

Advocating for Adopters through Research

Seldom Heard Voices Forum

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- Professor in Lancaster University
 - Research in the social and ethical aspects of health and medicine
 - Qualitative researcher
 - Sensitive topics, seldom heard groups
 - Chair of the Faculty of Health and Medicine Research Ethics Committee
 - Member of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Adoption and Permanence
 - Adopter
 - Adoptee

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- > 80,000 children in care (Department of Education, 2022)
 - Research shown that adoption = greater stability and improved child developmental outcomes (Hornfeck et al., 2019)
 - Adoption rates decreasing
 - Covid effect?
 - Fewer adopters?
 - Children remain in care (longer), adopted older, sibling sets
 - Experienced significant traumatic events and early adversity
 - Impacts upon children's brain development, and their behaviours, thoughts and feelings (Cairns, 2008; Sonuga-Barke et al., 2017)
 - Impact upon the family, including adopters' mental health (Hamilton et al., 2007; Lyttle et al., 2021).



Adopters Advocacy



<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/adopters>

- Lack of research that focuses on prospective adopters and adopters needs
- Adopters Advocacy aims to bring into focus the needs of prospective adopters and adopters, whilst not diminishing the needs of adoptees and their birth families.
 - To promote and conduct high-quality interdisciplinary research about adopters needs throughout Lancaster University and beyond to have a tangible impact on policy, practice and process.
 - To develop collaborations with key stakeholders in the adoption community across the UK and beyond, working together to generate research that improves the adoption experience for adopters.
 - To provide a locus for external funding applications for research that places a focus on adopters needs.

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- Current project
 - Improve knowledge, awareness and understanding of adopters' mental health needs
 - Generate better understanding of existing support available to adopters when experiencing mental health issues and what support adopters want to benefit their mental health.
 - Explore how adopters wish for their mental health experiences to be researched.

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- Briefly share what we know already about adopters' mental health
 - Highlight two areas for future research
 - Promote responsible research, sensitively done
 - Research challenges
 - Research design considerations
 - Ethically done
 - Based upon literature searches and reviews
 - *Thanks to Lacey Johnson, Rhiannon O'Marah, & Dr Lina Hamad*
 - Research experience
 - *Thanks to Ellie Vowles*

Post Adoption Depression and Secondary Trauma

- PAD is not hormone-related, characterized by a set of symptoms indicating persistent low mood occurring within a month of a child placed (Foli et al., 2016; Payne et al., 2010).
- Approx 32% of UK adopters become depressed (Senecky et al., 2009).
- Less well known is the potential for adopters to experience secondary trauma (Figley, 1995).
 - Adopted children, who have experienced trauma, are likely to be in a constant state of terror that is replicated physiologically by the adoptive parents, affecting their own resilience, and leading to hyperarousal or disassociation of their own emotions (Cairns, 2008).
- Makes adopters vulnerable to compassion fatigue (Cairns, 2008).

- Adoption disruption is when a family is considered to be in crisis, or the child has been removed from the adoptive home and returned to foster care (Selwyn et al., 2015).
- Official national statistics of adoption disruption unknown or unavailable publicly.
- Research has shown that key predictors for adoption disruption:
 - The age of the child at placement (Dance & Rushton, 2005).
 - The child's behaviours due to their adverse early lives (Lyttle et al., 2021).
 - The lack of pre-placement preparation (Lyttle et al., 2021).
 - The lack of post-placement support from services (Lyttle et al., 2021).

Key Research Challenges, Design and Ethics

- Retaining adopters' engagement in the research (Anthony et al., 2019)
 - Study design choice e.g. multiple phases to a study or longitudinal research
 - Recruitment e.g. extended period of recruitment that overlaps with data collection
 - Participants e.g. increase the number of participants recruited to ensure that project still viable when participants withdraw.
 - Data collection e.g. prolonged period of data collection, and flexibility when collecting data, reflect, regret, and right to withdraw.

Key Research Challenges, Design and Ethics

- Difficulty admitting challenges and experiencing shame, fear, anxiety, depression (Anthony et al., 2019; Weistra & Luke, 2019)
- Learning the full extent, depth and range of adopters' emotions.
- May not participate (Cregeen, 2022)
- Focus on the children, rather than themselves (Neil et al, 2020)

Key Research Challenges, Design and Ethics

- Ask adopters how they wish to share their experiences.
 - Individual or joint interviews, in person or at a distance (emails, phone/online).
 - Consider providing a list of questions and asking participants to record their responses and sharing the recording with the researcher.
 - Creative modes such as poems, photos, journalling, drawