are part of the same agency working towards the same permanency goal. They are all professionally qualified and experienced social workers. They share the same overarching concern – is this the right match for Lily in respect of her permanency needs? They are critically evaluating the process; working with and against their own and each other's hypotheses. The different teams have different approaches and additional agendas related to their specific agency function and culture. The practitioners will bring their unique professional and personal skills, experiences and values to this work. They have to collaborate.

Months later in the interviews with Claire and Debbie I wondered how they had experienced this collaborative working, particularly with Jane. They both noted difficulties

but both their responses described a tricky but functional working relationship. Claire recounted how she had worked with Jane's feedback during the introductions and found it credible and perceptive. Debbie's response similarly indicated a working relationship, albeit an unequal one.

I created or developed my own relationship with Jane. Which I didn't expect that to go that way because Jane is quite, not hard, but she is quite a tough woman. But actually in the end with the introductions it worked for me because it reminded me of one of my family because she really likes to take the lead in what she is doing. I kind of said, I kind of let her do that and I think she was happy with it so it kind of worked (Debbie, Interview).

Debbie's position is revealed here to be particularly precarious. She has had to assume a subservient position in relation to Jane in order for this process to work. She finds a strategy to do this which draws on her experiences in her own familial relations, and 'it kind of worked' (ibid). Debbie, Claire, Sandra and Jane develop working relationships from this inauspicious beginning, over the course of a few weeks of very close collaborative practice. Sandra and Claire both provide transport, collecting Lily and Jane and travelling between Debbie and Jane's houses. Jane teaches Debbie how to care for Lily. Debbie supports Jane in her care of Fay by paying her attention and recognizing the value of her relationship to Lily. The entire project is held together through work and given that social work, foster caring and parenting is highly gendered this is women's work.

Debbie says 'shall I bring her back on the train then?' Claire 'oh yes that's an issue isn't it, we don't want you stressed in trying to navigate public transport, we need to make things easy for you'. Debbie 'well look I'll have to manage the trains at some point so I'll need to get on with it'. Claire 'Look there's a lot to be managing so let's not do things that make life harder. Let me look at my diary and see if I can pick you up'. Claire looks at her diary and shakes her head 'No I just can't on that Wednesday. Sandra, can you?' Sandra says 'No sorry I have to get my kids'. Debbie says 'Look its fine I'll get the train and then the bus from the station'. Claire 'it's too much'. Sandra says 'Look why don't you get a taxi?' Claire says 'Yes!' Sandra says 'This is not expensive for the local authority sometimes we have to put people up in hotels or pay for trains and planes, so a £20 taxi fare is reasonable I think'. Claire 'well will your team pay?' Sandra says 'Oh yeah, er, not sure but let's do it and sort that out later'. Claire says 'Debbie can you pay and keep the receipt?' Debbie 'yes, sure' (Observation 3).

In this case study women are responsible for multiple children and they are filling in the gaps where the state is failing. Social workers cannot even rely on a £20 taxi bill being authorised. As a network, brought into existence through their specific responsibility to Lily,

they have to work alongside each other's ethical and practical responsibilities in respect of other children. Sandra can collect Jane but only at a certain time because she must be at the school gates to collect her own children. Jane, of course, has multiple children (some are not yet born) that must be held in mind.

Jane's daughter's baby as you know is due on the 17<sup>th</sup> – so if the baby does come on that day, we'd probably begin intros on the 21<sup>st</sup> – if the baby comes sooner, we could begin intros on the 16<sup>th</sup> potentially. (Email from Claire to Debbie 24.02.16)

Debbie, still weeks away from meeting Jane, is already being compelled to think of Jane's wider family. She has to take account of Jane's maternal relationship with her daughter and Jane's daughter's transition to motherhood. Through this matching process social workers, adopters and foster carers encounter and are appropriated into a multitude of ethical relations and responsibilities in respect of each other's relationships with children.

Any liminal transition between forms of social process will thus require both a psychosocial attunement at the level of subjectivity, and a sociopsychological attunement at the level of the coordination of social practice (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160)

As the professionals in this meeting Claire and Sandra are charged with the coordination of social practices needed to produce this transition. From the paralysis of polarised positions they find a space where they can do this collaboratively and with care, 'let's not do things that make life harder. Let me look at my diary and see if I can pick you up' (Claire, Observation Record 3). It is through recognition that the collaboration required to build a new family for Lily is generated. Permanence has a future focus. Everyone is compelled to keep pushing forwards. Sandra notes that sometimes these meetings take 3 hours. It seems that whatever the issues a plan will be formulated. It is in this context that Jane's relationship with Fay becomes central to the process and is integrated into the planning. There is no other way through, no other way this quest will be achieved. Jane (and Fay) might be trapped in a 'vicious circle' but they must be helped and perhaps through this new transformation things might shift for her/them. The actors, through Jane's actions, become attuned to Fay's needs. Could Jane and Fay's relationship be enhanced in this encounter with an event of becoming? Is that possible or just wishful? Greco and Stenner (2017) use the term 'pattern shift' to refer to the generative potential at the heart of a liminal hot spot:

...it can push those involved towards the invention of new forms-of-process based on new gestalts... capable of embracing a greater degree of complexity, within which the paradox can be resignified... (p.155).

Could we all expand our capacities for 'embracing a greater degree of complexity'? (ibid).

Hoggett and Thompson (2002) argue that deliberative democracy needs to give closer attention to the affective dimensions of the use of public spaces for debate. They suggest that 'public spaces of deliberation are places permeated by emotional forces' (p.107). Their proposal is that spaces for deliberative democracy should be structured, not around the concept of rational argument, but as spaces where 'citizens can reveal their needs and express their emotions in a process of coming to what might be thought of as a 'good enough' understanding of their fellows' (2002, p.107). I understand this meeting to be an emotionally fraught public space. Here in amongst the pressures, time and space *is* being made for complex deliberations. In this space and in this case intersubjective recognition of multiple relationships (including of Jane and Fays' existing relationship *alongside* Debbie and Lily's emerging relationship) is reached through a process involving the 'coordinating of numerous social actors into joint action' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160). In the next chapter I suggest that in this matching process Fay is understood to be a key participant/viewer. We think about her, she is talked about, her name is written on the planning tools. She is someone to us. Through Lily's planned move Fay also achieves recognition.

Precisely because photographs carry a trace of the bodies they picture, they are a very powerful means for doing togetherness, even when—indeed, especially when (Sontag 1978)—families are scattered (Rose, 2004, p.560).

Traditionally understood through the lens of 'a debt economy' (Gregory 1982, cited in Rose, 2010, p.65) whereby 'to give a gift is to establish an obligation to return the gift' (ibid), gifts have more recently come to be understood as part of relational practices. A gift and its gifting work to establish a network of connections and relations. Layne (2000) argued that new mothers are drawn into a gift-giving network which establishes a community of people connected and invested in the baby. The gift remains connected to the giver. Gift giving networks are 'opened up by pregnancy' (Thomson et al., 2011, p.213). In the making of Debbie and Lily as a family there is no pregnant body. There are instead multiple bodies involved in maternal practices and there are the processual markers of the permanence project. The planning meeting functions as a place where cultural practices associated with

making new families can take place. Jane gets the ball rolling with her photographic practices. 'Family snaps always contain more than the people they picture, they also contain the donor' (Rose 2010, p.64). Is Jane signalling to Debbie, with this gift, her desire to remain a part of Lily's life? Jane knows from (Fay's) experience that relationships post- adoption order are in the control of adoptive parents, 'past, present and future family connections cannot be taken for granted, but must be materialized' (Elliot et al., 2017, p.13). Photographs are particularly useful in this specific materialization because 'sending photographs maintains familial affiliations, and shows togetherness' (Rose et al., 2010, p.45). The gifting of this photograph transgresses Jane's apparent determination to cut ties with Lily. It is suggestive of the opposite because what she also does with the photograph is put herself into Debbie's home alongside Lily.

### **Afterword**

...maternal subjectivity could be thought of as the creative aporia between the ideal and our realities – what we do, day in and day out, with that misalignment, not as a form of lament, but as a way of recognizing that navigating this space is itself an agentic practice (Baraitser, 2009, p.1).

It might be too much of a stretch to conceptualise this introductions planning meeting as a 'creative aporia' (ibid) but Baraitser's evocation of a space between 'the ideal and our realities' (ibid) resonates. We are far from an ideal. But this chapter is not a case review and it is certainly not 'a form of lament' (ibid). It is, instead, an analysis that has tried to consider the psychosocial dynamics at play, the misalignments and the generative potential of permanence practices. Jane's provocations, beginning with the photograph, have been followed and used as entry points. I worked on the basis, '...that family photographs are a way for women to negotiate a subjectivity' (Rose, 2010, p.58). It has been argued that in this case Jane demonstrates 'the importance of doing things with family snaps [in relation] to [her] maternal positioning' (ibid, my brackets). In her work with this photograph she reveals the role and significance of maternal practices and it is through these practices that the lives of other children in foster care are made visible. In this chapter the practical, emotional and physical responsibility for childcare in the present (but also for the future) is solely held by women. Some of these women are mothers through birth and others have ethical responsibility through their professional roles. For Debbie her responsibility for Lily is yet to be realized. These matching practices have mobilized individuals into a network around Lily. Through this network and specifically during these few weeks childcare responsibilities become a collective concern. Maternal bodies, Park (2006) argues, are

mediated by cultural expectations which are not applied to paternal bodies. This is part of the dynamic mobilized in the planning meeting that I observe. Regulation and the policing of norms is an integral part of the picture but it is also only *part* of the picture. It is maternal work (the practical, emotional and psychic labour involved in caring for children) coupled with the forward focus and drive of permanence that emerge as the force to be reckoned with. These features provide both the tools and the impetus needed to navigate this particular 'liminal hot spot'.



## Chapter 6: Transformative Practices

'I've put the photo of Lily in her room and it's great. I mean it's like she's there, I love it. This is weird but when I get up in the morning I go in and say hello to her. It's like I'm checking on her. I say, "Morning my darling". People have been dropping in bags of clothes and toys. The house is full of stuff, it's been a bit crazy' (Debbie, Observation Record 4).

So lovely if slightly rushed and frenetic meeting. Debbie so excited and buying baby stuff. Really funny. I also felt guilty about having this time alone with her. Claire should be here sharing this fun bit. I am worried about how fast this is all moving (Field note 4).

Debbie has travelled to Claire's office to bring the book she has made for Lily and to finalize plans. It is 5 days since the planning meeting. She has arrived late and out of breath. Claire and I had been sitting in reception waiting for her. We all then move through a series of locked doors and a long corridor to a small office with a broken radiator. Claire goes to get coffee and leaves an empty chair between myself and Debbie. As the door shuts Debbie immediately starts talking.

This encounter with the photograph is taking place in the margins of the main story and in the absence of the social worker. The first part of the analysis focuses in on the photographic practices that provide the scenic introduction. Lily's photograph is conceptualized as a transformative object which functions as a tool in Debbie's transformation to mother. The second part of the chapter builds on this analysis and examines the multiple imaginative and material practices illuminated by the data. The final section addresses the risks involved in transformative practices. It is argued that, in liminal spaces, boundaries are required. In this data set they are created through the use of space and time. Through this boundary work actors seek to protect themselves from the destabilizing impact of their roles and the noise generated by a melee of different competing demands.

### **Lily's Photograph - A Transformative Object**

According to Rose (2010) certain objects are central to the production of domestic space. It is the indexical presence (or trace of a person) that has led family photographs to be understood as, one of, 'the most powerful of these transformative objects' (2010, p.45). Debbie has transported the photograph from the social work office (across a city via a bike and train) and has physically attached the photograph to the wall of a bedroom in her home. That room is now being transformed from a spare room to Lily's room. Through the photograph's holding of her indexical presence, a trace of Lily is now 'sort of present' (p.127) in Debbie's home. 'I've put the photo of Lily in her room and it's great. I mean it's like she's there, I love it' (ibid). Debbie is practicing and performing (with/to herself and with me) a process of integrating Lily into her life. She makes it clear that it is something she wants; 'I love it', and 'it's great'. She tells me that she begins each day by pretending Lily is in her home and she uses the photograph to do this. 'I say hello to her' and 'Morning my darling'. Here Debbie claims Lily, 'my', cares for her, 'darling', in the context of a new beginning, 'morning'. With these three words, 'Morning my darling' she imagines and invokes the dawning of a new wanted and loving family. Debbie's addressing of the photograph of Lily may be, as she says, 'weird' but it is not unusual. In Rose's work she observes that photographs are repeatedly talked about as if they are the person they picture. In Debbie's domestic space room is being made for Lily. 'Putting a photograph of a family member on display... is akin to inviting that person to dwell in a house' (Rose, 2010, p.126). Hanging the photograph in this room helps Debbie prepare for motherhood. It is also 'akin to inviting' Lily into her life.

In my diary entry I use the words 'rushed', 'frenetic', 'fast' and 'moving'. There is intensity to her story, the way she tells it and the feelings it evokes in me. The drama is evident from the beginning of Observation Record 4. 'Debbie arrives out of breath 'Sorry so sorry I missed my train and then realized I'd forgotten my phone'. Time is speeding up, phones are being left behind, trains are missed and Debbie is moving so fast her breathing can't keep up. The intensity is pleasurable, 'so lovely' and 'really funny'. Alongside the pleasure is anxiety, 'I am worried about how fast this is moving'. There is also guilt, I feel 'guilty about having this time alone with her'. The guilt is linked to absence and to do with the pleasure, 'Claire should be here sharing this fun bit'. Should Debbie and I be laughing together like this, in the midst of so much absence, in the context of so much work and on the brink of something so momentous? In my (practitioner) mind Debbie is not simply chatting, she is working. Claire's role is to assess Debbie's readiness and to be alongside her in this imaginative work. Initially I wondered if Debbie is using the research encounter as a dress rehearsal/sound-check in preparedness for Claire's return (the proper audience).

Later as I worked through the data I note that Debbie's narratives of getting ready for Lily are full of encounters with objects, places and people. She appears to be doing preparatory work for becoming a mother in multiple ways, with friends and with others (like me). People she barely knows.

Debbie tells me she's spent the weekend shopping and sorting out lots of baby stuff friends keep bringing round. She tells me she's felt like a total idiot in Mothercare. 'I had to ask these young girls about half my age what type of buggy to get. I mean they were great but they were asking me about Lily and I don't even know how much she weighs!' She tells me how she bought the buggy and then put her bags of shopping in the buggy and wheeled it through town and then got a taxi driver to take her to a furniture shop and had him wait for her whilst she bought a chest of draws and then got the guy to drive it back to her house. 'I mean it was all ridiculous, shopping for stuff I don't know what. Obsessing over whether she'll like the colours' (Observation 4).

Debbie's description of buying for Lily is dynamic and fun. In the *Making Modern Mothers* (2011) study women were understood to partially construct themselves as mothers through the acquisition of things. Shopping was a 'pleasure' and a 'practice that brings the baby into being' (Thomson et al., 2011, p.214). Researchers describe one respondent, Kate, as 'laughing at the intensity of her emotional response to small things' (ibid) as she talked about shopping for her new baby. This would seem to capture something of Debbie's account and my reaction to it, 'I laughed with her. It all seemed so absurd and wonderful' (Field note 4). Debbie notes that it is 'all ridiculous', she is 'obsessing', she feels 'like an idiot' and it's all 'a bit crazy'. In her actions and in her stories, she is disorientated and slightly panicked. Like 'these young girls' and this 'taxi driver' I am included and caught up in Debbie's preparations.

The momentum of the match has a powerful pull. Debbie's 'friends keep bringing round' baby stuff. Some of this stuff is new but the majority are objects that they themselves have used in their own mothering, including bags of baby girls' clothes (too big now but will fit in the future), a changing table (too big for Lily's room) and a chest of drawers. The image in my mind, as Debbie talks, is a small room with a photograph of Lily as a centre piece surrounded by a growing mountain of stuff. Could these bags of clothes and toys multiply so much they obscure Lily's photograph? Will they form an obstacle which Debbie has to navigate before she can reach Lily? Is Lily in danger of being lost? In the text of Observation 4 Debbie's 'Morning my darling' is immediately followed by, 'People have been dropping in bags of clothes and toys. The house is full of stuff'. In my text Debbie's imagined intimacy with Lily is momentary. Their connection immediately has to accommodate the presence of others. The physical and psychic space is 'full of stuff' and much of it belongs to other people and their 'real' children.

It is not pregnancy that opens up this gift giving network for Debbie in her transformation to a mother. It is the processual markers of the permanence project that initiate this deluge of objects and intense activity. The timeframe bears some consideration.

1. The match is approved by Panel on the 8th March.
2. Debbie meets Jane on the 9th March and is given Lily's photograph.
3. Debbie prepares for Lily 9th-14th March (this includes hanging a photograph, buying baby things, buying furniture, transporting furniture, finding a toy that resembles Sammy the Seal, taking photographs, making a book, receiving and sorting gifts)
4. Debbie meets Claire on the 14th March
5. Lily and Debbie meet on the 17th March.

Debbie has been part of an adoption process for 2 years but this stage takes place in 9 days. Within these 9 days Debbie's home is made ready and her friendship circle is mobilized as part of the process. Gifts, buying and the collecting of things for parenting Lily functions like 'a bridge into a new terrain.' (Thomson et al., 2011, p.214). Their gifting establishes these relationships as part of the imagined adoptive family. Debbie is supported but also has to manage these friendships and the gift-giving generated by the transformation she is undergoing.

....so many other people are invested in this as well. Lots of my friends have been through this whole process with me, everyone's got their own stuff going on with it (Debbie, Observation 3).

These networks and their complicated role in this process are recognized by Debbie and also by the social worker in her role as assessor and supporter. Claire's response to Debbie's description of all the gifts she has been given is, 'Are you ok with that? It sounds like a lot of stuff? You can say no to things, that's ok' (Observation 4). The implication is that these gifts are not benign objects and their gifting might not be helpful to this transformation. Debbie might need protecting from this stuff and their emotional content. Debbie is given permission to say no to some things and to some people. Debbie is not becoming a mother through birth and her use of commodities as 'a bridge into a new terrain' (ibid) of mothering has to take into account a real child and her existing relationships. Lily has stuff; she has her own things and preferences. Our knowledge and understanding of Lily's material world is mediated through Jane.

For the women interviewed as part of the Making Modern Mothers (2011) study the acquisition of objects was a significant part of becoming a mother. Researchers describe 'the work of commodities as preparatory, expressive and identity producing' (p.198). For Debbie 'the work of commodities' opens her up to the experiences of all mothers-to-be. But additionally, for Debbie her work with commodities must take account of a child who already has stuff, it must take place in 9 days, it takes place in the context of a collaborative quest/project, it is entangled in Jane's anxiety and also within all our collective hopes and fears. Debbie must also show that she is doing this 'preparatory, expressive and identity producing work' before she will be allowed to become a mother. She must demonstrate her ability to work together with those around her. In this matching and placing phase, the 'testing element is not in the foreground but nevertheless present' (Noordegraaf et al., 2008a, p.325). As Jane tells the meeting (in Observation 3) that she will be keeping Sammy the Seal and the Winnie the Pooh mobile, 'Debbie writes down as Jane is talking'. By listening to Jane and then writing Debbie is both demonstrating to Jane recognition of her authority and also evidencing to the social workers her capacity to learn and work collaboratively. Debbie is doing what she needs to do (of course we don't know what she is writing).

In this planning meeting, and in these encounters with Jane and Sandra, Claire's authority as the face of the agency is diminished and her decision making is directly challenged in Debbie's presence. Paradoxically these interactions seem to bolster the practitioner and adopter coupledness (Claire and Debbie together in adversity) whilst also diminishing its significance in this matching/placing stage. Debbie must quickly build relationships with other gatekeepers in order for this process to work. In doing so she demonstrates her capacity for relationship building. She is also demonstrating her capacity to navigate power relations. This is not a requirement listed on any adoptive parent capacity list but is a core competency nonetheless. Debbie *has* to work with Jane's articulation of a maternal subject. She has no choice; 'adoptive mothers know that their status as mothers depends on mastery of the social script for good mothering' (Park, 2006, p.202). The complication (or perhaps the opportunity) here is that Jane has thrown out 'the social script for good mothering' (ibid).

There are aspects of this process which demand compliance. Then there are some that also demand creativity, albeit in the context of a collectively agreed script. At the planning meeting Debbie is advised to make Lily a book. She should include in it photographs of

herself holding a cuddly toy in different rooms of her house. This cuddly toy, the group agrees, should resemble Sammy the Sea Lion. The idea is that this will serve as an introduction to Lily of Debbie and her home. The cuddly toy will be significant as a transitional object between Lily's worlds.

Debbie reaches into a pink plastic bag and passes Claire a hand-made book. Claire opens the book and says 'this is great!' I can see on the first page are photos of Debbie and there are drawings around them. 'Oh I've had a great time it's been like playing' (Observation Record 4).

Photographs again play a part in these matching practices. Debbie has made the trip to the office specially to deliver this book and Claire has adjusted her plans to ensure she can receive it and then deliver it to Jane later that day. I have also adjusted my plans to observe this meeting. It will (following Rose, 2003, 2004) carry a trace of Debbie into Lily's home. It is not just for Lily though; 'it's for Lily to get to know you. And I guess for Fay too' (Claire, Observation Record 4). Debbie through this book has to address multiple audiences and hold them all in mind. In recollecting their experiences of this matching and introductory stage the women in the ASG all recalled other children.

Yes, that reminds me, yes because when we got Cerys, we got our daughter from Edinburgh. And there was another foster child there who was about five, Karen, and of course she was so aware that the baby was being taken into a home, and that was a whole other dimension to deal with, this little girl coping with the fact that she hadn't got mummy and daddy coming for her but the baby had, and she'd been there longer (Gail, ASG).

Well again, we had that three times over. Every single one of ours was living in a foster home where there were other children who were either adopted or fostered, and were older... and were, as you say, losing a child when they came to live with us (Andrea, ASG).

Whilst these women were not responsible for these children, either physically or emotionally, they held them in mind (and these children still have a presence in their minds 20 years later). Both Debbie and the women in the ASG became aware through this process that in their journey to becoming a mother they were destabilizing other young lives.

Greco and Stenner (2017) suggest that 'the volatility of liminal occasions refers to a heightened propensity for becoming affected that characterizes the subject in transition' (p.160). This 'heightened propensity for becoming affected' opens up prospective parent and child to their new becomings (and unbecoming). For all of us involved to different

degrees this transformation, 'involves a foundational involvement and stirring of human sentiments, dreams and fantasies' (Thomassen, cited in Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160).

The book Debbie produces is part of this process too. Its mobility and trajectory are almost a mirror image of that taken by Lily's photograph. It has been made in Debbie's home and transported from a town to a city (via a bike and trains). It is passed from Debbie to Claire in a social work office. It will be passed from Claire to Jane later that day. These transactions have all involved planning and the adjusting of arrangements. This book of drawings and photographs is taking on the air of an important public document. This book, in its passage between actors and through their social practices (viewing, touching), is a tool used to help in this transformation process.

...I've left the caption blank, I've brought my pens. I didn't know what to write, should I call myself Mum or Mummy or Debbie?' Claire says 'Mummy. You are going to be her Mummy. Mummy I think not Mum, she's only little'. Debbie says 'Yes Mummy...let me write in the book' She takes out a pen and opens the book and underneath her own photo she writes 'Mummy' she writes over the letters twice. Both Debbie and Claire are smiling as she does this (Observation Record 4).

Here Claire, at Debbie's request, names her. Debbie is told to call herself Mummy. Debbie takes a pen and writes this word in this book. She then writes it again. It is a declaration. In this observation role I feel like a witness to a ceremony. Greco and Stenner (2017) suggest that in liminal phases there has to be a 'ceremonial death of the previous status' followed by 'the rites of incorporation (whereby a new status is ritualistically adopted)' (p.149). Debbie has handed in her notice at work (this might have involved some kind of documentation too). In this book and in her naming, 'a new status is ritualistically adopted' (ibid). In these roles, adopter and social worker are practically, discursively and imaginatively making a family together. In my role as witness I too am involved.

### **Drama and Pretence**

Transformation has '...roots in the theatre, 'describing a sudden and dramatic change of scene on stage' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989, cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.57). It is also 'an archaic term for a woman's wig' (ibid). Baraitser in her exploration of maternal practices points out these odd etymological meanings. If transformation does involve 'a sudden and dramatic change of scene' then Debbie is in the midst of this process. If Debbie's Saturday shopping trip was part of a play there would be numerous set changes – we would see her in a shop, then in a taxi, then in another shop, then back in a taxi, then home. On the

Monday (of Observation Record 4) she arrives breathlessly in the reception area and immediately recounts how she has left her phone somewhere else. First, she thought it was on a train but then realized it is at home, on a table. This is a mini-drama associated with a lost object, a mobile phone, something that connects her to Claire. Debbie must not lose her connection to Claire. She becomes panicked at the thought. In Debbie's narrative there are multiple changes of scene and multiple mini-dramas.

As Baraitser notes a wig makes you see yourself differently and it makes others see you differently. Debbie's transformative work involves trying something out, staging something and an element of pretence. She is (with Claire's guidance and through her authority) now practicing writing a new name. She has also been asked to walk around her house holding a toy and taking photographs of herself. Here Debbie is performing the role of Lily's Mummy to-be, a role collectively constructed by this permanence network. In this performance Debbie must signify she is warm, likeable, playful, steady and reliable. There are no images of a disorientated, breathless and panicked Debbie. She has to be to an all-round and reliable performer. She is even asked to sing.

Claire says 'maybe Debbie could record a song or read a book and we send you the audio to play to Lily?'... Jane says 'well me and Fay always sing to her "Hush Little Baby", she loves that. I mean Fay loves it too because it's the song her Mum used to sing to her and Heather, she loves it when I sing it to her' (Observation Record 3).

Debbie cannot choose the song she sings and the song chosen for her is laden with complicated emotion. It is difficult to untangle all the loss; daughters, babies, mothers and sisters entangled in a lullaby. Like a wig (an ill-fitting one) the practices around preparing for Lily are uncomfortable (Baraitser, 2009). The group reactions to the naming of Debbie as Mummy (discussed in the Methodology chapter) draw attention to the tensions inherent in these events of becoming. Group members did not like Debbie being named in this way. This life event becoming a mother is both a unique and intensely personal experience yet it also necessitates social recognition to be actualized. Do adoption processes amplify these tensions or just make them more visible? Park (2006) suggests they do both.

Wigs also bring to the fore questions of authenticity and legitimacy. In the discussion the women in the ASG consider the 'realness' of my record. The case is 'extreme', the record 'sounds made up'. Like a bad wig or a hammy play, the observation record generates questions about authenticity.



Pauline: are they really.., is this real?

Gail: Yes. It sounds made up.

Pauline: Yes, but I'm just thinking, god, this is getting worse and worse.

Gail: It does sound made up, it sounds almost like an extreme example.

Pauline: But it's probably very true.

SP: Well it is (ASG).

This questioning touches on my own anxieties about this case study as an outlier and of me, as a 'real' researcher. When I first listen to the audio recording of the ASG I identify myself as the speaker who says 'Well it is'. I initially hear 'Well it is' as my defensive voice – asserting the authenticity of the research and undermining my status as a researcher at the same time. It is some time before I can separate my anxiety from the content of the group's discussion. It is only through multiple readings and listening's that I can begin to recognize and attune to the detail and to the voice. The speaker of 'Well it is' is not me. Someone else is defending this record as real.

Gail: She said it was ridiculous at the start....

Jenny: And it's not ridiculous.

Sue: No, it's not.

Jenny: It's normal (ASG).

Here Debbie's description of her preparations as ridiculous is addressed. Throughout their discussion group members frequently use words conveying oddness (ridiculous, bizarre and weird) when recollecting their own experiences. Debbie uses the word 'weird' in reference to her preparations for becoming a mother. In her research, exploring the experiences of women becoming mothers through birth, Hollway notes 'the frequency with which the word 'weird' cropped up' (2015, p.80). In Thomson et al. (2011) weird is also used frequently by respondents; '...it's just weird buying stuff for somebody who isn't even here yet.' (p.213). In my data set the words ridiculous, bizarre and weird occur frequently. They are used by Debbie and by the women in the ASG to describe specific tasks, roles and situations from their own experiences of this matching stage. These words are also used as a summary descriptive term to encapsulate the whole experience of making a family through adoption. 'The whole thing's really weird' (Dawn, ASG), 'It is a bizarre experience' (Andrea, ASG).

In the exchange, where Gail, Sue and Jenny challenge Debbie's use of the word 'ridiculous' as recorded in the text, they actively to seek to normalize Debbie's experiences by comparing them to their own. The group seem attuned to Debbie and support her throughout. This exchange can be read as an example of this allegiance. These women are

reaching out to Debbie, to fill in the gaps of support they identify. The exchange could also be read as a reaction by the group to being labelled as different. The women are comfortable using and labelling their own experiences as weird. They know each other well and have formed a collective identity and familiarity. Here then, in this engagement with Debbie's experiences, they may be asserting their right to name their own experiences. A further reading can be made. The vacillation between weird and normal speaks to a paradox at the heart of adoptive family practices. Is this an ordinary family or an extraordinary family? Who are we?

The ambivalence manifest in the ordinary/extraordinary dichotomy of the contemporary adoptive family is a live issue or becomes live when these women encounter Debbie's story. Questions of authenticity pervade the ASG discussion, yet the authenticity of Debbie's experiences, as captured in the recording, is always accepted by the group. Even when Gail, Jenny and Sue challenge Debbie's description of her actions as ridiculous, they are attuned to her discomfort. The inference in their collective discussion is that of course she would be unsure and need some reassurance. For the ASG attuning to a prospective adoptive mother (particularly at this stage of becoming a mother) does not require any leap of imagination. Individually and collectively, throughout the group discussion, they seek to have Debbie's needs and her efforts recognized and normalized. Theirs is an understanding, born from their experiences. To successfully navigate this liminal space and achieve this transformation the group understands that 'a social recognition of the new skills and qualities of the neophytes...' is required (Thomassen, cited in Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160).

Yes, they should reassure her that actually this is wonderful and they're so pleased she's doing it... (Gail, ASG).

Pauline: The social worker seemed to have a lot of problems about organising dates and meetings. And they're bringing it into the meeting with the prospective adoptive parent, who doesn't need to hear that, I think. That's my opinion.

Gail: Too much

Pauline: There's too much of that going on about their own, sort of, jobs and they're overwhelmed and their workload,

Sue: She doesn't need to hear

Pauline: And the last thing an adoptive parent needs to hear as they're about to embark on this journey, shall we say, is all their problems, because they're going to have enough of them later on with the children, you know. And I just got that overwhelming sense of why are they [inaudible] all their problems? (ASG)

In this discussion the phrase 'doesn't need to hear' is repeated, as is 'too much' and 'overwhelming'. For the women in the ASG being asked to consider a stressed social worker is provocative. The descriptions of the social work office, the reception area and the pressures surrounding the social worker are talked about with what I experience to be annoyance, even anger. Their discussion is focused on the Observation Record but I wonder if their annoyance is also about the now. This text (that I have brought to their group) contains information they do not want to hear, right now, in this room. I am struggling with feelings of annoyance too. There are things being said that I do not want to hear either. The recounting of stories of poor social work practice leaves me saddened and defensive. Did nobody have a good experience of social work? In my mind I become conflated with Claire or at least with the role of social worker. This conflation also emerges in the minds of group members. Gail says, 'they should reassure her... they're so pleased she's doing it'. Gail is referring to a part of the narrative in which Claire is absent and where it is just Debbie and me in the room. She is corrected by Andrea. What remains though is the sense that someone in authority (social worker or researcher) should recognize her role in this permanence project and in family life.

In this configured group research setting (the ASG), in our collective considering of Debbie's experiences, a further scene is created. In our encountering of this story we are affected, we are provoked. Past experiences are re-awakened.

...we used to go in and there was all this tension all the time because of their relationship with the social worker; the foster carers (Sue, ASG).

...the foster mother didn't drive but her husband did, and he was a driving instructor who worked all day. He couldn't do it. Well, he refused to do it, to be honest. It was a bit, one of those tentative things about planning meetings before, where everything we suggested got thrown out. Because they weren't going to co-operate. Because they were peeved off with the social workers, because they didn't have a good relationship there. So it impacts then on them, and then on the child, and on the prospective adopters. So we had to handle that side when we were doing all that. (Pauline, ASG).

...we were going there, staying in hotels for longer and longer periods, to spend longer and longer with them, the foster carers, but obviously the three different foster homes, and going out for the evening and we would be left babysitting to spend time on our own with whoever was in that particular home and they all came. Well, they arrived over two days, and obviously the foster... We had the social workers and the foster carers and the children. One lot on one day and one lot the next day. And I don't think, I can't remember them managing to organise, because all of the foster carers had loads of other foster children. How would they

have got away to come down here for... They'd have to stay the night, it's too far. It would have been, you know. ...We producing all these photographs of the house and what does it look like because they have no idea. I think the hope was that because they would be together that it would be easier. But I remember the pressure of meeting the needs of everybody was enormous (Dawn, ASG).

Gail: We had an adoption that didn't go through with a little boy who we did see... meet, it didn't work for one reason and another. And we had a letter from the social worker afterwards, this is a long time ago, telling me the stress involved had hospitalised her.

Laughter...

Sue: Oh really?

Gail: Yes, and yes, she was in hospital for a week with... it wasn't us who actually did it, you know, I'm sure there were other things in her life that had led up to it, and this was probably, you know, the nail in the coffin for her, but I didn't need to hear that and that was unnecessary. So, I feel quite strongly, you know. And I think all of us have been in stressful jobs in our lives, and you have got to take a deep breath and play that role and be supportive.

Pauline: I remember Kate's social worker telling us I'm going to Australia after this, and she did (ASG).

In becoming mothers, the participants of the ASG describe experiences where they were overwhelmed with information or received news that they 'didn't need to hear' (Gail, ASG). Dawn speaks for the group when she comments that, 'the pressure of meeting the needs of everybody was enormous' (ASG). Under these conditions excess information is experienced as enormous pressure; 'the interference is literally con-fusing: it frustrates and de-differentiates the forms-of-process' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.154).

Arrive and wait in the reception area. There are interview rooms next to the reception and I can hear a man saying 'How dare you. I've been parenting longer than you've been alive. What are you saying, well I should ...' I try not to listen and look at my phone. The door opens and a man comes out walking quickly across the room, a woman follows him out. Claire comes after 10 minutes and sits with me whilst we wait for Debbie. Claire tells me she's overwhelmed with work and is feeling very stressed, she asks how I am and I say 'I'm ok'. Some people (a couple and a male social worker) come out of another room and Claire says, very quietly, 'oh no I don't want to see them' (Observation Record 4).

Similarly, in the 'betwixt and between' space of the social work reception Claire and I cannot avoid encounters we'd really rather not have. The difference is that these encounters are experienced as *momentarily* disruptive. For example, I can zone out of the noise emitting from the office by looking at my phone; I am disturbed but I am still Louise

(new researcher waiting in reception). For Gail and Dawn, in their transformative state, the noise cannot be easily ignored. Prospective adopters are at risk of a sensory overload.

### **Old Memories and New Encounters**

Whereas the description of the social worker's experiences is provocative, the account of Debbie's preparations is evocative. In the audio recording of the ASG there are long pauses where no-one speaks, 'because we are all remembering' (Andrea, ASG). Their accounts of preparing for motherhood contain details redolent of Debbie's. These accounts contain drama, farce, excitement and exposure. These stories are evocative; we laugh. We are a group again. Something has shifted. Why, what was it and how did it shift? The 'triggers' of this Observation Record have generated conversations and the sharing of stories that are new. At the end of the group, the women discuss their surprise about this newness. In the 20 years of meeting they had not spoken together about this time, this time of transformation.

Andrea: I mean, it's incredible, the triggers. As you read it out, just one trigger after another. And every single one of those incidents actually is so imprinted on my mind, you know. They're as clear to me now as they were 20 years ago or whatever it is now, you know.

Dawn: I thought the description of the mother talking about her shopping and buying and getting the room ready...

Andrea: Yes.

Sue: I know, exactly.

Gail: That really brought back memories. I remember exactly going into Boots and asking a guy how old his baby was and what it does, so I knew what to buy for it. And he held it up like this, literally, so I could see how long it was, and you know. And his wife came along and he's holding the baby up. Because you know nothing, you know, if you have not been around babies you don't have a clue (ASG).

The issue for me, and I remember this so clearly, is the issue about pretence. You're kind of pretending to be someone that you're not. And so, you know, the issue about having a discussion with people in the Mothercare shop is that they say, where is the baby? You know... And then you're kind of open... Then you're faced with this issue about, oh we're going to be adopters. So, there's something very personal that gets unwrapped. And then... I can't remember about the weight thing, but the issue is that it's just going to... It's this whole transition, from one stage to another that kind of sense of a pretence about it (David, MMG2).

Gail and David in the groups remembered clearly (from over 20 years ago) incidences in baby shops where they were asked specific questions. These questions were related to

specific details (size or weight) of a child they had not yet met and so they could not answer. These incidents led to unwanted exposures and amplified feelings of illegitimacy contributing to a sense of vulnerability. Gail links the 'not knowing' in the becoming of a parent to not having a baby by birth. She later describes this as being denied 'the privilege of pregnancy'. The absence of a pregnancy as part of creating a family is particularly evident in Gail's narrative about her own shopping experience. In her memories of shopping it is the encounter with a stranger's baby that comes immediately to the fore. In her account Gail describes the baby as held up in front of her, evoking an image of Gail as a new mother being shown her new (birthed) baby for the first time, 'he held it up like this, literally, so I could see how long it was, and you know...'. There is an intimacy to this encounter. Like Debbie in her shopping account, Gail recalls connecting to and seeking help from a stranger. She has revealed her adoptive status to this man in the context of her vulnerabilities about 'not knowing' the child she will parent. In David's words something very personal is 'unwrapped'. This father responds generously and holds his child up for her to see. The reverie is broken by the appearance of the baby's mother, 'his wife came along and he's holding the baby up'. This enacting of a family - Gail, this man and a dangling baby - is shattered by the entrance of 'the real' mother.

For Debbie, Gail and David and others preparing for family life in a consumer context involves encountering the difference of making a family through adoption. In these consumer practices, which include revealing their prospective adoptive status, there is also the opportunity to try out a new identity. It seems that part of that process involves intimate and transitory connections with strangers. Shop assistants, taxi drivers and other shoppers are drawn into these practices. These bystanders are, for the most part, an engaged and willing audience. In the retelling of these stories these strangers become integral to the overall performance. It is Debbie who draws attention to just how collaborative a process this is. She is a single woman but she is not alone in this preparatory work. Debbie has sought the advice of girls working in shops, and has relied on a 'guy' driving a taxi to help her navigate and move with her new purchases. These are interactions with strangers that she initiates, that are helpful to Debbie in her preparation work. She may be encountering the difference of making a family through adoption but she does not seem diminished by it. In her assertive demands of the taxi driver she seems powerful. She is exposed in these interactions as a deviant from the norm. She is a prospective single adoptive mother. In the accounts she shares with me the exposure of her deviancy is laughed off.

As an assessing social worker, I might note how Debbie's actions indicate her resourcefulness, her willingness to ask for help, her acceptance of the distinctive 'open' features of an adoptive family and her motivation. She is willing to enter into new relationships and what could be seen as a vulnerability (being without a partner) is revealed to be nothing of the sort. In her telling of these encounters she is also inviting me into these preparations. She does not hold these connections to herself and they are given more weight and substance in the storying process. These transitory connections become something important in the imagined family to come. In this liminal space this openness is required of her, but in adoption this level of openness is also hugely risky.

### **Disintegration**

Yesterday we all received surprising news about Lily's hearing and the prognosis – Debbie and Jane took her to an audiology appointment. She has lost hearing in her left ear as well as the right, and there was mention of her sight possibly being affected – it was a big shock for Debbie, and it seems that the health information has been confusing and at odds – which has added to her sense of shock. So, we're putting the introductions on hold, as Debbie needs some space to think clearly (Email from Claire to Louise March 2016).

This match, the placement of Lily with Debbie, is halted after this new medical information emerges. The news is desperately sad and as Claire says it is 'a big shock'. All the plans are now thrown out as space is made to 'think clearly' about this new information and what it might mean. Claire will visit Debbie later that day. In this email she advises that it is not appropriate for me to attend due to the extent of Debbie's distress. I am relieved not to be going. The next observation that I am invited to is a meeting between Claire, Zara and Debbie some weeks later where (as I understand it) further discussion about Lily will take place. In Observation 5 I arrive at the meeting under the assumption that the topic for discussion will be Lily. From what I have pieced together the contraction of a virus in utero has had life changing consequences for this child. In my mind, the problems to be thought about rest with Lily's body. I have some catching up to do. Debbie's body is also causing concern.

On that Monday when I visited I was so worried about you Debbie, it was like you're thinking brain had been completely overtaken by emotion and you had completely shut down. I asked you what I could do for you and you just slumped in the chair with your head down. I wanted to just get you out of that situation, to rescue you.

Do you remember? You were holding Lily and she was on your lap facing outwards and she was screaming and thrashing. You were talking over her at me and it was like she wasn't there. You seemed unable to manage your own feelings or recognize her feelings. I know it was stressful and we were all distressed but in that moment, you seemed to just fall in on yourself. I had to say to you 'Debbie we need to concentrate on Lily now' and I had to come over to you and take her and try and comfort her. Do you remember? Then afterwards you were just slumped in the chair and Lily was really distressed and it was like you had switched off (Zara, Observation Record 5).

This meeting is, from my perspective, as shocking as the news about Lily. The first part is fairly relaxed and reflective. There is a team feel between Debbie, Zara and Claire (and me). The second part is almost unbearable. The team is reconfigured. It is now Zara and Claire who are working together. Debbie and I are sitting together on a sofa. Claire is positioned on a chair across from us. Zara is sitting on a chair to the right of where we are sitting. In her intervention Zara encourages Debbie to engage with what happened by re-counting the event. I think of Lily 'screaming and thrashing', an unresponsive Debbie 'slumped in a chair' who has completely 'shut down'. It is a horrible image. I am now slumped on the sofa and I want it to stop. Debbie's response to Zara's questions is confused. She sounds upset and at times lost for words. Claire lets Zara take the lead. I have to resist the urge to take Debbie's hand and drag her out. Like Zara, in her recollection of the event, I want to get Debbie 'out of that situation, to rescue' her.

Scrutiny of Debbie's performance in this matching process has not, up until now, been 'in the foreground', although it has always been 'present' (Noordegraaf, et al., 2008a, p.325). In Observation 5 it is in the foreground and Debbie's performance is being directly questioned by these leading actors. She is found wanting. With my practitioner hat on her responses are not reassuring. She seems unable to make sense of what happened and what is happening. In this observation role I am also stunned. When it's over and we leave, Debbie and I both walk out together. Not much is said as we unlock our bikes and say goodbye. I fiddle with my bike to allow her time to cycle away. Instead of heading home to immediately write up the observation I cycle to a café and stare out the window. Later, when I can think and write, I process the information provided by Zara in Observation 5. Zara has informed Debbie that her match with Lily is not going ahead whilst Debbie is actually holding Lily, sitting in Jane's house. Debbie had been expected to absorb this information and then at some point physically hand Lily back to Jane, with no guarantee she would see her again. To immediately stop being Lily's Mummy. It is an incident that is



redolent of the stories told in the ASG, 'as adopters we were just these people who would take children' (Pauline, ASG). This is disturbing and confusing. I like Zara. I experience her as skilled and empathic. Why would she be deliberately cruel? I begin to analyze the data in which Zara features. Through this analysis it becomes apparent that in her work Zara is required to deliver unwanted news in all kinds of situations.

...the call I got just before panel really distracted me. I've just been told a Dad is dead. He died on Sunday night. Claire asks which children? And Zara says 'Leah and Chloe, the twins, and their brother Paul'. Claire says 'I was Paul's social worker when he was a baby' Zara says I need to tell them, I had better cancel ... Claire says 'oh no. How old are they now?' Zara responds 'the twins are 13 and Paul is 10'. Claire says 'oh no' and they both stop outside the office. Zara says 'I better cancel my meeting ... do I get them out of school to tell them?' (Observation Record 3)

Zara has been about to enter the Panel where Debbie and Lily's match is to be considered when she is thrown by unwanted and life changing information. How can it be possible to attend to the form-of-process that unites Debbie and Lily when you are attending to a form-of-process whereby children are bereaved of their father? This is the terrain a social worker navigates. Zara works directly with children who have been subject to turmoil and may continue to experience traumatic relational experiences. She is a named social worker for (probably) a dozen or more children. Some of these children will be in transition entering foster care, moving from foster care, returning to birth families. These transitions are subjectively significant for the child concerned. They are all also socially significant given the state's investment and the quest for permanence. Zara is always encountering liminal hot spots and distressing situations. She is working with a lot of noise and a lot of feelings. Is it any wonder then that she cannot recognize that Debbie is in the midst of a life-changing transformation? Is attunement a constant struggle?

Zara is required to encounter liminality and to act authoritatively in the face of uncertainty and distress. These encounters 'overlap temporally and spatially' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.154). Jane tells us (in Observation Record 3) that Zara popped into see Lily after telling the twins of their father's death. It seems that they only live a short distance from her house and Jane knows their foster carer. The day after Zara tells 'Leah and Chloe, the twins, and their brother Paul' that their father is dead she is due to attend the Introductory Planning meeting for Lily. Claire informs us, as we gather for that meeting that, 'Zara can't make it she has a migraine' (Observation Record 3). In this open-plan system boundaries are few and far between.

### **Vulnerable Bodies and Bodies on the Move**

'I just collapsed with a virus and didn't get out of bed for a week. I guess these things manifest themselves through your whole being' (Debbie, Observation Record 5). Zara has a migraine after delivering news that a father is dead. Debbie collapses and is bed-ridden following the end of her relationship with Lily. In the ASG all the participants could recollect physical and mental illness as part of their experiences of becoming mothers through adoption. This was sometimes in the context of things going wrong (matches not progressing) but also when things had gone relatively smoothly.

Dawn: when I came to the day of taking our boys, I was really really poorly and now I couldn't not go and pick them up and stupidly though really, because I spent the next 24 hours in bed.

Pauline: Yes, I wasn't well either.

Andrea: Stress (ASG).

The presence of illness does not seem noteworthy. It is an expected aspect of the process (see also Debbie's, 'I guess these things manifest themselves through your whole being'). Debbie is not surprised that in the aftermath of this aborted matching she is rendered incapable of functioning. Pauline and Andrea respond to Dawn's recounting of what must have been a horrible way to start her family life with the equivalent of verbal shrugs. As if to say, 'of course, you got ill, I did too' (the inference being doesn't everyone?). The cause is obvious and it requires just one word, 'Stress'. No elaboration is offered or needed. The illnesses described by the women in this study are not the stuff of minor coughs or colds. They have an impact that leaves them unable to function.

I think it's difficult to understand how absolutely mind-numbingly terrified you are as a prospective adopter. I remember when we'd go up to Edinburgh and we met the social worker and the foster carer outside the hospital, for some reason we had to meet the doctor in the hospital before we went to meet the the...baby, and they wanted our marriage certificate for some reason I think. I can't remember. I haven't got it, that's it and I.... From that moment on my brain wouldn't work. And it is... You know, you're no longer a normal thinking person (Edwina, ASG).

Edwina's description of the impact on her is markedly similar to, and redolent of, Debbie's. These are incidences which are overwhelming and unbearable. Edwina is recounting an event etched in her mind from over twenty years ago. She describes it as 'mind-numbing' and then experiences elements of that mind-numbing in the retelling, 'I haven't got it, that's it and I...' She briefly loses her train of thought and then recovers. 'From that moment on

my brain wouldn't work. And it is... You know, you're no longer a normal thinking person'. These are gaps in memory and in thinking that resonate with the description of a 'mind-numbing' experience.

We had an adoption that didn't go through with a little boy who we did see, meet, it didn't work for one reason and another and we had a letter from the social worker afterwards (this is a long time ago) telling me the stress involved had almost hospitalized her (Gail, ASG).

I mean I had, like, a mini breakdown really. I have a loss of memory for that week, I have no idea what happened because he went back, and err... yeah because it was just too awful (Gail, ASG).

The discussion reveals another casualty and a body rendered incapacitated. Actually, it reveals two, but Gail cannot at first acknowledge that, like the social worker, she is devastated by the experience. Initially she introduces this event to the group when the focus of the discussion is the inappropriate over-sharing of information. This is another example of social workers not being up to the job. She says of the match with 'a little boy' that 'it didn't work for one reason or another'. She also says that 'we did see, meet' this boy. Gail and her husband would have done much more than 'see, meet' a boy. They had begun to make a family with this boy, and to imagine him their son. He would have been introduced to them as his new family. Gail cannot at first acknowledge the significance of, or the distress, involved in this experience. It is only later in the discussion that she is able to acknowledge her own experience, 'I mean I had, like, a mini breakdown really'. It is a vulnerability that can only be touched on. The words 'like' and then 'mini' work to downplay her experience but she's not fooling anyone. She has completely lost any memory of the week in which it all happened, because 'it was just too awful'. Her mind has worked hard for all these years to protect her and she still does not recall what happened. There is nothing 'mini' about this experience or its impact. Gail has not shared this experience in 20 years of meeting and talking about family life with these women.

I feel better, calmer and more myself. I've been so upset and anxious. I've been ill, I couldn't sleep. I think actually I've been grieving for her and well I went on holiday last week and I just decided. It just made sense. I think I've been coming to that decision and then just being away helped me too (Debbie, Observation Record 6).

Debbie links her experiences in the matching process with her illness and with a holiday. The inference is that she needed to escape in order to recover and it worked, 'being away helped me'. Across the data set holidays serve to aid recovery. 'I feel better, calmer and

more myself'. Jane has experienced matching before and has a holiday prearranged, she is forearmed, 'Look we need this holiday' (Jane, Observation Record, 3). Claire too has a holiday booked during the match. Andrea (ASG) recalled that 'what we did pretty much as soon as they moved in was go on holiday with my brother and his wife and their four children'. Pauline says, 'I remember Kate's social worker telling us I'm going to Australia after this, and she did'. Jacqui (in MMG 3) laughingly observes that holidays taken during matching might be a niche area for a future PhD study.

Greco and Stenner (2017) suggest that a 'minimally liminal paradox can be easily and quickly *deparadoxified* in two obvious ways. It can be *spatialised* ...or it can be *temporalised*' (p.154). They use an example of a phone call that interrupts a host at a dinner party. The noise from the party interrupts the phone conversation and the noise from the phone means the host cannot attend to the conversation of the dinner party. Here in this 'minimally liminal paradox' things are easily resolved. The host can move to another room to take the call or they can re-arrange the phone conversation. In the matching practices present in this data set holidays can be seen through this lens; they function as a strategy to exit a highly affective zone. In this process, which takes place in this open plan system, boundaries are necessary but they have to be created. Jane, for example, uses both space and time to deparadoxify her situation. She will have her holiday, it will take place when she has planned and it will last for 2 weeks. She will not budge from this. Through this holiday she removes herself. On holiday she will attend to the realigned family and no, she is not prepared to see Lily and Debbie during this time. Debbie needs to be free of this space too. She is in limbo as the match for Lily is neither on nor off. She takes a holiday and removes herself from her home with its traces of Lily. She becomes Debbie again, 'I am more myself'. These strategies are only partially successful. These spaces are entered again on their return from holiday.

...in most societies, the different forms of social process are allocated their own spatial territory, and hence a transition from one to another is typically also a territorial move... Put abstractly, restoring boundaries allows each successive event in the form-of-process to be grasped as a coherent gestalt (p.154).

The movement of Lily to Debbie will involve a 'territorial transition'. The whole planning process pays close attention to these territorial transitions. The planning tool tries as best it can to impose boundaries. Contact should be this long, take place in this space, these are the things to say and not to say. It attempts to provide a structure. It provides a map of

some kind. Like all maps it is a political beast and is laden with power relations. Claire, in her interview, reveals that Jane ignores its directions. It seems she was always going her own way. Jane can do her job and she can cope with a territorial transition (under certain conditions). She is asked to see Lily directly after the move and to be a support to this new family in their new spatial territory. This is just too much. What is too difficult to bear (for everyone) is being asked to *stay* in a liminal hot spot.

### **Afterword**

The more a non-biological mother comes to terms with her own life and losses, the more she will be able to be cracked wide open as a mother, capable of loving a child for who she/he is rather than needing the child to fulfil a specific identity in her fantasy life (Waterman, 2003, pp. 57-58).

The aim in matching and placing children is to initiate a process in which 'she will be able to be cracked wide open' (ibid). In this chapter this process of cracking open has been honed in on. My analysis suggests that the transformation required in becoming a mother through adoption is enriching, disorientating and highly performative. It is also hugely risky. I return to the concepts at our disposal (matching and placement) and am struck by their limitedness. There is no indication that somebody/everybody might be cracked wide open. To be cracked wide open means running the risk of destruction.

In this analysis the matching process is managed and endured through the creation of boundaries provided by time and space. Boundaries are necessary. 'Spacing and timing are ...ways of supplying boundaries that return liminal paradox to an orthodox logic of either/or' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.154). Social work practices (including talking, meetings, plans, making books etc) provide important and necessary markers for prospective parents as rites of passage. Temporal and spatial boundaries are shown to work as protective strategies but there are problems with this when they are used to obscure vulnerability and deny complexity.

## Chapter 7: Precarious Bodies

Claire 'There are things in there that belong to Lily? I guess I'll need her photograph back too'. Debbie 'Err... yes. Well of course. Do you want to come and get it?' Claire 'Is that ok, If we go in the bedroom now?' Debbie, 'yes we should. Come on I need to.' Debbie stands up, so does Claire and they walk out the room. I follow them up the stairs and we walk onto the hallway. All the rooms have open doorways except for one. Debbie leads the way, then Claire and then me. She opens the door and we follow her in. We stand in a small box room, with a cot. Lots of toys and girls clothes. There is a photograph of Lily on the wall. Debbie reaches up and takes it down and passes it to Claire. We all look at the photograph of Lily. She has a gummy smile and fluffy hair. Debbie and Claire look at each other and then they hug. I look at my feet. They pull apart and Debbie says 'will you look for a new family for her?' Claire looks at the photo and nods her head, 'Yes and I will find her a family'. Debbie says 'Good' (Observation Record 6).

This scene takes place at the end of a meeting at Debbie's house. It is 2 months since Lily and Debbie first met. Claire, myself and Debbie have been sitting in Debbie's living room for an hour or so. Claire and Debbie have been discussing ending the match/union with Lily. Debbie would like to be considered for another child. Claire has suggested that they will all need some time before any decisions are made, perhaps a few months. Debbie would like a meeting in a month's time. As the meeting draws to an end Claire asks about Lily's things and the scene that opens the chapter takes place.

A practice ... is a fairly consistent way of doing something, deploying certain objects, knowledges, bodily gestures and emotions. It is through practices that social relations and institutions happen, and through practices that subject positions and identities are performed (Rose, 2010, p.18).

This analysis chapter takes forward Rose's (2010) approach. Using her work, through which family photographs are understood to be objects embedded in complex social practices, I begin by exploring how Claire and Debbie's subject positions in relation to each other and to Lily are mobilized in this scene. I build on this analysis to consider the role of the practitioner, her work and her responsibilities. In this discussion questions of liminality arise, generate noise and are navigated. In the latter section the role of the agency (its actors and its institutional arms) and the influence of policy directions are examined in relation to the practitioners' work and to questions of liminality. Data from interviews, field notes, emails and the observations are considered alongside the group data (specifically the analytic insights they contribute). Throughout the chapter, provocations in the data set (including moments of awkwardness, sadness and exuberance) are honed in on. This Lorenzian approach uses provocations as entry points to broaden the analysis and

to consider the ways through which subjective experience may reflect social/cultural/political dynamics (Froggett et al., 2014). In this chapter, Lily can sometimes be glimpsed, just on the edge of the set.

### **Who are we?**

Claire says 'What's happening with Lily's room, sorry I mean your room?' Debbie 'Well, to be honest I haven't been in it since the introductions stopped. I've shut the door and I haven't been in again... Claire 'Is that ok- if we go in the bedroom now?' Debbie, 'yes we should. Come on I need to' (Observation Record 6).

Claire misses a beat here, 'What's happening with Lily's room? Sorry, I mean your room'. It's hard to adjust to the bedroom not being Lily's room, but in missing a beat she connects to Debbie's own state of mind. Since the introductions have stopped this bedroom has remained shut off from the rest of her home. The room is still Lily's and must be reclaimed by Debbie as her own. Lily's things must also be reclaimed. Claire will 'need her photograph back' and if that's ok with Debbie she will take it 'now'. Debbie cannot be left in this liminal state in which the match/union with Lily remains a distant and unlikely possibility. It is a state of existence which has 'the character of a void which is both a vacuum (with minimum concrete actuality) and a plenum (with all potentials at play...)' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160). Debbie responds to Claire's request with, 'yes we should. Come on I need to.' Claire and Debbie are working together. The materiality of the photograph is helpful in this process. It is used to stabilize uncertainty and to help Debbie reconcile her experiences. The closed bedroom suggests that Debbie is stuck, she is paralyzed by this state of existence, '...stuck in transition from one circle to the next' (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.149). Claire's role is to help Debbie escape this paralysis and yes they will need to open that bedroom door.

Claire is decisive about this object and she is decisive about time. Boundaries are needed in this situation. The MMG2 express their relief when Claire removes the photograph; something is being restored. Debbie will have no further role in Lily's life but Claire does. Claire re-establishes her commitment and her role as a family finder to Lily as she holds and looks at the photograph. In response to Debbie's question, 'Will you look for a new family for her?' Claire responds physically, she 'nods her head' and answers affirmatively without hesitation 'Yes and I will find her a family'. Debbie's response to Claire's decisiveness and authority is an unequivocal 'Good'.

..there's something about attending to the feeling, even in a kind of physical way, that brings them back to the child, isn't there? So they go, at that moment Debbie says will you find her a family? So suddenly, the real Lily comes into the room... (Marie, MMG2).

The group reflect that in the discussion leading up to the handover of the photograph, a sense of Lily as a real person had been largely absent. There is also for the group too much uncertainty emitting from Claire. They note her vacillation about when to meet with Debbie. Claire should just decide when the next meeting is. For the group it is only in the moment with the photograph that Lily feels present. Claire uses her authority in this exchange. Is it through this authority that Lily is brought into focus? The photograph, just as in its first appearance in the social work office, pulls us in; 'we all look at the photograph of Lily' (ibid). It is through the photograph that Claire exerts her authority and it is through the photograph that sadness is expressed. I watch as Lily's photograph is passed between Debbie and Claire. I look at my feet whilst they hug. To look at my feet I have to lower my eyes. The family that we all imagined has not come to be. In this moment it feels like something died.

I felt like I was watching a funeral, like when people stand as the coffin is carried from the hearse, a wake following a stillbirth? (Field note 8)

The material space and its objects, specifically Lily's photograph, are used to enact a ceremony of sorts. This is needed because what has occurred is significant and must be marked in some way. There are no established rites of passage for this event, so one has to be created.

### **Kind of grieving**

But you know, that really reminds me, and... I suddenly began to think about an adoption breakdown that I had. The child had been there for a few weeks, the baby, and I'm thinking about, you know... And the [inaudible] distraught, how devastating it is for the social worker, for the team. And it's so painful. I mean, as I begin to talk about it, I have flashbacks, you know? And this was years ago and I've had other placements. And that it's almost... It's almost too... Because the social worker has been part of creating that placement and has been on that journey as well, that it's almost... You're so... It's so painful to talk about. It's that you're almost not the person, you know? You're sent in to go and explore with her what's happened, but actually, you're also kind of grieving (Jenny, MMG2).

Jenny (responding to Observation Record 6) recalls her own experience of a family that did not come to be. Her account and the way she describes it resonates with the way memories



were described by the women in the ASG; She says 'as I begin to talk about it, I have flashbacks, you know, and this was years ago'. She expresses surprise that the memory emerges and has such visceral effects after so many years. The word she uses is 'flashback'; defined as 'a short part of a film, story, or play that goes back to events in the past' involving 'a sudden, clear memory of a past event or time, usually one that was bad' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). Jenny is linking drama with trauma and with time. A flashback is an intrusive memory. Jenny does not or cannot reveal any of the details of that memory. She tells us something of the event, enough of a narrative to work with, but this is a flashback and is, as such, a short part of a bigger story. When Jenny talks about the 'flashback' she stumbles over her words and there are gaps in her speech, 'and that it's almost... It's almost too...' and in the next sentence 'that it's almost... you're so... It's so painful to talk about'. The difficulty in talking is both in the past and in the present.

In the ASG Gail describes herself as 'And it is... You know, you're no longer a normal thinking person'. Zara's description of Debbie's presentation is strikingly similar, 'it was like you're thinking brain had been completely overtaken by emotion and you had completely shut down'. Debbie, in describing her recovery from these experiences, also says, 'I feel better, calmer and more myself'. Within all descriptions, there is the inference that an experience has been so momentous that as reaction parts of the body simply stopped working. For a time people became unrecognizable to themselves and to others.

It's so painful to talk about. It's that you're almost not the person, you know? You're sent in to go and explore with her what's happened, but actually, you're also kind of grieving (Jenny, MMG2).

Is Jenny talking in the first person? Does she mean that any practitioner in this situation is 'almost not the person? Is this about me/she or us? The confusion is in the conflating of experience, but perhaps the distinction is not important in the context of a 'flashback', when affect travels in this way, when experiences are similar and identifications so strong.

Jenny is the only group member (in MMG2) still practicing as an adoption social worker and is perhaps closest to Claire's position. For Jenny being close to an abortive/abandoned and nearly adoptive family means being exposed to grief. Although she is unable to fully claim the experience for herself or for Claire, 'you're also kind of grieving'. Here, 'kind of' works to downplay the experience. Redolent of Gail's description in the ASG, 'like, a mini

breakdown really', this vulnerability can only be touched on. Jenny suggests that as a practitioner, 'you're sent in to go and explore with her what's happened'. The practitioner is 'sent in', but what is she sent into and what is she sent in to do exactly? According to Jenny the practitioner must 'explore with her what's happened'. In Observation 6 this involves collecting up transformative objects (that marked the beginning of a family). It necessitates physical work (carrying these objects and hugging Debbie). It involves cognitive work; Claire must be investigative and analytical (because she must explore and make sense of events in order to inform future planning). She must be curious, sensitive and empathic, because she must do this work *with* Debbie, to 'explore with her', and not to her. To explore an upsetting situation with someone involves emotional labour and relational skills. All in all it's a lot of work.

Claire's arrival at Debbie's house on the day of Observation 6 suggests it might be too much work. She arrives and tells us that she's late because she drove past the house; actually she drove too far west. In driving past the house Claire is also taking the same road Jane had planned to take on the day of Lily's move; both women heading west. The Many Minds group reflects on what Claire's late arrival might mean.

David: And I told myself, she might have wanted to have kept going, into the west...

Marie: Yes.

David: Just not have to think about anything (MMG2).

Claire has been 'sent in' through her role and her duties as Debbie's social worker to undertake the work she is required to do. She drives past the house, a house she has visited countless times over the course of a year or more. As David suggests 'she might have wanted to have kept going'.

Throughout the data set there are a plethora of potential outcomes and very little certainty. All the research participants express their discomfort at the level of uncertainty at some point during the research. Claire is in a difficult position in this regard. She is an authority figure charged with decision making. Jane already had her plans 'to go west' in place before Debbie and Lily had even met. For Jane and Claire to go west might allow them, as David suggests, 'not to have to think about anything': to escape this 'affective volatility' (p.160). Claire's (seeming) reluctance to begin the work might also be to do with another job she is required to do at this visit. She must use her authority, to help end a family. The imagined family of Debbie and Lily is lost. 'To go west' also means to; 'be killed or lost: Meet with

disaster' (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.b). Claire now has an important role in killing this fantasy family; the family she had been working so hard to realize. Claire is not allowed to keep going west. She is being 'sent in'. She turns the car around and comes back. It takes her until the end of the meeting, but she does her job. She takes Lily's photograph and this family is no more.

### **Protective Practice**

At the end of my interview with Claire I comment on the demands of her role. She has fitted our interview in between appointments and is leaving immediately afterwards to visit adopters who are being matched with a child. Claire, in response, reflects on her strategies for managing the emotional demands of the job.

Claire: ...but I suppose you'd you know you would have to protect yourself against that everywhere, most people, everyone... it would be a normal sort of response wouldn't? To protect yourself in some way against of um being you know devastating or...

Louise: You mean Debbie would or you would or..?

Claire: I mean I am thinking for everyone, I think adopters you know but also workers... yeah so you are I don't know you are constantly going a bit closer and then sort of a bit back and a bit closer, you know, because it would be no good if you were in that with them (Claire, Interview).

There is a conflating of experience 'you would have to protect yourself against that everywhere, most people, everyone...'. Those questions again, "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" Claire recognizes the risks and the potential for devastation for herself, and for others; 'I am thinking for everyone'. There is a collective need for defences, 'you have to protect yourself'. Jenny's 'almost' and 'kind of' grieving are given further clarity here. To grieve or to fully acknowledge grief would mean to be 'in that with them', to lose sight of who you are. To do that results in the kind of experiences relayed by the women in the ASG, 'We had a letter from the social worker afterwards... telling me the stress involved had hospitalised her' (Gail, ASG). This is tricky then, this work, which involves 'going a bit closer and then sort of back a bit and a bit closer'. Gail's social worker got too close.

In Observation 6 Claire is seen to be defended; 'She's so like, removed, isn't she?' (Marie, MMG 2). Why is she not engaging with feelings here? The dialogue between Claire and Debbie is deemed to be stilted and avoidant. Marie is bored by some of the discussion. The group notes a number of key moments where opportunities for delving deeper are not

taken, sometimes by Claire and sometimes by Debbie. 'There's a lot of dancing around' (Marie, MMG2).

It becomes very procedural, doesn't it? And then Claire almost defends... Right at the beginning there's a sense that Claire defends against any emotional talk by, can you tell me about the decision making process? So she already... There's a real sense of cutting out, yes, the question of how are you feeling, by you know, you know, how can you make sure nobody talks about feelings (Jenny, MMG2).

Following the group's lead I follow Claire's lead through the written record. In Observation 6 in her questions and in her responses Claire does, as the group suggests, guard against explorations of emotion. She begins, 'Can you tell me about your decision-making process?', and Debbie follows her lead. Debbie then talks about decision making and processes. She says at one point 'I want to go forward with another placement' but Claire corrects her; 'You mean with becoming a Mum?' Claire is supporting and protecting Debbie in this scene but something happens in this moment. Debbie's use of the word 'placement' seems to be provocative. Through this provocation Claire's role as a social worker, charged with pursuing permanence, is mobilized. If her relationship with Debbie is to continue she must be confident that Debbie can and wants to be a maternal figure to a child. She can allow Debbie to use language that distances herself from the loss of Lily but she has to respond to 'I want to go forward with another placement'. Claire needs clarification. She addresses the, "Who am I?" question by challenging Debbie, "Who are you?" A placement provider or a mother?

I mean, that's... You don't get a sense that this is worrying about children, a child, really it kind of feels as though Lily's evaporated. So the kind of loss of... The ending of her relationship and whatever kind of feelings, however long it may have lasted, it feels that it's just not a part of... So you've not, you've not kind of started this kind of... The power of trying to make a connection with a vulnerable child... That's really what this... None of this really allows that that is fundamentally what has been brought to an end (David, MMG2).

The group reflecting on both Claire and Debbie's language and the interplay between them are disturbed. Where is Lily in this? Why is Debbie not expressing her feelings? What are her feelings? Where is the grief? Does Debbie really want to be a Mum? (MMG2 are also provoked by the word 'placement'); 'it's almost like she's removed herself from the reality of what she's embarking on, and it's become this very cognitive, rational thing' (Marie, MMG2).

In Observation 5, in contrast, Zara's critique seems to be based on Debbie being too emotional; of her being swamped by emotions. In the previous chapter I wondered if Zara understands Debbie to be, and treats her, as someone solely providing a service. She seems not to recognize that Debbie is also a woman on the threshold of becoming a mother to Lily. The inherent tensions of these two positions (service provider/mother-to-be to a child) are recognized, in the literature, as producing ambiguity in contemporary adoption policy and practice (Hart and Luckock, 2004). Does Zara defend herself against this tension by ignoring it? Just who is Debbie to Zara? Zara delivers terrible news to Debbie and Lily. A reminder of that news; Lily is losing her sight and hearing and these developments indicate a degenerative condition with an unknown prognosis. Debbie may not see her again. Debbie is not defended or protected when she receives this news and nor is Lily. She is holding Lily in her arms in Jane's house. In her collapse she endangers Lily and Zara has to intervene. In this scene, it seems that multiple pressures, avoidance and ambivalence about adoption coalesce in the practice-mind-set. Is it that, caught up in a system characterized by permanent liminality, Zara cannot attune to Debbie or Lily in that moment?

In Observation 5 in the aftermath of her collapse Zara and Claire seek to understand Debbie's response. The meeting, from my perspective, is confusing and upsetting. I don't know what's going on. Claire and Zara's alignment and Debbie's incoherent responses disturb my understanding of who these actors are. As I slump into the sofa I experience a simultaneous sense of paralysis and an overwhelming desire to flee. It is only later that I can consider the strength of my identification with Debbie. Claire, in her interview, describes that meeting as 'excruciating'. That was my experience too. Perhaps then Claire, in Observation 6, knowing the risks, provides Debbie with the means in which to protect herself - a language and concepts devoid of feeling. With the gift of this language is Claire 'thinking for everyone' and protecting the three of us from another 'excruciating' encounter? I appreciate her efforts because even with the level of protection afforded by the avoidance tactics we are close to an 'excruciating' encounter; 'I remember feeling very happy to be moving on very quickly from all the really difficult things' (Louise, MMG2). As we leave the house at the end of the visit Debbie suggests she might go for a walk.

Actually, even Debbie wants to get out of the house, doesn't she? And Louise says yes, you should definitely, that will be good. This is... At the start, you're like, what a lovely house. And now you're like, get out of the house, get away from this house. (Marie, MMG2)

### **What a lovely house**

Claire is asking Debbie how she is and they are chatting. The kitchen is small and so I turn and go into the living/dining room (Observation Record 6).

In most of the observations I have spent time alone with Debbie as we wait for Claire. In Observation 6 Debbie and I have talked about tea and property and plants. I have arrived earlier than Claire and I have spent time in the kitchen with Debbie before her arrival. In some ways the kitchen functions like the reception of the social work office; it is a liminal space. In this research encounter the 'real' talk will happen later with Claire in the living room. Claire's arrival signals a shift which changes the dynamics of the kitchen. The kitchen is not comfortable anymore. Is it safe? I move out of the kitchen almost immediately. I then struggle to find somewhere to sit that will accommodate the three of us.

There is a round table and I sit at the table, I realize there is a huge mirror on the wall and I move so my back is to it. There are some prints on the wall and the bookshelf contains large books on design and art. Claire and Debbie come into the room and I say 'do you want to sit here? I've moved so my back is to the mirror but that means you two will be facing it'. Debbie says 'Err well we usually sit in the living room on the sofa when there's two of us'. I say 'Well shall we go in there?' Debbie and Claire look in the living room and then back to the table. Claire says 'yes come on lets go in here' (Observation Record 6).

In this observation three is a crowd. My presence and the space available do not quite work. We are all determined to avoid the mirror. A sense of intrusiveness is tangible, more than the low level awkwardness that has characterized the previous observations. This visit is a difficult one but there have been other difficult meetings. This is the sixth observation and Claire has specifically invited me after asking Debbie's permission. Furthermore they explicitly invite me to be an observer at their next meeting. I feel welcome in my observation role. Where then does the forcefulness of this feeling of intrusion come from?

I went on holiday last week and I just decided. It just made sense. I think I've been coming to that decision and then just being away helped me too.' Claire puts her tea down and turns her body towards Debbie, 'Can I ask? Did you go on holiday with Bob?' Debbie 'Yes, Yes I did'. I pick up my tea. Claire, 'Ok so are you two together?' Debbie 'Yes we are' (Observation Record 6).

Debbie at Claire's prompting reveals a secret. There is someone else pushing for thinking space. Has Bob been the intrusive presence? Can he be accommodated? How will things be aligned? This is decidedly uncomfortable. My response to an awkward situation is to 'pick up my tea'. Claire wants a straight answer to this question (she 'puts her tea down'). There is to be no hedging about here. Debbie answers directly, 'Yes, yes I did'.

Tea, kitchens, and the role of those sort of domestic things figures quite a lot in that first section. And you talk about who picks up their cup and put it down, and it feels like there's something about the way that tea and cups, and trying to make it kind of normal, is going on. But also sort of a way of protecting as well against something pretty horrible. There's a sort of comfort, I guess is what I'm looking for, the word comfort (Marie, MMG2).

Perhaps comfort is what we're all 'looking for'? In each of the observations I attend at the social work office Claire makes a fresh pot of coffee. This has taken on a familiarity and is something I look forward to in the field work. I have even changed my domestic habits in response. On the morning of an observation I just have a tea instead of a tea followed by a strong coffee. I can rely on Claire to make me a real coffee. On the morning of the Matching Panel Claire is interrupted making the drinks and forgets my coffee. At our next meeting she apologizes. Amongst all her work she remembers this. There is something about the way in which drinks are used and talked about that evokes (for me and maybe for others) a strong sense of the maternal.

'Can I get you a coffee? Warm milk?' 'Yes please' Debbie and I both say...Claire says 'Zara do you want a coffee' Zara says 'Oh yes please, is it real? Wow The adoption team is so much nicer than the fieldwork team so much more nurturing' (Observation Record 5).

Is Claire taking on the mantle of carer for everyone? Is that the function of the adoption team in this permanence project, to make it all alright? She even warms our milk. Hot drinks provide a comfort and familiarity. They remind me of infancy and familial relations. Culturally 'more tea' or 'let's have a nice cup of tea' are also euphemisms for avoidance, as in let's drink tea and not talk about difficult stuff. Claire puts down her tea to challenge Debbie. In response I sink into the sofa and cradle mine.

### **A closed door**

Once humans get close to each other, their internal worlds are in a dynamic relation to each other. All the earlier experiences of each member of any significant intimate relationship (dyad, triad, family, group, etc.) contribute to the landscape of the new relationship. Events in the present can throw into prominence troubling

aspects of the past, both providing a chance for a new way forward but also often engendering confusion and distress (Rustin, 2008, p.81).

Rustin is exploring the dynamics of adoptive family life years after a matching process. With this description she could also be describing the landscape of Claire's work place. When Jenny talks about being 'sent in' this is where practitioners are expected to go. In Observation 6 the landscape is not safe. There are too many humans too 'close to each other'. The dynamic relation of internal worlds, the multiple troubling aspects of the past and the loss of 'a new way forward' (envisioned by the joining of Lily and Debbie) creates a precarious working environment. Claire is required as part of her role to try and make sense of events in order to plan for the future. In Observation 6 there is a sense that everything is up in the air and the threads are too entangled. It is just not possible to make sense of everything in the moment. Yet they must be thought about and it seems that Claire uses our interview space to untangle some of these threads. On the morning of the interview she is busy and I am late but this is not a deterrent. Claire has work to do and she gets on with it. She is asked to talk about the story of her relationship with Debbie and begins by saying, 'I think it sort of already, it was... it came with history before I met her and she met me...' The past looms large, 'before I met her and she met me'.

Sexual abuse is an experience that resides on a continuum of the 'unsaid to the unsayable' (Hollway and Froggett, 2012, para.3.9). Seven months into the research and finally the unsaid is named. Claire does this within the first minute of the interview, suggesting that it is something that has been close to the surface. Even so it is not easy; 'During that sort of initial bit Debbie had disclosed um stuff about her past um sexual abuse from her father' (Claire, Interview). The sexual abuse is initially 'um stuff, she then pushes through to name it, 'um sexual abuse from her father'. This is something that needed to be spoken about. Drawing on Lorenzer's work Hollway and Froggett (2012) describe the unacknowledged as having a 'yearning quality' that 'presses into consciousness' (para. 7.39). In the collective and experiential thinking of MMG2 (who have no knowledge of the sexual abuse) is it this that 'presses into consciousness' and comes within reach of our imaginations?

Angela: And you think, you know, who hasn't dealt with what, you know? That kind of comes to mind.

Marie: And the closed door is symbolic of that as well.

Angela: Yes.

Marie: All the doors are open apart from one. It's really...

Jenny: I felt so sad when that part came up.



Marie: Spooky as well.

Jenny: Exactly, a bit ghostly. There was something with the door.

Karen: Which bit?

Jenny: The door...

Marie: Second line.

David: Yes.

Marie: All the rooms have open doors except for one.

Jenny: It kind of starts a short story.

David: Yes.

Marie: Yes.

Jenny Quite an opening line.

Marie: Yes. Like there is a dead child behind the door, you know? (MMG2)

The group sense something is spooky and ghostly – Jenny describes feeling 'so sad'. The abandoned and lost family of Debbie and Lily would suffice as an explanation for strength of these feelings of sadness. But there is more. The sense of intrusion and unease that pervades Observation 6 which was partially explained by the information regarding Bob is now, to my mind, explicated. In my field note (F10) I struggle to understand how this information has been thought about in relation to this match. Did all this thinking take place somewhere else, in meetings and telephone calls to which I was not invited?

For the Greeks, the hidden life demanded invisible ink. They wrote an ordinary letter and in between the lines set out another letter, written in milk. The document looked innocent enough until one who knew better sprinkled coal-dust over it. What the letter had been no longer mattered; what mattered was the life flaring up undetected (Winterson, 1989, p.10).

Claire sprinkles coal-dust and a hidden life flares up. This hidden life had remained undetected but yes, it was there all along 'between the lines'. Everything changes now, what comes to matter is this other life 'flaring up'. The open bedroom doors now come to symbolize the aspects of this relationship that Debbie and Claire allow me to participate in. 'All the rooms have open doors except for one'. As an observer I have been allowed into all these intimate spaces except for one. The room with the dead child has stayed closed. In this fieldwork which has been characterized by provocations (confusion, shocks and surprises) Claire's naming of Debbie's abuse is, for me, at the far end of a continuum. The actual information is upsetting but it is the way these experiences have remained unsaid and unsayable during the observations that shocks me. In England in 2016 'the hidden life demanded invisible ink'.

I am stunned by the news. Not because of that happening but because this has not been spoken about across the entire time I have been with them. All the concern

about Debbie as vulnerable from other professionals, her dissociative episode and her at times sort of surface presentation are being connected in my mind to this childhood experience. I can't believe this has gone unsaid for all these months during all this. Even through Panel, no mention. Like everyone agreed this is horrible let's not think about this ever again. Or let's all think about it but don't talk about it... I feel so confused (Field note 10).

To have the past abuse of Debbie by her father verbally acknowledged and named after all this time is a shock. Even as it demands to be vocalized it remains beyond speech. In the interview with Claire it is only she who talks about it; I can't. I make no reference to it in the interview, at all. In the field note above I refer to the sexual abuse as 'news', as 'that', as 'this' and as a 'childhood experience' (what - like a trip to the pier?). 'It' still cannot be named. The interview with Claire takes place 3 days before the MMG2. I choose Observation 6 for the group to consider (in which the sexual abuse is not acknowledged). I don't share what I know. It's become my secret too and true to form it generates sadness, guilt and confusion.

Thoughts following MMG2. Confused and flat – feel like I dumped a sad story on people in a duplicitous way. So I didn't tell people the 'whole' story about Debbie and Claire where the professionals had made the decision to stop the introductions and also that Debbie has experienced sexual abuse...It seems I'm now keeping the sexual abuse a secret as well (Field note 12).

### **Boundary Work**

Claire: I had been off sick for quite some time. I actually had something, I had cancer. But I had it, it had started off with a condition that which she had had and I actually shared that with her when things got very difficult with her after she sort of pulled away from the introductions with Lily um just as I suppose as a kind of way of just trying to make a connection with her ...

Louise: mm...

Claire: ...and wanting her to feel you know that I didn't want to sort of cast her adrift sort of thing and if I had been here I would have been buddying Lara who was doing her assessments so kind of me not being there and Lara sort being off sick meant that there was quite a lot of, there wasn't well we were short staffed well the team was short staffed so this was my first assessment coming back and coming back to work (Claire, Interview).

Claire links Debbie's sexual abuse, her own experiences of cancer, a pregnant/poorly and ineffective social worker and an understaffed team within the first 5 minutes of the interview. There is no time to waste. Like sexual abuse, cancer is not easy to name. First Claire says, 'I had been off sick for quite some time', then 'I actually had something', then

finally 'I had cancer'. This method of interview requires that I follow Claire's associations but I am struggling here. Claire's cancer and Debbie's sexual abuse are beyond my speech.

Cancer and its treatment are often referred to as a journey, something to be gone through. Much like an adoption assessment is part of a journey, something that must be gone through as a route to parenting. Cancer is not just an experience of sickness, it is a life event; there is a definite before and after. Claire's relationship with Debbie begins immediately after Claire returns to work following her treatment for cancer.

Jenny: Yes, you can't ebb and flow, can you? You kind of have to be this sort of still lake. Because she does say, this is my first assessment coming back, and coming back to work, and when I read that I thought this was her first assessment coming back from potential death, you know, because she then has to put the *and* coming back to work. What was she coming back from the first time?

David: Perhaps the issue is about she is coming back as a human being; she's meant to come back as somebody else (MMG3).

Claire makes the mistake of returning to work as a human being. As David and Jenny observe this is a terrible error. In her interview Claire links her illness with Debbie's difficult initial experience of the adoption assessment. She suggests that 'so kind of me not being there' impacted on the team and their capacity to do their jobs properly. In her mind this state of affairs directly impacted on Debbie. Claire feels responsible for something she can have had no control over. She then describes how she has used her experience of cancer to 'try and make a connection' with Debbie following the end of the match with Lily. To do this Claire shares private information about herself. This information refers to something (an unnamed condition) that she and Debbie share. This information is so private that it can't be named in the interview. The knowledge exists in the space of her relationship with Debbie. Both in her mind and in her practice there is a powerful association between her experience of cancer and her work with Debbie. Claire begins her relationship with Debbie in the context of coming back from an encounter with death. In her first assessment she encounters an applicant who has revealed childhood sexual abuse (this disclosure has been provoked by the adoption process). This enormous experience has only been partially processed as Lara, Debbie's first social worker, has been ill (pregnancy related) and her work with Debbie has been interrupted.

Claire: Yeah I think again I think our sort of, it's so strange the way it is interesting the way it works, I don't really understand it myself but you know like I

have said I have sort of felt that I have had to fight her corner with other people, she has been a bit unfairly kind of picked on

Louise: mm...

Claire: But I think she is also she is very able to stand up for herself but I don't know if I am sort of replicating something where I am not sort of doing and not actually standing up for her in the way I should or I don't know there is something just all fairly kind of occurring to me as I'm thinking about it, but definitely she has I have been I have felt several times caught in the middle of between her and other people whether that's others, the child's social worker, the IRO, my manager, you know and just recently she, well you were there (Claire, Interview).

These are complicated dynamics. Claire describes Debbie as needing Claire 'to fight her corner' because 'she has been unfairly picked on'. She then says but 'she is very able to stand up for herself' and then questions herself, perhaps I am 'not actually standing up for her in the way I should'. There is confusion about Debbie's resilience and emotional robustness. There is also confusion in Claire's mind about what is being evoked in this relationship. She refers to encounters with other professionals (including her supervisor, the panel advisor and other social workers) which have unsettled their relationship.

Jenny: ...and I think that was what struck me. A sense of what her role is in this relationship seems really quite muddled because there's lots of those things that you're saying David, of not holding an assessment stance but actually really joining this woman, Debbie, against the system and becoming her sort of partner, defender, and that that's how she's positioning herself in a relationship.

Marie: As powerless (MMG3).

Claire, too, is aware of the way her account is bringing to the fore questions of role and assessment. She says about her storying, this is all 'fairly kind of occurring to me as I'm thinking about it'. In her observation 'it came with history before I met her and she met me...' she recognises how dynamics have been shaped by past experiences, experiences which, in different ways, have brought them close to destruction. This is not to say that there is anything pre-determined about this particular collision of lives. What emerges through this analysis is how these dynamics seem to be given further force as the two of them encounter other agency actors.

Claire: ...and they said they didn't hear her, they didn't call us in, so we were waiting in the Town Hall, how can I forget that? for an hour an hour and a half, just waiting, waiting, waiting, like you do because they always run late, it's so horrible and then they came out and talked to us in that waiting room with you know pictures of poor people sort of begging and Victorian pictures and paintings

Louise: Yeah, Yeah

Claire: um and said oh no we don't feel, so it wasn't like it wasn't that they didn't want to approve her they didn't feel they had enough information so that is where I had to go away...

Louise: Okay

Claire: ...and had to and so I think at that point so we had shared that horrible experience and I again I suppose feeling responsible. So I'm saying you know I'm feeling confident it's okay we will be fine just breathe and think about the questions they are asking you know I think you will be fine, you know... (Claire, Interview).

In her storytelling of their relationship Claire recalls a specific occasion which she describes as significant in their work together. In this extract she describes the experience of going to the Adoption Panel with Debbie. Attendance at Adoption Panel is an important marker for all applicants. It is both a significant procedural and symbolic occasion.

For survivors of childhood sexual abuse the 'belief that they could ever be noticed, recognized, or held in mind by another is particularly tenuous,' (Noack and Baraitser, 2004, p.357). For Debbie the implications, both of not being heard or accepted as able to parent can be understood as entangled with her history of childhood abuse. Claire's description of waiting with Debbie is vivid and visceral, affective and affecting. She recalls how they are left 'just waiting, waiting, waiting...' The content and affectivity of her account suggests that this is more than a pivotal moment '*within*' a circle, following Greco and Stenner, this has all the features of a liminal moment '*between* circles' (2017, p.149). They are suspended in time, 'betwixt and between' (Turner, cited in Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.150). Claire has to encourage Debbie to breathe, 'its okay we will be fine just breathe'. Without Claire would Debbie just stop breathing? What is at stake here? Debbie's past is being considered by a group of strangers who will decide whether she can be a mother. This is high stakes. The waiting, the uncertainty and the encouragement to 'just breathe' is also redolent of a maternity ward and a woman in labour.

Breathing, with its in-and-out movement has connotations of opening and closure, relaxation and internal–external connectedness, as well as connotations with sexual intercourse. Its connection with pregnancy and birth meant that the breathing exercises could come to symbolize something new coming into being, within the women themselves as well as in relation to their children (Noack and Baraitser, 2004, p.353).

Noack and Baraitser (2004) are writing about their therapeutic group work with mothers who have survived childhood sexual abuse. These groups work psycho-dynamically with women who are struggling in their own parenting and whose children are deemed to be at risk. The group process includes a number of breathing exercises which are designed to help calm and ground the women before they begin and leave the group session. The breathing exercises suggest something 'new coming into being' (ibid), not only in relation to a child but also 'within the women themselves'. In Claire's description of encouraging Debbie to breathe there is survival but also the hope of something 'new coming into being'; a future family. But what is also evoked again is a shared powerlessness in the face of an uncertain future. It is not just Debbie who is in danger; 'its' okay we will be fine' (my italics). Claire uses 'I' and 'we' interchangeably. She is speaking for them both.

In this waiting room Claire is affected by the building's Victorian heritage. She describes the paintings of 'poor people begging'. The way Claire evokes the space and its Victorian heritage is through destitution, powerlessness and oppression. This is a specific and significant linkage in the context of adoption, gender and the role of the state in family life. 'Victorian wives became property to their husbands, giving them rights to what their bodies produced; children, sex and domestic labour' (Buckner, 2005, p.137). The situation for unmarried mothers and their children was dire; 'social censure was so grave that many single mothers handed their babies to the Foundling Hospital or in desperation committed infanticide' (Marsh, n.d.). The paintings hanging in the waiting room in the Town Hall depict these social conditions. This abhorrent squalor and injustice is the genesis of social work as a profession. It is also the genesis of adoption practice. Claire's professional identity and practice is entwined with the era captured in these images. In this open-plan system and through this liminal space noise reaches Claire from across time.

Claire and Debbie are bringing another story of injustice and the abuse of power over a female body to this building and to this institutional arm of the state. The Adoption Panel members have been asked to individually read this material and then collectively consider its implications in the context of deciding whether Debbie could adopt a child. Debbie has undergone hugely demanding psychological work. She has through this adoption process revealed her abuse (to her family and to the police). She has with Lara and then with Claire spent hours thinking about these experiences. The Adoption Panel considers the report behind closed doors. Claire and Debbie are left alone for 'an hour, an hour and a half'

(Claire's not sure, she loses track of time). Then they are sent away, 'they said, they didn't hear her, they didn't call us in'.

I keep on thinking about the dynamics of abuse and sexual abuse and of course the issue of powerlessness and the sense of aloneness (David, MMG3).

In Claire's description of this Adoption Panel for Debbie and Claire there is this sense of aloneness. Claire had reassured Debbie that it would be fine. This group of people would hear them, they would listen and Debbie would be validated. Claire is far from an assessment position here; she is alongside Debbie. They are denied a hearing and in that sense it was not fine, 'so we had shared that horrible experience and I again I suppose feeling responsible' (Claire, Interview). In the interview with Claire I suggest that the level of responsibility she expresses for Debbie is very high.

Yes but there is definitely something feeling a bit responsible for her. Yeah, she has had a difficult life you know... I mean her mum is around. Her mum is lovely but couldn't protect her you know from her father (Claire, Interview).

Claire acknowledges her amplified sense of responsibility for Debbie (although she calls it 'a bit responsible'). She then links this responsibility to an ineffectual Mum who failed to protect Debbie and to the father who abused her. In thinking about the responsibility she feels for Debbie she evokes Debbie in her childhood (as an abused child) not as an adult undergoing an assessment.

As infants and children, these mothers were used as objects by others, rather than being recognized as subjects in their own right. They are now unconsciously seeking someone to meet their dependency needs and provide a space for regression to repair the damage (Noack and Baraitser, 2004, pp.349-350).

Claire is certainly working very hard to ensure that Debbie is recognised as a subject in her own right. Is she also providing Debbie with a space for regression? Sexual abuse relies on secrecy and the abuse of power; it creates isolation and worthlessness, shame and guilt (Noack and Baraitser, 2004). It represents a fundamental breach of trust. The work Debbie and Claire do through this adoption process involves revisiting Debbie's childhood. Through listening, talking and making sense they must build trust in relation to a shaming experience. They must integrate this experience into a whole life and then tell the story of that whole life to others. Through this process, the deadening power of childhood sexual abuse encounters powerful countering forces. The inertia of the past is challenged by

Debbie's desire to be a mother, the generative dynamic of Claire and Debbie's relationship and the forward momentum of permanence practices.

Noack and Baraitser (2004) describe the intensity of working with survivors of abuse and the need for firm boundaries. In their own group work they describe a system of support that the group leader has access to, in order to process the difficult and often overwhelming feelings that they are exposed to. Powerful dynamics are to be expected when working with survivors of childhood abuse and Noack and Baraitser (2004) suggest further that these dynamics are 'magnified by powerful feelings evoked around mothering' (p.356). Claire is not providing therapy to Debbie; she is assessing her capacity to parent an adopted child, but in her role and in her relationship with Debbie she is working with the same dynamics as those described above. She may also be being pulled in to meet Debbie's 'dependency needs'.

...she kind of feels enormously responsible and wants to protect her and also recognise her strengths at the same time and does return to it in the end. I suppose again the theme for me... I just felt rather uncomfortable with that, given that this versus an assessment (David, MMG3).

David understands Claire's role is as an assessor of Debbie's readiness and capacity to adopt a child. He raises questions in relation to this role. Claire will be working hard with her supervisor to reflect on her work with Debbie, but this work will compete for attention with all their other cases. There is no psychotherapeutic support available. Claire is also Lily's family finding social worker, tasked with finding Lily permanence. What does it mean to match an adopter, who you have assessed, with a child for whom you hold responsibility for finding a family? How does this intersection of two distinct roles work? What does this work invoke given the specific biographies of Claire, Lily and Debbie? At the very least it will mean that Claire's responsibilities in connection to this match/union are amplified.

I don't know the way that sits in all this but the motivation to rescue the child as well. Lily. So from the loving very quickly comes Lily's rescue, it becomes a strong possibility and I guess that is another factor isn't it? How what she desires to... For this kind of idealised union to... It makes me think of that kind of Bion, you know, that sort of idea that after this comes... Will come this union, and it will save this complex system and save this little girl in the middle of it. You know, in a kind of fantastical way, but whether that's kind of playing out the kind of anxiety around what will happen to Lily; where will she go, is part of the system. I guess that wouldn't have been her responsibility but it might have been around (Marie, MMG3).



Marie presumes that the job of finding Lily a family is not Claire's responsibility but, as Lily's family finder, Claire does hold significant responsibility. The risk here is that, through these two roles, Claire becomes fully mobilised in the reparatory drive of adoption policy and practice. She is working to join a child and a woman (both who could be considered to be vulnerable) together in a family, to bring 'something new... into being' (Noack and Baraitser, 2004, p.353). This match has all the features of an idealized union. Yet Claire is not on her own; what about the permanence network and the formalised checks and balances?

Poor Zara has run out of time and not done any of the paperwork before she goes on leave – so it's down to me – which is fine (Email from Claire to Debbie 12.02.16).

It will be fine. I have never had a problem with moving a child of this age (Sandra, Observation Record 3).

Claire is working without Lily's social worker to write the matching report, 'which is fine'. Lily is after all only a baby; 'it will be fine'. When we attend the Matching Panel Claire reassures Debbie that the Panel will be less intimidating as it will be smaller. The speed in which this specific Panel has been organized means that not everyone could attend. The body of people that oversee the match between Lily and Debbie is reduced by half from the one that considered Debbie's adoption approval.

Claire explains that there are extra panels at this time of year to get the numbers in to meet the local authorities' targets (Observation Record 2).

Local authorities are measured on the rate and speed of adoption approvals and the number of matches they achieve every year. These figures are required by April of every year. As we wait for this *March* Panel we learn that one of the people missing from the Panel is the medical advisor. Zara is asked about Lily's hearing by the Panel Chair and replies, 'I was hoping to ask the medical advisor' (Observation Record 2). The Panel Chair responds 'well I'm sorry we don't have one today'.

### **Precarious bodies**

The work that Panel require Claire and Debbie to do in order for Debbie to be approved as an adopter is to complete a further assessment directly related to Debbie's experiences of sexual abuse. The Chair leaves the Panel meeting in situ to deliver this news. In Claire's description of waiting and then being sent away without being heard there is a sense of loss.

Yes, this is a lost opportunity to acknowledge Debbie, to recognise Debbie and Claire's work together, but it is also a lost opportunity to do some work. An opportunity for collective thinking and a chance for Claire to be supported/challenged in her assessment work. She is told to gather more information and to do more work with Debbie, on her own. On their return to Panel, Claire and Debbie have a very different experience, 'it all went through you know they loved her they absolutely loved her' (Claire, Interview).

The chair came into the room and introduced herself, and we introduced ourselves. She said 'good to see you again Debbie' and explained that the Panel had decided on the questions they wanted to ask. She also thanked Claire and Debbie for their report on Bob and explained that Panel had no questions about this as that had been well covered in the report (Observation Record 2).

During the match with Lily Debbie informs Claire that she has begun a relationship with Bob. Claire seeks advice from her manager and from the Panel Advisor. Their decision is that Debbie must make a choice, Bob or Lily. There is no time to waste, Lily needs a permanent family. For an assessment to take place of Bob and Debbie, as a couple, they would need to be together for at least 2 years. A decision must be taken and it is for Debbie, supported by Claire, to do so. Debbie completes an addendum to the matching report which sets out her decision to choose Lily.

The chair says 'I'll tell you straight away it good news, the panel have unanimously agreed that Lily should be placed with you'. She then runs through all the positive attributes that Panel have noted about Debbie....The Panel members are milling about in the corridor and in a small kitchen and one of them gestures to Debbie with a thumbs up and then follows this with a punch in the air (Observation Record 2).

At the Matching Panel there are no references to Debbie's experiences of sexual abuse nor is her relationship with Bob directly addressed. The Panel Chair acknowledges the report Claire and Debbie have produced regarding Bob and says, 'Panel had no questions about this as that had been well covered in the report' (Observation Record 2). In Debbie's addendum she describes her relationship with Bob and her feelings towards him. This is someone she has begun to care for and who, in her mind, is radically different to other men she has had relationships with.

My 100% commitment and attention needs to be with Lily at this time and after speaking with Claire the correct decision to end the relationship has been made. I don't feel too much at a loss, because I have gained much valuable insight into the kind of person I would like to be present in my life, and the type of qualities that

would work in a relationship for me (Addendum written by Debbie 17.02.16).

From the point of telling Claire about Bob (15<sup>th</sup> February) she makes the decision to end the relationship (16<sup>th</sup> February) and writes the addendum (17<sup>th</sup> February). By 22<sup>nd</sup> February all the paperwork for the match with Lily is completed. Everyone has all the information they need. There will be no delay and deadlines can be met in time for the Matching Panel in March 2016.

In their review of the literature on mothers who have been sexually abused Noack and Baraitser (2004) draw attention to the complex emotional and physiological reactions in survivors of childhood sexual abuse that are triggered by the experience of becoming a parent; 'the pains and pleasures of motherhood for survivors of sexual abuse may be experienced in particularly intense and frightening ways' (p.348). At Matching Panel there are no references at all to Debbie's childhood experiences and how she understands and thinks about herself in relation to her experiences in becoming a mother specifically to Lily.

There's also the issue about you can have information about somebody being sexually abused but that's only the beginning of it isn't it? It's really then about what gets done now and what it means, and what it means to you. So the information is just the start really, it's all the emotion that comes along with that and particularly, you know, the whole range of things, whether it's kind of betrayal, fury, aloneness, guilt; I mean it will be a whole range of things. Fury at your mother, fury at your father, you know, sometimes the kind of sense of, you know, I liked being close to him. There's just so much there, what it means and it's not just about information and I suppose it feels as though the kind of issue about the assessment is what does it mean for you to become an adopter and actually to think about the child that might be placed with you. What meaning the child actually will bring to you and your life and how do you...? Not just about what's in the CPR report... But it goes further than that. It's about the feelings (David, MMG3).

David reflects on the feelings that might be generated by the experience of sexual abuse, naming some of them as 'fury, guilt, aloneness', indeed 'a whole range of things'. He makes the point that 'information is just the start'. This Panel has all the information it needs. They have no further questions. Noack and Baraitser (2004) note that some women who have been sexually abused 'struggle to identify themselves as having needs of their own, and instead project their own needs onto their children' (2004, p.350). What makes this situation particularly difficult is that Debbie is encountering a process (contemporary adoption practice) which is premised on the reparatory parent. As a maternal figure she must provide a total containing environment. This is a precarious state of affairs not least

because 'an infant forces into awareness much that we have defended against for most of our adult lives' (Noack and Baraitser, 2004, p.348).

Jenny: I think the real tangent here is, the thing that stood out for me as well was, you know, we've talked a lot about ambivalence and uncertainty and this sort of... But she says when we did get to panel though it all went through, you know, they loved her. They absolutely loved her.

Marie: Yes, it really stands out doesn't it?

Jenny: And just thought it's so out of kilter with the rest of the...

Marie: Narrative. Yes. Yes. Because it is just not ambivalent. It's really 100% love. Love, its kind back in these kind of extremes isn't it?

David: I mean I do wonder how that came to be. Because actually the issue around ambivalence kind of runs through the whole of this narrative doesn't it? Somehow it gets constructed into almost an idealisation of her suitability (MMG3).

The MMG3 are struck by the incongruence of what they observe to be a pervasive ambivalence in relation to Debbie's suitability to parent and Claire's description of the Panel response; 'They absolutely loved her' (Claire, Interview). Did Claire misread the Panel response, were they really as positive as she describes in her interview? Claire did not get it wrong, they really did love her. Remember the exuberant gesture from the Panel member; 'one of them gestures to Debbie with a thumbs up and then follows this with a punch in the air' (Observation Record 2). Jenny notes that in her experience she has yet to feel that a Panel 'absolutely loved' any of her applicants. David wonders about how this 'idealization of' Debbie's 'suitability' 'came to be'.

I was thinking about, in my experience, when I've been working with prospective adopters where I'm really having to hold a boundary and say actually this isn't going to happen, for these reasons, and feeding that back. That I'm often left feeling quite persecutory, you know, so they leave me feeling in a position of, you know, you are sticking the knife in. You are persecuting us, how can you do this and its really, you know, I take all my psychic energy to kind of not back off and so it is sometimes when you hold a boundary people challenge it by saying stop persecuting me, and then you rescue them, and you go oh I didn't really mean that. You know, because I really think you're lovely (Jenny, MMG3).

As Jenny observes in working with prospective adopters there are significant pressures to say yes and to move forward quickly. Many adopters have had a long and difficult journey in respect of trying to make a family by the time they get to the adoption process. Applicants may have experienced multiple attempts at IVF, miscarriages, stillbirths and sometimes the death of an older child. Loss is often embedded in the drive to make a family. As set out in the introduction the pressure to proceed forward is given more force at

a macro-level. The Adoption Reform Agenda is explicit that delay is harmful and also that assessments should not be overly intrusive. Don't delay and don't intrude. These dynamics would also 'have been around' (ibid) for every part of the permanence network. It is in this policy context that this hastily arranged much reduced Panel are presented with a compelling case. In recommending this match they can exercise their corporate parenting in respect of Lily *and* make amends to Debbie for the failures of her parents *and* meet the targets for placing children. No wonder then that 'one of them gestures to Debbie with a thumbs up and then follows this with a punch in the air' (Observation Record 2). This is heady stuff. To say no, or even just not yet, would mean to go against a tidal wave of emotion and political pressure. Who wants to do that?

Well I can remember feeling because my kids were older being 4. Tony my husband was thinking will they like me and I was thinking, will I like them? And this was this terrible dilemma, what can I do if I don't like them? And it's unbearable (Dawn, ASG).

The possibility of a prospective adoptive parent saying no or I'm not sure in these circumstances seems highly unlikely. As Dawn explains she could not even voice her fears to her husband. How could Debbie resist these pressures under these conditions? It maybe 'unbearable' but there really is no time for ambivalence. There'll be plenty of time for that once the child is placed.

### **Afterword**

So the child might be placed and needs to be protected too. And it didn't feel to me as though there was a lot of space for that to happen (David, MMG3).

Spaces and places in which thinking can take place are full to the brim. There is just too much going on and too little time in which to do it. The confusion regarding Lily's development and health needed to be clarified and collectively thought about. Debbie and Bob's relationship, Debbie and Claire's relationship and Debbie's psychological journey to becoming a mother required more thought. All this work required time and nobody had any. There are questions as to the future of established practices around collective and independent decision-making processes including Panels and Independent Reviewing Officers (see most recently Department for Education, 2018). There is vulnerability across the system in individual bodies and in administrative bodies. I want to suggest that precarity is *felt* foremost in individual bodies, and there is one body that because of her biography, age, needs and lack of agency is completely dependent on this system and on *functioning* bodies.

This study set out to examine permanence practices ostensibly to contribute to better outcomes for children and their families. In this research I enter into an open-system. I have been here before and the terrain is familiar. I bring with me my own experiences of affectivity, transformation and precarity related to permanence practices; experiences that are embedded and intersect with my own biography. In this psychosocial analysis I followed provocations, provocations which led me to consider the foster carer, the prospective adoptive mother, practitioners and the agency. Across the analysis Lily's photograph helped frame these actors' stories. She herself features as a bit player, mostly existing on the periphery, occasionally emerging but only ever momentarily. How did Lily experience this process? Was she disturbed, changed, transformed? No idea; I forgot to ask. In this research just as in this case study there really is not 'a lot of space' in which children can be thought about. Lily does not even get her own chapter; there wasn't the time.

# Act III

## Chapter 8: Discussion

In the foreword to the thesis I suggested that a central tension in research of this kind is the competing demand 'to know' and 'not to know'. This is a tension that has been particularly difficult to navigate in this Act as I have struggled to move from exploration to resolution. I have cushioned the transition and written the Act over 3 chapters. This discussion chapter draws together the central themes (maternal practices, liminal spaces and judgement) and affords a little more space for exploration. In this chapter I also reflect on methodology and analytic practices. To begin with I turn to David, who in the last Many Minds Group meeting, reflects on the 'case' and considers what can be learnt or garnered from this research.

I think that what this illustrates is a very powerful set of themes about our role and about opening things up and why we think that's the right thing to do, and why it's difficult and the defences that we adopt, and well, whether we decide to do it or not to do it, and the degree to which we do it. It's the dynamics of assessment and matching and all the rest of it... The dynamics are huge. They are drawn so powerfully from primitive sets of feelings. I think this is just illustrative of two of them, you know, one is about life, and it's a life and death issue; whether its cancer or it's the ghastliness of abuse. You know, when you try... All the children are thinking about some abusers in some form or another. So I think that... Yes, it's right, that it's the dynamics of what we... And this illustrates what we do and it just is powerful in the sense that cancer and sexual abuse are two of the specific dramas to try to make sense of what's happening here... (MMG3).

Throughout this study David and the other members of the MMG were (alongside me) trying 'to make sense of what's happening here' in the context of 'the dynamics of assessment and matching and all the rest of it' (ibid). This thesis has been about trying to make sense of something and out of something. Baraitser describes her work as;

...not as an example of a mothering experience that others may relate to, but its opposite; as what 'sticks out' of just one mothering experience, that may give pause for thought (p.23).

This chapter explores what 'sticks out' from this study and the 'everyday interactive order' it illuminates (Roy, 2017, p.7). This is a single case study located in a specific time and place yet 'I do not believe that the specificity of this account invalidates it' (Baraitser, 2009, p.23). I understand that some of its features might delineate this as an outlier or extreme case. I suggest instead that, following Cooper and Webb (1999), difficult experiences and 'the



messy tangle of relationships which cases typically present just *is* the way things are' (p.120, original emphasis).

### **Reading between the lines**

To begin this Act and this discussion chapter I step back from the 'experience-near' writing of the previous three chapters to carry out an additional interpretative process. This approach follows a hermeneutic and recursive approach congruent with the psychosocial paradigm. I read my analysis chapters together a number of times (making notes). I engaged with written feedback from my supervisor on all three chapters and asked for verbal feedback on individual chapters from three of my research participants (2 people from the MMG and 1 from the ASG). This feedback alerted me to elements of the texts that I had not accessed. In this chapter I juxtapose '...the intersecting themes ... and the commonalities and paradoxes between them' (Froggett, et al., 2014, para.5.60).

Froggett et al., (2014) suggest that this type of analysis should consider the *form* of the analytic writing. Following this approach I came to see the analysis chapters as something akin to hybrid novelistic pieces of writing. According to Froggett et al., (2014) the novelistic genre of writing helps to contain inconsistencies as the reader is taken through a familiar and discernible storying process. In a storying process (with recognisable rules in relation to form, albeit in my case unconsciously accessed) the instabilities and anxieties produced by the practice of interpretation are made manageable. In the table below, I consider the chapters alongside the key characteristics that determine the form of a novel as identified by Czarniawskaw (1997) (cited in Froggett et al., 2014).

Form	Chapter 5	Chapter 6	Chapter 7
Personification	In all the chapters characters personify worker, mother, child and the social projections that surround these figures/tropes.		
Identification	With Jane as a struggling & flawed mother/worker	With Debbie as a woman on the brink of becoming a mother	With Claire as a struggling social worker doing a difficult job
Suspense	The brinkmanship of the planning meeting.	Zara's challenge to/of Debbie – 'what's going on?'	What's behind the closed bedroom door?
Unmasking Quality	Opposing constructs and practices of mothering.	Ambivalence (in becoming mothers). Endemic vulnerability (Lily's illness, Debbie's collapse, Claire's cancer, Zara's migraine)	Debbie's relationship with Bob. Sexual abuse. Claire's cancer.
Climax	Jane's holiday announcement ; leading onto the; 'We did not know' 'Yes you did' moment.	Lily's diagnosis and prognosis Zara's challenge of Debbie. Adoption Support Group – 'Is this real?'	Claire's revelatory interview
Catharsis	Fay's permanency needs are recognised.	Silence surrounding ambivalence and vulnerability is broken.	The silencing of sexual abuse is broken.
Moral Message	Recognise each other's struggles to overcome polarisation.	Enduring harm caused by the denial of vulnerability and ambivalence.	Care is a collective responsibility

**Table 2:** Reading the analytic chapters through the form of a novel

In the analysis chapters each photographic/anecdotal opening introduces a new focus. The practices of the foster carer, the prospective adoptive mother and the social worker are

situated differently and sometimes in opposition but they emerge collectively as struggling, vulnerable and committed figures. For example, Jane is alternatively villain, heroine and human. She is initially a disturbing character and then is recast as a struggling flawed woman engaging in complex multiple and demanding maternal practices. She emerges from the analysis anew. This shift in characterization can be understood as congruent with an understanding of subjectivity as relational, temporal and dynamic. It also chimes with a key feature identified by maternal theorists. Scholars have suggested that, 'motherhood both provides the potential for identifications between women and the ground for women to experience differences in a heightened way' (Thomson et al., 2011, p.10). Through this 'experience-distant' reading I found that tensions between difference and identification were a recurring motif across the 3 chapters and often in the context of maternal encounters.

### **Maternal Encounters**

A significant dynamic mobilized in this case study and first identified through the thematic analysis was a 'clamour of conditions' (Hollway, 2015, p.17) through which the maternal subject emerged. In this study maternal practices produced paradoxes, ambivalence, conflict, collaboration and opportunities for transgression. I drew on maternal theory and scholarship to explore the imaginative and material practices, relational networks and collaborative work that I observed in the field. In this study the matching process actually produced a network of women who had to navigate 'an arena where differences between women are defined and compounded through the creation of distinct cultures of child rearing' (Thomson, et al., 2011, p.4). Berebitsky (2000) suggests that the law on adoption represents 'a public site to thrash out meanings' on the nature of family (cited in Kirton, 2013a, p.97). My analysis suggests that this matching phase functions as a public/private site to thrash out and construct maternal subjects.

Lewis (2009) argues in her work that the needs of children have to be thought through;

...in relation to those of a carer who may be containing not just her infant's projections, but the affective dimensions of multiple social projections including racialized hatred, and socially ostracized desire (discussed by Baraitser, 2015, p.29).

The majority of children 'in care' in England are living in foster families (The Care Inquiry, 2013). Kirton (2013b) argues that foster care is closely associated with the stigma attached to public care. He suggests that policy directives to provide children with good parenting in

care have 'prompted a focus on their 'quality', with clear class undertones' (p.662). He notes that ministers have called for the recruitment of better educated foster carers and 'expressed concern that foster carers who are 'dependent' on state benefits will adversely affect aspirations' (Harber and Oakley, 2011, cited in Kirton, 2013b, p.662).

...foster carers are overwhelmingly female and older than the wider population with dependent children, with an average age of over 50. Between 25 and 30 per cent are lone foster carers [...] foster care's majority position means that as public care has been identified as a conduit, if not source, for numerous social problems – such as unemployment, homelessness, offending, early parenthood and substance misuse (DfES, 2006) – so has foster care become central to their amelioration (Kirton, 2013b, p.660, my brackets).

Through this lens foster carers responsible for caring for children (like Lily and Fay) have to contain the multiple social projections related to class, age, race, gender, mothering, family life and the stigma associated with the state care system.

In the second analysis chapter I explored the role of another questionable female, the prospective adoptive mother. In this analysis I highlighted the intensity of her transformative practices in the matching process. In this case study the transformation was not realized but the observations captured important aspects of that process or event of becoming.

Most social workers raised time (or lack of it) as an issue. The pressure on services, particularly given financial cuts and rising demand, left them less time to work with children and families (Featherstone et al., 2018, p.18).

Externally and internally there is an overwhelming pressure to keep on keeping on within the 'happy ever after' narrative' (Featherstone et al., 2018, p.10). In the permanence context the adoptive mother is likely to encounter additional pressures to hide anything other than positive feelings. She is taking on a specifically charged mantle for society because the mother is figured as 'the category of the future' (Baraitser, 2009, p. 42). In this sense she becomes the bedrock of permanence. In this data set the maternal subject took her place alongside the child as a body ripe for identification, fantasy, and projection.

We might have found ourselves in care for much longer, without the secure attachment that being cradled in a mother's arms brings...there is nothing as richly rewarding as being an adoptive parent. It means knowing there is someone in the world who will wake up every morning forever in your debt (Gove, 2011, n.p.).

In this statement Gove makes the link between mothers and the 'richly rewarding' experience 'of being an adoptive parent'. He also suggests that the actual experience of being 'in care' is one to be escaped from straight into the loving arms of the idealized mother. Debbie's experiences and the recollections from the ASG (women who have trod a similar path) suggest that there are significant psychological and physical risks involved in becoming a mother through adoption. Some of these risks are inevitable and reflect the extraordinary challenges associated with loving a child and building a family through adoption. The trope of the idealized mother brings with it a whole load of additional baggage.

Debbie's journey towards becoming a mother was complicated by her childhood experiences of sexual abuse. It is possible to say that through this permanence process society was able to finally address the terrible harm inflicted on Debbie as a child. She was heard and her father was held to account. Whilst this is not justice it is still an incredible achievement given the silencing and shame attached to sexual abuse. The approval assessment process provided the conditions through which this work could be achieved although it fell too much on the practitioner's shoulders. There was no capacity within the agency to respond to these complications in a matching process. It seemed that collectively a shutting down of difficult feelings took place. They were not recognized in this matching process and this is unsurprising. We know from research, from survivors' testimonies and the repeated failure of institutions and organisations to respond to allegations that it is very hard to think about sexual abuse. There is evidence that a process of silencing in relation to sexual abuse and mothering is evident for women who become mothers through birth (Courtenay et al., 2015). There is also a dearth of research. In one small scale study researchers found that women reported that their experience of sexual abuse had '...affected their ability to bond with their children' and for some '...their desire to have female children because of fears about protecting daughters from abuse' (p.519).

This was not just about the powerful emotions generated by sexual abuse. Difficulties in speaking also emerged powerfully in the accounts of women in the ASG. These women had spoken at length with each other about their experiences of *being* mothers but had not spoken about their experiences of *becoming* mothers. Memories were both blocked and intrusively visceral. Hollway argues that:

The period of becoming a mother is a fundamental issue for feminism and a challenging one for psychology, involving a specific set of psychological processes and psychic changes that are hard to access through available language and discourses (2016, p.136).

Hollway make a series of points that have resonance for this study. She notes that this time of becoming is an area of experience that her disciplines (psychology and feminism) have inadequately addressed. Furthermore Hollway argues that ‘...the deeper identity changes involved in maternal becoming are – after babyhood – the most inaccessible to language’ (p.140). There is then a problem with words. The ones currently available do not suffice. Might these observations provide insight into the conceptual confusion surrounding the making of an adoptive family? In a majority of cases this process will involve a maternal becoming, a transition considered by Hollway to be ‘inaccessible to language’ (ibid). My study suggests that this period in which social work facilitates a maternal becoming needs further exploration.

### **Liminal spaces**

In this study matching practices involve both the doing *and* the undoing of family life. Losses are navigated and attempts are made to mitigate their impact but further loss and fracture is also produced. Things got opened up and other things were shut down. I have suggested that a matching process creates highly affective liminal spaces and requires a significant change of pace for all those involved. In this study matching cuts across dimensions of time and networks of people, spaces, places and objects. ‘Blurred boundaries are inherent in transformative practices and they have to be, to allow movement from one space to the next’ (Baraitser, 2009, p.57). In these spaces liminality is ubiquitous and there is a plethora of possibilities and ‘minimum concrete actuality’ (Greco and Stenner, 2017, p.160). There are risks for everyone in relation to these spaces and the emotional forces they generate. In this study the struggle became one of survival and escape through spatialized /temporalized or polarizing strategies. In this data set the potential for change and the risks to survival are illustrated by the confusion around ontology and the frequency in which identities are conflated. A key question, raised by this data set, is the question of limits. The frequency of physical and mental collapse (reported mainly by adoptive mothers in the study but also apparent in data from other sources) suggests that limits are being reached.

The title of the final report of the Care Inquiry (2013) is titled 'Making *not* breaking: Building relationships for our most vulnerable children'. My study shows that matching involves making *and* breaking; both the doing *and* the undoing of subjects, relationships and family life. Destruction and loss are both inevitable and necessary in a transformative process and they are necessary in the complex practices involved in constructing a new family. Furthermore, 'Conflict or ambivalence within the child, within the caring system, and between it and the professional system, are normal rather than exceptional features of this work' (Cooper and Webb, 1999, p.121).

In my analysis matching practices were conceptualised as taking place across complex open systems with foster care functioning at the centre. In the matching guidance and the literature the complexity of the foster care role is barely considered and when the role is considered it is understood through a task orientation. In this study the foster carer is positioned as an agent provocateur. She cuts across social niceties, she undermines, she transgresses, she irritates and she demands attention. She is not child-centred and yet she is resolutely centred on her relationship to children. She forces us to engage with her position and with 'the difficulties that arise from the status of being 'in between'' (Warner, 2015, p.161). Using the concept of a liminal hot spot I suggest that the foster carer role is extraordinarily complex, demanding and important. She is doing a job that she is paid to do and there are specific tasks associated with this work. She is also alongside a child, a child who is undergoing a transformative process in the context of multiple lives, paradoxes and possibilities. The foster carer may do this work many times. She is also charged with negotiating and stabilising the 'liminal hotspot' of others and of multiple children. This work falls on *her* shoulders because caring for children is 'a highly gendered activity' (Gillies, 2007, cited in Warner, 2015, p.16). If matching relies on the strengths of collaborative (gendered) relationships then there are a range of questions that need addressing relating to how current powerful social projections are playing out within these relationships and within these liminal spaces.

### **Judgement**

A psychosocial or depth reflexivity is profoundly interested in the trace or "idiom" of the author (...) which frequently manifests through a personalised aesthetic of expression, an "existential signature" of which s/he is unaware (Froggett, et al., 2014, para 3.2.22).

In the analysis chapters an "idiom" (ibid) of the author/researcher/me is apparent in the way subjects are positioned and in how these positions shift across the chapters. This also connects with the "existential signature" (ibid) of a practitioner-near social work researcher trying to avoid binary thinking. There is a hybridity to the writing which can be seen to be part of a discernible "existential signature" (ibid). In the example below attempts are made to combine descriptive material and other voices with an authorial voice that contains the emotional (and moralistic) aspect of the piece.

In recommending this match they can exercise their corporate parenting in respect of Lily *and* make amends to Debbie for the failures of her parents *and* meet the targets for placing children. No wonder then that 'one of them gestures to Debbie with a thumbs up and then follows this with a punch in the air' (Observation Record 2). This is heady stuff. To say no, or even just not yet, would mean to go against a tidal wave of emotion and political pressure. Who wants to do that?

Dawn: Well I can remember feeling because my kids were older being 4. Tony my husband was thinking will they like me and I was thinking, will I like them? And this was this terrible dilemma, what can I do if I don't like them? And it's unbearable. (ASG)

The possibility of a prospective adoptive parent saying no or I'm not sure in these circumstances seems highly unlikely. As Dawn explains she could not even voice her fears to her husband. How could Debbie resist these pressures under these conditions? It may be 'unbearable' but there really is no time for ambivalence. There'll be plenty of time for that once the child is placed (Chapter 7).

In this example the writing switches between feelings and descriptions; speculation and certainty; between figures/positions and data sources. The switching also chimes with the substantive theme of liminality. Liminal hot spots feature noise and affectivity. This piece evokes that noise and affect; the narrative meshes data from across temporalities (observation from 2016 with Dawn's recollections from circa 1990) and from a polyphony of voices. Content, language and tone are visceral (e.g. 'follows this with a punch in the air' and 'a tidal wave of emotion') and provocative (e.g. Dawn's 'what can I do if I don't like them?' and the author's 'There'll be plenty of time for that once the child is placed'). In this example provocations are amplified; the author directly challenges the reader with 'Who wants to do that?' and 'How could Debbie resist these pressures under these conditions?' The challenge is around judgement. Across all three chapters the question raised is 'who are we to judge?'



For Hollway and Froggett (2012) the 'emotional response of the (data) analyst brings together the subjective fantasy and the concrete social reality' (para.4.15).

...the provocation's significance is not restricted to the individual; it can be understood as collective in the sense that subjective fantasies draw on the necessarily social quality of collective experience embedded in interaction forms (para. 4.15).

It is through the provocation (in my work this is the question 'who are we to judge?') that 'we might be able to trace not only the individually specific but the collective aspects of experience...' (para.4.16). In the introduction to this thesis I highlighted the multiple ways in which judgements and authority in relation to adoption practices are being challenged, but during the period of this study questions about judgement were not confined to the adoption field. In geopolitics Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have called into question the whys and the ways judgments are made and accepted. There are powerful sociocultural dimensions related to judgement that are manifest in our culture and our politics currently. It is therefore unsurprising that judgement and ambivalence related to exercising authority emerge as meta-themes in this study.

Matching takes place in a climate of societal ambivalence towards authority and specifically to state intervention in family life. Ambivalence about judgement is animated in my analysis and this ambivalence can be seen through the idiom of the author. In my writing a strategy I use to manage ambivalence is through the occupation of a liminal position, whereby self-reflective irony is used to temper/obscure moral judgements. A similar approach is used in a recent publication by the economist and political commentator Robert Peston (2017a). His book entitled '*WTF*' seeks to examine the causes of Brexit and the failure of post-war economics to meet the needs of the poor. Peston describes his shame on hearing the results of the referendum;

It wasn't just me, but my entire circle were out of touch with millions of British people and I just felt ashamed and I thought I have just got to do something to get back into this country (Peston, 2017b, n.p.).

In his book the struggle to both understand and to hold an authoritative position is managed through the use of different types of language and writing styles. Froggett et al., (2014) also describe a similar authorial positionality in their work using scenic compositions. They describe how in one of the research group's scenic compositions the;

...narrator/protagonist is aware of the tensions in the scenario and of her own emotionally split responses. She takes an observing position but includes herself as part of the scene (para. 3.2.27).

The description chimes with my 'experience-near' writing. The impossibility of remaining detached is highlighted from the beginning of Chapter 5. In Chapter 7 this final summary paragraph brings to the fore the frustrations and sadness produced in attempts at connectivity.

Across the analysis Lily's photograph helped frame these actors' stories. She herself features as a bit player, mostly existing on the periphery, occasionally emerging but only ever momentarily. How did Lily experience this process? Was she disturbed, changed, transformed? No idea, I forgot to ask.

Thomson and Kehily (2010) describe the complex navigations professionals have to make when they work as authority figures in childcare spheres. In their work they suggest that, 'the responsibility of 'being right' and recognizing difference produces a troubling reflexivity' and a 'struggle to find a comfortable discursive space' (2010, p.239). In this study the exercise of authority is complex and painful and the lack of a comfortable discursive space is evident throughout this thesis.

For Froggett, et al., (2014) the switching of voice allows the author 'to dance recklessly on the line between uncontained and unconstrained' (Froggett, et al., 2014, para. 3.3.49); to occupy a transitional space where the demand for judgement is suspended, if only temporarily. In this final paragraph I am working to highlight the failure to connect *and* to forge connections (with Lily and with the 'bodies' that, like me, also lose sight of Lily). To this effect, I employ a self-reflexive/self-protective irony, 'No idea, I forgot to ask'. Like Peston's 'WTF' this approach speaks to the struggle for connection.

### **Methodological reflections**

...intellectual work is better thought of as a kind of machine, grabbing what it can from what lies around, putting it together in novel ways, trying things out, returning to base, chipping away (Frosh, 2017, p.5).

I set out to explore matching practices. I tried to work from my data, 'chipping away' and 'trying things out' (ibid). The research design incorporated research methods which had not been used together in my field although they have been used in allied fields. In response to my data I did a fair amount of 'grabbing' (ibid). I found and used Rose's work on photography because I needed work through which to consider Lily's photograph. I drew

significantly on Baraitser (2009) both substantively to think about maternal practices and also stylistically and theoretically. I used Greco and Stenner's (2017) concept of a 'liminal hotspot' to think about the spaces created by matching practices. I found Lorenzer's concept of the scenic useful too and I came to his work mainly through Hollway and Froggett (2012) and Froggett et al., (2014). I have worked with all these scholars and ideas insofar as they have helped me think about the data.

At different points in this study questions have been raised in supervision about theoretical coherence or lack of. The way I have worked is akin to that described by Frosh and particularly within a notion of 'trying things out' (ibid). Frosh frames this transdisciplinary approach through a lens of innovation; these are 'novel ways' (ibid) of working. I can claim originality here (useful for a PhD candidate). Frosh also notes that there are risks of incoherence. In this study and at this stage of writing I recognise that there are a fair few incongruences. For example Greco and Stenner are working from a psychosocially discursive epistemology which is different to the relational psychoanalytic orientation of Hollway and Froggett. My supervisors also note that I use the 'scenic' both in its prosaic sense and as theorised by Lorenzer. There is some slippage between the two (this particular slippage is also apparent and acknowledged in the work of Thomson, et al., 2012). I have not been able to fully align concepts or theories and some clarity may have been lost here. In one way this approach is aligned to the field of psychosocial studies which can be understood 'as a set of transdisciplinary practices that allow movement across different traditions of thought without having to fully belong anywhere' (Baraitser, 2015, p.212). Yet is a 'trying things out' approach compatible with a PhD? Does it leave questions about my scholarly credentials? Nurius et al. (2017) suggest that researchers must acquire disciplinary depth and that this is a prerequisite to transdisciplinary work. Is it only established scholars who have the freedom to roam? What does disciplinary depth look like for a social work researcher at doctoral level undertaking a transdisciplinary exploration? If you are moving backwards and forwards across disciplines which ones do you need to develop depth/expertise in?

Infant observation afforded me a robust structure on which to build a multi-modal ethnographic study and an intellectual space which allowed me to roam. As Rustin (2012) notes it is a travelling methodology and many 'sub-fields of observational research are now emerging' (p.19). This study is an example of a sub-field. I had specific studies which I used as benchmarks (BAM and MMM). I used the methods developed through those studies

(infant observation, reflective field notes and interviews) and I also accessed email correspondence. This afforded another rich source of data. I accessed this source because it emerged as an important site of communication. Combining different modes of data collection is fairly common practice in ethnographic research. I am not the first researcher to use ethnographic methods to consider social work practice. The originality of this study in respect of methodology resides in the use of these mixed methods to this specific object of inquiry. This is the first study of permanence practice to use these methodological tools.

Practitioners and teachers of infant observation emphasize the importance of predictability and consistency in relation to the structure of observations (see Urwin and Sternberg, 2012). These features help to stabilize uncertainty and provide the observer and observed with a degree of certainty in which they can adjust to their roles. Those structures were not a feature of this study. The changing settings, the multiple actors, varied 'experience-near' encounters, the in-flux of information and the amount and intensity of discussion challenged my focus. In the first two chapters of this thesis I mapped out how research on matching is predominately drawn from studies concerned with identifying the factors associated with disruptions. It is failure which underpins these explorations, a deficit orientation. I had been keen to shift the research gaze to ordinary relational practices, to illuminate the everyday. This aim proved hard to realize;

I am pulled backwards (or perhaps apart) by the experience of researching in a locality where I have worked. How can I attend to this encounter, to its generative potential, when the space and place is so imbued with my past encounters? Practically I am called out before I even get to the room where I can be observer, 'What are you doing here?' ask people every time I visit the social work office. My research identity is constantly interrupted by external forces but also by internal drives. I use my time with Debbie before and after the meetings to try and support her. I am trying to attend to her (and my) emotional needs in some way. I cannot keep the social worker in her box. This is not a tidy encounter with the field. I am a distracted and confused observer and I am also finding this encounter with the field very intense. Where are the ordinary moments? (Field note 3)

In this field note it is the 'practice-near' nature of the study that proves hard to marry with the aim of paying *close* attention to ordinary life. In supervision we wondered too; is it possible to be too 'practice-near'? The observation records in trying to follow the flows of discursive information fail at times to capture the everyday intricacies of communication between Debbie and Claire. The operationalization of the FANI method also comes undone as Debbie withdraws from the match and declines to be interviewed a second time. In the

interview with Claire I am so surprised by her initial response that I struggle to attend to her associations. In those first few weeks the deluge of emails that flooded my inbox and the hastily arranged meetings evoked both panic and excitement. As the match faltered the gaps between observations grew and the emails stopped. Initially as a researcher in the field I had felt on the back foot struggling to keep up and assimilate new information. Towards the end of the study time slowed down and a sense of sadness enveloped the observations. In the MMG group members described the case as like a roller-coaster. Whilst I do not claim to know how anyone else felt during these observations I can say that being 'near' to this process created feelings of anxiety, confusion, excitement, frustration, anger and sadness in me. The 'practice-near' methods in which I followed this case afforded me the opportunity to experience matching practices in real time.

Timeliness is a key consideration and drive of permanence policy and it is hardly surprising that dimensions of time emerge as a feature of the study. Furthermore, time is a central component of the infant observation methodology. The difficulties in aligning this research to the central tenets of the methodology (regularity, consistency) raised my anxiety but also sensitized me to dimensions of time. I think I became attuned to Debbie and her journey towards becoming a mother in a way I had not envisaged or anticipated and the intensity of this process became evident in a new light. I found it striking that as a social work practitioner I had omitted to notice the dimension of pace as a feature of matching practices.

The analytic approach and the writing strategies I have used have sought to capture the dramatic force of the case, to think about this aspect and make it accessible to the reader. I drew on theorists who drew their inspiration from the arts, particularly literature and the theatre. In many ways (structurally, substantively, analytically and stylistically) drama underpins this study. I have argued for the congruence of these approaches within the field of adoption and with the emotional landscape of this case. However, I am mindful of Jeyasingham's (2014) critique of ethnographic and mobile social work research (cited in Roy, 2017). He argues that there is a real danger with endowing a mythologized and dramatic quality to social work.

These situated events take on a mythology in discourse about social work, both lay and professional, which strip space of its textured, everyday reality and replace it with a scopically oriented, theatrical quality (cited in Roy, 2017, p.9).

This is a particularly prescient and unsettling critique given that I have actively sought to explore the drama of the everyday. I do not want to engage in professional, female or mother mythologizing. That would be reductive and pointless. I sought to traverse that particular hole and in that traversing I was influenced by the following quote from Kraemer (1996). She argues that the maternal subject could be productively understood as 'neither devalued nor feared, neither sanctified nor vilified...Simply subjectively alive and struggling' (cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.21). This seemed a good position to take. My intention had been to convey a 'scenic intelligibility' which also captured the texture of everyday matching practices. I am slightly reassured by Roy (2017) who acknowledges the dangers of mythology in these practice-near accounts but argues that;

The value of this work lies not in its character of being dramatic, although undoubtedly some of it is, or even – often at least – in what is said, but in the careful attention given to detailed descriptions of scenes and movements, which depict the mundane features of the difficulties of realizing everyday social work practice (Roy, 2017, p.9).

### **Analytic Reflections**

In the methodology chapter I set out my intention to use a phased approach to analysis. I began with a thematic analysis drawing on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). Through a 5 stage process the data set was organised and codified. In the subsequent three analysis chapters I followed chains of association and ideas arising from the thematic analysis. The aim was two-fold. First, I sought 'to provide a vivid, visualised, rendering of a data extract that preserves its emotional resonance during data analysis and for the reader' (Hollway and Froggett, 2012, para. 1.2). Second I worked to make 'explicit the contemporaneous interpretations and "wonderings" of the' researcher (Thomson, 2010, p.10). I used Lily's photograph as an analytic and presentational device. The photograph was given meaning in this data set and in this analysis through its participation in practices associated with permanence. I accessed scholarship on photographs through Rose (and on objects through Baraitser). I learnt that objects matter in the context of social practices. Through Baraitser I found Latour. His suggestion that objects should be viewed as actors offered me a different way to consider the photograph. Latour argues that we should follow the actors, defined as 'anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action' (cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.138). If we follow the flow,

We can begin to investigate the mutually constitutive relationships between humans and non-humans...their sociality ... the types of actions that flow from one

actor to another, the work actors do for each other, and the changes that their movements produce (p.138).

I drew loosely on Latour's provocation. The aim was to work with the photograph without losing sight of the object of inquiry. I was not being led by an object (as Latour proposes); I was using an object as a tool, to do work. The photograph helped me attend to practices and to setting and the anecdote provided the initial proposition (a way to begin). In the methodology chapter I positioned the anecdote in theatrical terms and described the photograph as a recurring motif. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue 'anecdotalism' is something qualitative researchers should strive to avoid, defining it as 'where one or a few instances of a phenomenon are reified into a pattern or theme, when it or they are actually idiosyncratic' (p.95). To describe an account as 'merely anecdotal' is to dismiss something as marginal (Baraitser, 2009). To purposely write anecdotally is to bring to the fore issues of validity, generalisability, objectivity and analytic rigour. My argument is that these are issues that should be at the forefront of all research practices. I also suggested that we might productively approach the study of matching practices through the lens of a suspicious practice. The juxtaposition of different (and in some cases suspicious) approaches to analysis and practices seemed congruent with a commitment to transdisciplinary work. My approach in developing 'experience distant' approaches *from* research built on 'experience near' research is an original methodological contribution. The juxtaposition of writing styles approach allowed for the power and accessibility of 'experience near' findings to be further consolidated through a deeply reflexive stance.

In this study I have sought to make visible the interpretative process and methods for engaging in interpretation have been adapted and developed as I have worked. The research design afforded the space and a toolkit of methods and strategies through which I could use my own subjectivity as a resource for the study. In this type of recursive engagement a risk is an over emphasis on the researcher. Here the researcher 'avoids the complexities and anxieties of knowing another' (Elliot, 2011, p.4) and instead 'settles for knowing oneself' (Thomson, cited in Elliot, 2011, p.4). I hope that this study has traversed that particular ravine but I'm not sure. Of help, in this respect, have been the reflective opportunities with colleagues and the contribution of the group processes.

### **Ethical Practices?**

This study generated a data set which contains sensitive and personal information. The data generated refers to many different experiences of adoption but at the heart of the study is

a single case. All names have been changed and I have worked to remove identifying information. It is likely that the participants would recognize themselves given the specificity of the data. I gained permission from the agency to undertake the study. I gained verbal and written permission from Debbie, Claire and all the group members and consent was re-negotiated throughout. As I undertook the study I came into direct contact with other people; Zara, Sandra, Jane and others. I checked with these people that they were happy to be part of the study. Zara, Jane and Sandra all gave their verbal consent. I have written about others who have not given their explicit consent, including Lily, Bob, Debbie's parents and Fay. The inclusion of data relating to Lily and to Fay is based on the consent of the agency. I achieved ethical clearance from the university based on this research design. I think though with Thomson (2010) that;

The psychological depth promised by these intensive methods raises a particular set of ethical and practical issues concerning the invasion of privacy, confidentiality (for researcher and researched) and the representation of data (p.4).

I understand the methods undertaken in this study to be intensive. I think within my relationship with Claire and Debbie practices of consent were navigated fairly successfully given the specific events and dynamics. Debbie and Claire were clear that at particular times they did not want my presence. As I commented in the methodology chapter it is in the writing and representation of the data that issues of confidentiality become more prescient. At the recruitment stage I found an unexpected benefit of using a method drawn from and entangled in the language of psychoanalysis. People understood that the research would seek to explore communication and relational dynamics and to do this in depth. Most people I approached did not feel able to commit to that type of research. During the (long and frustrating) attempts at recruitment I considered changing the language associated with the infant observation methodology in order to encourage people to participate. Feedback suggested that the words psychoanalysis and observation were off-putting. Numerous 'nearly' participants considered the study and then decided that it would be too exposing. Claire and Debbie agreed to be part of the study and did so having been fully informed. They both took some time to consider and make their decision. The upside of sticking with this approach was that issues of exposure and interpretation were on the table from the beginning within our relationships. I have not speculated as to why they decided to be part of this study or as to what use they made of me during the process. During this study I gained access to very personal information about Debbie and Claire. Whilst I had permission to use this information as data I did not take these decisions lightly.



I have documented my decision-making in relation to the inclusion of the disclosures of sexual abuse in the methodology chapter. The use of data and information were the subject of ongoing discussions in supervision. How could we take care of people? What more could be done in relation to anonymity? Did everything need to be shared as data?

In many ways these are questions routinely faced by ethnographic researchers. The additional complexity in a study of this sort is the use of data relating to children who have not explicitly consented to be a part of the research. I can look to the consents received by the agency and the university's ethic committee as proof of authorization but this feels insufficient. This thesis highlights the invisibility of children's perspectives and agency from decision-making bodies and further points to the multiple ways children can become lost within services. I cannot say that Noah, Paul, Joe, Fay or Lily were informed or consented to their inclusion in this study. This research does not occupy an elevated moral stance in relation to issues of children's rights and agency. It does highlight the complexities involved in doing this type of research and the particular issues raised when undertaking ethnographic work. There are risks involved in undertaking a practice-near research but this type of study can speak to the challenge posed by Shaw and Lorenz of research that attends 'to the complexity of social problems and acknowledges the value of inter-subjectivity in producing useable and ethically grounded evidence' (2016, p.308).

## **Chapter 9: Conclusion**

In this conclusion chapter I position myself as an authoritative figure; one with knowledge, a platform from which to speak and an audience to speak to. There is no other way because the function of the third Act is resolution; defined as ‘the quality of being determined or resolute’ and synonymous with ‘...purpose, purposefulness’ (Oxford Dictionaries, n.p.c).

In this chapter I specifically address the implications of these findings separately for practice, policy and research. To write about open-systems and psychosocial practices that transgress disciplinary, work, personal and public spaces then to purposely draw-up divisions seems conflicted. I think with time I could write a concluding chapter which might challenge these divisions through a more congruent and fluid framework. I imagine this would be constructed around the notion of practices but I’m all out of time so in this chapter I work with these separate spheres whilst recognising that they are all interconnected. I can begin by addressing all three simultaneously. Matching in adoption is still too often understood by practitioners (in research, policy and practice) as an event, a change of placement, something to be completed quickly, a sign of success or a failure if things don’t work out as intended. It is none of those things. Matching is family building and it requires collaborative, imaginative and complex relational practices across a highly charged open-system. It requires the capacity to act with confidence whilst understanding you might not be right and things might not work. It is a process of creation and as with all creations it involves destruction. This irreconcilability is inherent in matching. It is a tension that has to be recognised before it can ‘be negotiated and stabilised’ (Warner, 2015, p.172). Research, policy and practice all have roles to play in this negotiation and stabilisation.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

In this study I have suggested that the permanence process and matching practices creates liminal spaces which are highly affective. They are spaces of possibility as well as risk. Social work moves in and through these spaces affording the profession with opportunities for work and unique vantage points. Matching is a relational process and in recommending changes to social work practice I have focused in on three relationships (the practitioner/adopter; the professional network and the adopter/foster carer). Before I discuss those relationships I have to attend to another relational site whose absence is noticeable in this study.

Birth family involvement in matching practices: The role of birth families in matching has not been considered in this research or to my knowledge in any research. My study does indicate that a matching process may be a problematic time for direct contact between birth families, children and prospective adopters. A liminal hotspot is not a space where the additional feelings of loss, grief, guilt and trauma which are likely to be keenly felt in this complicated dynamic can be safely or humanely processed. This work does need to take place but in a period of relative calm where there is time and space to do it properly. It should not be rushed. Like matching, contact (between children and their kinship networks) should be considered as relational processes; never as simply an event. Research indicates that supportive professional practice can facilitate open, expansive and adaptive kinship networks which can be hugely beneficial to children (Neil, 2009).

Practitioner/adopter relationship: The relationship between a social worker and prospective adopter/s is integral to any matching process. It combines assessment, support, education and preparation. It facilitates a psychosocial transformation. This study illuminates how this practice relationship generates and has to navigate complex dynamics. In this study authority was difficult to reconcile with the supportive and emotional aspects of the practice relationship in the midst of a transformative process.

The practice-relationship undergoes significant changes through a matching process. A key implication for practice from this study is that the dynamics generated by a dyad (where there are single applicants) need specific consideration as they powerfully evoke a couple-like relationship. Joint and collaborative working with colleagues offers a way forward, as does inviting close friends of the applicant into the dyad and into deliberative spaces. The presence of a third helps to create thinking space. Joint working will not be necessary at every visit or meeting but should be used periodically through the assessment and during a matching process. In the liminal space of a match the practitioner and the applicant must have access to other 'minds' that are not themselves caught up in that space. As always practitioners need access to good supervision which can provide a space for critical reflection on their relationships.

An adoption assessment takes time. A matching process takes no time. A child can be encountered and then parented in a matter of days. This is an incredible dimensional shift (for everyone). Practitioners have to be responsive to the enormity of this process and to dimensions of time. The drive to move through this liminal space is very strong. When

matches are rushed important processing is by-passed. Wakelyn (2012) and Boswell and Cudmore (2014) have highlighted the impact on foster carers and children in these situations. My study supports their findings and highlights the impact and the demands made on prospective adoptive parents and on social workers. It highlights how emotionally and physically exhausting matching is and the risks involved. Some children, men and women will need more time to adapt to this change of pace because of their personal biographies.

Assessing social workers as part of their preparation work with prospective adopters should be talking specifically about matching and its transformative impact. Introduction plans from other matches should be shared and used as tools to prepare applicants for the demands of the process. Specifically social workers should be talking about the normality of ambivalence in relation to becoming parents and specifically in relation to mothering. Ambivalence is to be expected, it is a normal response to the radical changes generated by becoming a parent. It should be explicitly recognised. Reflective spaces to talk about difficult feelings can be more easily created in the slower pace of an assessment. It is difficult to open up these spaces in the midst of an emotional onslaught generated by a rapid transformation.

Prospective parents and particularly mothers may also welcome a space to think about ambivalence outside of the social work relationship (see Luckock, et al., 2017). Linking with experienced adopters (who have processed their own 'becomings') in a mentor capacity would be useful in this respect. This kind of intergenerational relationship has the potential to offer reciprocal benefits. In the Luckock et al. (2017) study mentors, through their training and in their support relationships, were encouraged to re-visit their own experiences of *becoming* parents. They reported feeling more positive about their own family relationships as a result.

There are multiple opportunities to juxtapose the disparate and different temporalities of an adoption journey. Paying closer attention to temporal dimensions could help foster sensitive and reflective practices. I have focused here on the adopter's journey and experiences but the same spaces and sensitivity are needed for the foster carer.

The professional network: Reflective spaces are difficult to carve out in the midst of a match and need to be established before the transformation is underway. In a matching process It

is necessary for a professional network to be established physically (to have existed as a material and embodied entity) *before* the foster carer/s and adopter/s are brought into this forum. My recommendation is that a meeting should be scheduled after matching panel and before the introductions planning meeting. Outcomes and tasks may be generated from this meeting but that is not its primary function. This is a symbolic, reflective and thinking space which has a protective and generative function. This meeting does need additional resources but this is an important investment in a workforce. Recruitment and retention of staff is an ongoing problem in the sector. My study demonstrates that there is a high risk of harmful practices in matching that will continue and be carried forward into future work and families if unchecked.

When there are other foster children living in the foster home their social workers should be included in this meeting. The key questions for this network at this stage are;

- 1) What are the relational dynamics that need to be negotiated and stabilised in order to undertake this work?
- 2) What might we as professionals be carrying into this match from our experiences?
- 3) How can we support each other and do we need additional support?
- 4) How can we *use* this opportunity to enhance the lives of the children who share the foster family home?

There is a pressing need to focus on the permanency needs of all children who experience state care and intervention. In a field beset by conflict this is a powerful consensus across policy, research and practice and across practice spheres. In this study I have argued that matching processes through which an adoptive family is created will frequently involve children who are living in foster families. The impact of matching on these children and their relationships is not known. We need to understand more about how children and their foster families are navigating these enormous changes. But we cannot wait for research to catch up. Social work can expand its conceptual understanding of permanency now. For the agency and its workers it involves a simple readjustment in focus away from risk minimisation towards an appreciation of the transformative potential created by (matching's) liminal spaces. We can and should make use of these risky spaces. As attention is focused on the needs of the child to be adopted a concurrent and equal focus should be given to other children who are impacted on by the match. This is entirely feasible. It is probable that in many cases it is already a part of practice (as in this case study). We can

make better use of existing practices and decision-making forums to ensure this work is given the recognition, status and the careful thinking it requires.

The foster carer/s prospective adopter/s relationship: Foster carers and adopters have complex roles and encounter multiple paradoxes in a matching process. This complexity and its demands must be recognised; they are not simply fellow professionals and words like placement are demeaning and reductive. The relationship between them should be treated with kid gloves and professionals need to understand that it requires skilled family work. This relationship has to be nurtured in order to develop some roots of mutual recognition. Collaborative relationship building at this stage of a matching process may help sow a seed from which an expansive kinship can grow in both families.

Foster carers and prospective adopters should not meet for the first time at a planning meeting. Respective and prospective family lives have to be shared and this requires a space cushioned from the demands of planning. This embryonic relationship must also be protected from the noise and affectivity of a social work office. Practitioners may be desensitised to the anxiety and distress which can be encountered in these spaces. Prospective parents are not. Prospective parents are acutely sensitive and should be considered as ‘...whole new kinetic being[s], both viscous and porous to sensation’ (Baraitser, 2009, p.157, my brackets). Foster carers too will be vulnerable as they face the loss of the child. My recommendation is that where logistically possible the initial meeting should take place in the prospective adopters’ home where the foster carer/s should be warmly welcomed. It would allow the prospective adopter/s the opportunity to begin this relationship on home ground. To say here we are and this is us. This is our home, where we hope to love and care for this child. This is the place where we hope she will sleep, eat, be bathed, play, cry, do her homework/ argue about homework, do her growing and from where she will explore the world. Welcome. To welcome the foster carer into the adopters’ home is a mark of respect and recognition of their role and relationship to the child. It would also afford the foster carer the opportunity to begin imagining the child in their new family and to start the necessary grieving process.

This meeting does require a practitioner whose presence provides both a bridge and an important signifier of the importance of this relationship. Photographs should be exchanged, hot drinks provided and conversations about the weather should be actively encouraged. This is not a time for planning or decision-making. A photograph of the foster

carer and the prospective adopter together could be taken and displayed in both homes for at least the duration of the match. Photographs are a powerful tool in this work. They can be used ‘...as a technology that helps to picture and perform the things [we all want]: a family that is together’ (Rose, 2011, p. 131, my brackets).

#### The adopter/s and the agency:

Social work is charged with translating the power of the state to intervene in family life through close proximity to families in the home and the wider community. Expression of this power includes 'authoritative' forms of intervention (Warner, 2015, p.160).

The authority and responsibility invested in the adoption agency and the social work role is integral to matching and this is where the notion of matching as a 'social work process' is useful. It is a reminder of the specific responsibilities invested in the profession, 'charged with translating the power of the state to intervene in family life' (ibid).

Professional responsibility cannot be relinquished by simply declaring the views of service users as the overriding, authoritative reference point. Taking care not to turn clients into objects of academic or professional attention does not mean giving their subjectivity an unchallengeable and un-dialectic status (Lorenz, 2016, pp.464-465).

Adopters are being encouraged to find their own children. There are complexities with this development that are not visible in policy discourse. Luckock et al. (2017) found that prospective adoptive parents did not feel empowered by having a greater role either in the matching or assessment process. Instead they reported feeling abandoned by social workers. Respondents were not seeking more responsibility for themselves; instead they wanted social workers to exercise their responsibilities properly. The push towards more adopter-led matching involves approved adopters engaging in multiple imaginary parental relationships with children. Whilst some of these tentative links may go no further than contacting a social worker the emotional labour and the generative dynamics associated with considering/imagining a child as a potential son or daughter is likely to be psychologically significant. Some agencies are now reallocating social workers at the matching stage and employing administrators to facilitate links. Adopters are expected to form new relationships with strangers or technologies at a time of heightened vulnerability and risk. These are not simply administrative tasks. This is a dangerous cost-cutting exercise that ignores the complexity and significance of these processes for prospective parents and undermines the practice relationship; fragmenting it at a seminal time.

My study illuminates the ways in which prospective parents are engaging in family practices before they formally meet a child. This is important and highly relevant information which needs to be part of an ongoing assessment and preparation process. How are these experiences being processed by the applicant? What gets carried forward into future family life? How do these experiences become reconciled with other experiences of loss and particularly with experiences of IVF or the still-birth of a baby? How do these experiences impact and intersect with the transformative practices required to make a family through adoption? Are they re-awakened/relived/reconciled through matching? Agencies and social workers must stand alongside applicants to facilitate sense making and must not opt out of this work.

### **Implications for Policy**

The government's plan to introduce a regionalised adoption system is underpinned by an anti-obstructive narrative. Regionalisation was first outlined in 'Regionalising Adoption' (Department for Education, 2015a). In the paper and under the heading 'What sort of change do we want to see?' the *first* point is 'a system where children are matched with the most suitable adopter as quickly as possible' (p.9). The timeliness agenda is associated with the promotion of a pragmatic approach; 'a great deal more pragmatism in matching and a greater role for adopters in initiating matches would not endanger placements' (Department for Education, 2013, p. 34). As other researchers (including Kirton, 2013) have noted timeliness as it is used (prominently and repeatedly) promotes a narrow focus which is not simply unhelpful it is also counter-productive. Timeliness as a policy concept is now divisive.

...we are witnessing increasing strain on the lives of vulnerable children and families as a result of changes to the benefit system and, through public sector budget restraints, a serious reduction in the ability of local authorities to discharge their duty of care to such vulnerable children and families (The Care Inquiry, 2013, p.2).

In the context of austerity the repeated demands to have children adopted quickly has animated the enduring suspicions surrounding adoptive family life. Timeliness is now too closely associated with one side of the pendulum (adoption as rescue) to hold credibility. It is also too often used alongside the language of placement and pragmatics; thereby reducing the adoptive family to that of a placement provider *and* perpetuating the damaging notion that foster care is something to be escaped from quickly.



Conflicts arising at the subjective level might therefore be subjectively suffered, but are always produced in relation with others and therefore never without a sociocultural dimension or free from the contradictions of society at large (Krueger, 2017, p.51).

My research highlighted how the combination of the 'happy ever after narrative' of adoption (Featherstone et al 2018, p.10), the pressures on time and resources can directly impact on matching practices. In matching 'the contradictions of society at large' (ibid) can be encountered in a particularly intense way. Policy makers must recognise that their statements, language and concepts are not neutral.

'Our adoption reforms will be delivered as part of our wider children's social care reforms, because children's social care must be treated as a whole' (Department for Education, 2016, pp.5-6). There *is* then an understanding that adoption and matching should be understood through a systems perspective. Yet still divisive practices continue which serve to undermine the government's credibility in relation to its commitment to all children who are looked after by the state. In the recent report 'Foster care in England' (Department for England, 2018) the authors propose radical changes to existing statutory responsibilities in relation to children in foster care, explicitly citing cost saving as a motivator. Willow (2018) noted that all these proposals were originally included in exemption clauses attached to the Children and Social Work Bill (2017). These clauses were withdrawn after sustained cross-party opposition forced their removal. Less than a year later;

Every one of these reductions in children's legal safeguards has appeared as recommendations in the Narey/Owers review of foster care. When it comes to independent reviewing officers, though, the ambition has extended far beyond removing them from "low-risk cases" (a deeply problematic concept anyhow) to their complete demise. A footnote on page 38 calculates that local authorities could save up to £76 million if they got rid of every independent reviewing officer. This would affect every child in care, including those remanded to custody (Willow, 2018, n.p.).

The explicit link made in this report between cost cutting and the lives of children in care gives a strong message that these are children whose worth is questionable. Furthermore the process in which these proposals have been put forward creates suspicion. Traditional mechanisms through which policy and legislation are developed (such as Green and White Papers) which allow for deliberation and debate are being bypassed (Willow, 2018). Radical and controversial ideas are put forward through opaque means, in this example through a review which calls for the removal of independent reviewing officers in which none of the respondents called for the removal of independent reviewing officers.

This research suggests that the policy focus on timeliness, the undermining of foster care and the constant attacks on deliberative processes contributes to the maelstrom of psychosocial pressures which are at work during a matching process. The pressure to move quickly impedes the capacity of the practitioners and the agency to do their work and to engage with the conflictual dynamics that can be generated in an adoption matching process (findings which chime with those of Wakelyn, 2012; Boswell and Cudmore, 2014; Randell, 2013; RIP, 2014 and Selwyn et al, 2015). This is a high risk situation given the stakes and the complexities. It creates unnecessary vulnerability across a workforce, across multiple families and ultimately in the lives of children.

In the UK we have been gifted and collectively forged a uniquely powerful concept; permanence. This concept is highly sophisticated, easy to understand, premised on hope and it continues to work across divisive and diverse spaces as a unifying force. In recent years government reforms and policy statements have explicitly promoted the commitment to permanence for all children in state care. This is to be welcomed.

Statutory guidance, research and practice guidance are aligned in respect of the necessity of good information practices for permanence. Information must be sought. In working with this data-set I have highlighted that the pursuit of information is only a beginning. It is a collective responsibility to keep doors open, to stay attuned and to collectively make sense of what lies behind them. Lives and relationships are always in process. Thinking spaces can make all the difference to family life especially at times of transition and when trauma and loss are present. It is in this context that panels are absolutely vital to the matching process. 'Panels play an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice' (Department for Education, 2013a, p.18). My study suggests that panels do more than this; they also facilitate the psychosocial movement required to create an adoptive family. Their role is crucial in publically/officially recognising the embryonic adoptive family at a time when questions of legitimacy and authenticity threaten the very process of family formation. They are an essential part of matching understood as a rite of passage process. The role of permanence panels is under review. In 2012 the Coalition government signalled their intent to remove 'the bureaucracy that currently makes the process more difficult' (Department for Education, 2012b).

Panels are a necessary bureaucracy in the way a registrar or celebrant is an integral part of a wedding ceremony or a funeral. These ceremonies would be completed faster without bureaucrats, but would they have any meaning? The work of panels is under-explored.

Permanency is founded on relational work across highly conflictual spaces. It requires commitment, skill and imagination. Divisive figures and practices impact negatively on the whole system. In policy making (as in a matching process), togetherness has to be performed and through this performance it may even be created. The sector urgently needs skilled performers at policy level.

### **Implications for Research**

In order to build our knowledge and develop a greater understanding of matching practices we need to significantly develop the research base. As Quinton (2012) notes there is *no* body of work that examines how ‘assessments of children and adopters are brought together in the matching process’ (p.77). If assessment is, as I have argued, integral to matching then we have *no* research on matching. There is very little empirical work on which to develop concepts. These are serious shortcomings especially on the back of an enormous investment in adoption research and given that the Government’s drive to substantially reorganise the sector is focused on matching.

Practice-near research: It is widely acknowledged that there needs to be ‘closer synergies between those designing and those taking up research’ (Ruch, 2016, p.17). Back in 2012 Quinton referred to ‘the defensive circling of professional wagons’ (p.112) which reject the applicability of research to real world situations. If research outputs continually fail to address the complexity of the real world then the divide between practice and research becomes a chasm and in that space cynicism flourishes. Cynicism is not conducive to learning or to good practice and a cynical profession has nothing to offer anyone. Practice-near research can address some of these challenges and the infant observation paradigm offers an exciting and adaptable methodology. It is a method that is sensitive to temporal processes and relational change. It is ideally suited to both social work and to matching. Principles and practices drawn from the infant observation tradition are already used in social work pedagogy and are underpinning innovative initiatives promoting reflective practices. In a field of study that is beset by binary thinking and high anxiety infant observation principles are not simply useful; they are absolutely necessary. This is a

method that has the potential to bridge a range of practices and to make a contribution to learning at a personal and organisational level. The use of groups and the attention to subjectivity, process and temporality offer radical new avenues for research in the field. Analytic processes for researchers and practitioners can be enhanced through the hermeneutic and recursive employed in the infant observation method. My research alongside Wakelyn's (2012) demonstrates that infant observation methods can be adapted to study the experiences of a matching process.

To engage in this type of research is to encounter complex ethical issues. Quinton (2012) in his review suggests that 'doing matching [...] is formidably difficult, as is research into it' (p.112, my brackets). I think my study illustrates those difficulties. I believe with Quinton that, despite the difficulties, '... not to find out more is a serious disservice to children, adopters and birth families' (p.112). I would also include foster carers and social workers in that formula.

Juxtaposition: In this study the juxtaposition of temporal and intergenerational perspectives afforded the researcher different vantage points through which to consider liminal spaces. It is an approach which could be usefully developed in social work and adoption specific research. Juxtaposition is a useful methodological tool and is particularly helpful in evoking the 'dynamism of real lives' (Thomson, 2010, p.16). In Thomson's work 'different kinds of sources and material generated at different times' (p.16) are considered alongside each other. Throughout the analysis I used the same analytic and presentational device. See below:

'I just collapsed with a virus and didn't get out of bed for a week. I guess these things manifest themselves through your whole being' (Debbie, Observation Record 5). Zara has a migraine after delivering news that a father is dead. Debbie collapses and is bed-ridden following the end of her relationship with Lily. In the ASG all the participants could recollect physical and mental illness as part of their experiences of becoming mothers through adoption. This was sometimes in the context of things going wrong (matches not progressing) but also when things had gone relatively smoothly.

Dawn: when I came to the day of taking our boys, I was really, really poorly and now I couldn't not go and pick them up and stupidly though really, because I spent the next 24 hours in bed.

Pauline: Yes, I wasn't well either.

Andrea: Stress (Chapter 6).

In this example the juxtaposition of these sources from across temporalities allows the analysis to stay close to 'experience-near accounts' whilst not 'eschewing generalisation' (Hollway, 2015, p.44). Dawn, Pauline and Andrea became mothers through adoption over 20 years ago. Their recollections of their experiences resonate powerfully with the data generated by the observations taking place in 2016. Intergenerational perspectives are generally untapped in social work research. I think this approach may also be helpful in navigating polarity both in research practice *and* in the delivery of research findings. Working with data generated across time and experiences encourages us to think more expansively about these highly affective spaces. In the ASG women engage with both their own experiences and Debbie's. As a group they talk about their own vulnerability and their acute awareness of the vulnerability of others (children, foster carers, social workers). The enduring impact of this process and the ways in which vulnerability is manifest, navigated and silenced is illuminated in ways that would not have been possible without the juxtaposition of intergenerational perspectives.

Future Lines of Enquiry: In this study I used transdisciplinary approaches to explore and analyse the data generated from the study. Matching provided a (possibly unique) epistemic lens into a range of diverse issues and practices. In the field the almost complete dominance of process and outcome studies have left an expanse of practice un-explored. There are four key areas which have been opened up in this study as future lines of enquiry: work and non-work relations; maternal practices, liminal spaces and organisational practices.

Work and non-work relations: Scholarship in the New Sociology of Work is addressing many of the themes developed in this study, particularly around 'the messiness, the mutual imbrications – of the relation between paid work and other life concerns' (Wolkowitz, 2009, cited in Kirton, 2013b, pp. 658-659).

Reconceptualizing work involves bringing to the forefront of our analytical prism an appreciation of the complexity of the dynamic and interconnected character of work relations... Rather than isolating work from non-work activities, the project becomes one to explore the points at which they become entangled and embedded as well as differentiated (Pettinger et al. 2006 cited in Thomson and Kehily, 2010, p.233).

Matching involves a collaborative effort. It is a process where work and non-work practices 'become entangled and embedded as well as differentiated' (ibid). In this study work and

home life were entangled for all those involved in a matching process. For the foster carer this was particularly powerfully felt. Foster care can be understood as a unique 'case study in the (re)configuration and negotiation of boundaries between work and non-work' (Kirton, 2013, p.658). The '...dominance of child welfare concerns in fostering research has meant little consideration of its labour process' (p.667). The labour process and the work life balance of the foster care role emerged as highly significant issues in matching. Research across these domains is necessary and could be enriched through collaborative projects between social work and aligned disciplines (e.g. the New Sociology of Work).

Maternal practices: Attachment studies have proven to be enormously productive for the adoption field, particularly in illuminating dyadic relationships. Attachment theory like all theoretical perspectives has its blind-spots. Gender is an enduring issue for attachment research and therefore for practice. Luckock et al. (2017) found that in an *innovative* attachment focused adoption service heteronormative ideas were routinely espoused. The authors argued that '...policy and practice should pay attention more explicitly to the likely impact on children of assumptions about parenting roles and responsibilities which are heteronormative' (p.8).

Representations of mothering emerge through and into a world characterised by strong (often deeply buried and taken for granted) investments in certain images of mothers, by professional dogmas and ingrained habits, institutional and personal defences and ideological differences across fault lines of class, ethnicities and religious belief (Hollway, 2015, p.24).

My research suggests that gender and specifically the maternal should be a key analytic lens when considering matching practices because of what happens, who is involved and because of our 'investments in certain images of mothers' (ibid). The field of maternal theory has long been engaging with complex questions relating to identity, relationships, labour, love and power which have huge resonance for matching practices. Conceptual resources, methodologies and a wealth of empirical studies in this field could be productively engaged with by researchers in the adoption field. The field of fatherhood studies is emergent and questions around the making of fathers through adoption have yet to be engaged with. This work needs to be done. The work involved in building an adoptive family offers rich data and a unique epistemic lens into maternal and paternal practices. This is a promising site for future collaborative research relationships.

Liminal spaces: Anthropologists, systems theorists and scholars in organisational studies have long worked with concepts of liminality to understand individual and societal processes and practices. Conceptually it allows space, time, process and emotion to be considered together. In this study it did other work too. Liminality provided a way of thinking about experience that transcended the divisions associated with adoption. By working with this concept colleagues in Denmark could easily understand culturally specific UK adoption practices as could academic colleagues in other disciplines and a class of undergraduate students that I taught on an inter-professional practice module. We all experience transformative processes at times in our life and these can provide experiential resources that can be used as a way of connecting to each other and to ideas. Liminality is a generative transdisciplinary concept that could be productively used by adoption and social work researchers to expand the scope, the relevance and the accessibility of research in the field.

Organisational Practices: Adoption as an area of practice generates extraordinary levels of anxiety. In the UK adoption policy is formulated and delivered 'in the context of the new matrix of tensions' (Cooper, 2010, p. 229) produced by the interaction between the welfare state and what Bobbit (2003) describes as 'the market state' (cited in Cooper, 2010, p. 230). The events of recent years where we have witnessed highly public polarised conflicts between the judiciary and the government that have impacted directly on day-to-day practice have been unprecedented. The fragmentation of adoption services from local authority social care provision and the policy driven splits in practice tools and relationships represent significant challenges for social work. In this context;

...the role of formal organisations and organisational cultures is key because they are the most important intermediate social formations standing between the policy machine and citizens themselves (Cooper, 2010, p.236).

My study suggests that psychosocial scholarship and research questions that seek to illuminate the role of organisations in relation to adoption practices amidst 'the new matrix of tensions' (ibid) could provide important insights into highly significant processes; processes that have relevance for all our lives.

## Chapter 10: Afterword

Elliot (2011) describes 'the researcher as a person, as well as an instrument, embodied and embedded in the field' (p.17). She also notes the emotional labour and the lack of analytic closure in psychosocial research. I connect with (what I read as) the ambivalence of Elliot's paper. During this study I have been excited and enriched and worn out and depressed. Perhaps this is the norm for all doctoral students. I have also wondered if the demands and ambitions of my specific methodological approach and the limitations imposed by a singular PhD project are reconcilable. What are the costs of a psychosocial study and are they worth it? As Baraitser (2009) notes in respect of her own transdisciplinary psychosocial ambitions, 'this holding in tension, this straddling of philosophical positions, this 'impossibility', will no doubt end in tears' (p.9). There is also confluence here with more pressing concerns raised by the doctoral study and this specific point in my life where I consider the future. I am also tired. Is any of this relevant? When should interpretation stop and why am I writing an afterword? What else is there to say? This is the point Elliot (2011) makes in her paper. There is a lack of analytic closure within psychosocial methodologies; through these approaches '...finality is never certain, there is always a new dimension to add' (Powell n.d., cited in Thomson, 2010, p.6).

To work with a commitment to uncertainty and process leaves a sense of incompleteness which can feel dangerously close to failure. Failure, 'loss, lack and alterity' (Baraitser, 2009, p.9) are woven throughout this thesis. I set out determined to produce non-deficit orientated adoption research but this 'case' compelled me to examine deficits even as I sought to highlight generative practices. The purpose of the research was to illuminate the practices involved in making an adoptive family yet during this study no family was made. In the introductory chapter I abhorred the lack of attention given to the experiences of birth families in policy, practice and research but those experiences are missing here too.

In thinking about the disjuncture between intentions and outcomes it transpires that there was a reason for an afterword after all. I do have a final point to make and it is this: I am letting myself off the hook because '...more than ever, we need a politics that makes *space and time* for human fallibility (and not just for women)' (Rose, 2017, p.7, my italics).



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### Appendix 1: Synopsis of Observations

Observation 1. 09.02.16: In this first observation I meet Claire and Debbie at the social work office. My first encounter with Debbie is in the reception area. Claire collects us and we walk through locked doors to an office. Claire and Debbie talk about Lily and the plans being made for the 'match'. Discussion centres on Lily's health and issues with her hearing.

Observation 2. 08.03.16: In this observation Debbie attends the Matching Panel which I observe. Claire, Zara (Lily's social worker), and Karen (Debbie's friend) also attend. We meet in a car park and then walk through the building to a waiting room. We drink and eat biscuits and talk about Lily and the process. We are then invited into the committee room and Claire, Debbie and Zara respond to a series of questions. We then return to the waiting room to await the outcome which is positive. Claire and Debbie hug each other. We all walk out together.

Observation 3. 09.03.16: Debbie attends the social work office for an introductions planning meeting. I meet Debbie in the reception area. Shortly after Jane (Lily's foster carer) and her social worker Sandra arrives. Jane gives Debbie a photograph of Lily. Claire arrives and takes us to an office for the meeting. Zara is due to attend but is absent with a migraine. The meeting lasts just over 2 hours and the plans for the introductions are made. After this meeting Claire and Debbie meet for a further 15 minutes which I observe. Debbie and I cycle away from the office together.

Observation 4. 14.03.16: Attend the social work office to meet with Debbie and Claire. The meeting is to finalise the plans for meeting Lily. I sit in the reception waiting and try not to listen to the conversations that are audible through the thin office walls. Claire arrives and tells me how busy she is. Debbie arrives and we all walk to an office. Claire makes us fresh coffee. Debbie shares her experiences with me of preparing for Lily over the weekend. She has bought furniture, child's things and has had many gifts from friends. Debbie has made a book that can be shown to Lily with photographs of Debbie in her house. Claire advises Debbie to sign herself as Mummy in the book.

Observation 5. 14.04.16: I bump into Debbie coming out of the station. We walk together pushing our bikes to the office. Zara and Claire meet us at the office. We are led through to the back of the building and sit in a large room overlooking a playground. Zara and Claire update Debbie on Lily's health and there is a long discussion about the introductions process and future planning. Debbie and I leave together on our bikes.

Observation 6. 19.05.16: This observation takes place at Debbie's house. I arrive before Claire. Debbie shows me round the kitchen and her garden. Claire arrives 20 minutes late. We sit together in the living room. Debbie talks about her decision-making and her emerging relationship with Bob. Claire and Debbie agree that the match with Lily will not now take place. We all go upstairs to see the room that had been made ready for Lily. Claire takes Lily's photograph. We leave the house and Claire gives me a lift back home.

Observation 7. 16.06.16: Observation is at Debbie's house. Claire and I arrive at the same time. The meeting lasts about an hour. Debbie wants to know when she can pursue the adoption process and what that process might be now she is with Bob. There is some disagreement and uncertainty relating to timescales and what might happen next. Claire and I leave with these tensions unresolved.



**Appendix 2: Tables and Figures**

**Figure 1:** Dixel Pixel Human Tree. Licence purchased from GStock July 2018.  
<https://glstock.com/purchases/236653> (Front Cover)

**Figure 2:** Data Extract from Observation 2 (p.90).

**Figure 3:** Data Extract from Observation 4 (p.93).

**Figure 4:** Data Extract from MMG1 (p.93).

**Figure 5:** Data Extract from ASG (p.94).

**Figure 6:** Data Extract from Field note 4 (p.94).

**Figure 7:** Thematic Map (p.97).

**Figure 8:** Final Thematic Map (p.98).

**Table 1:** Table summarising the data-set (p.83).

**Table 2:** Reading the analytic chapters through the form of a novel (p.176)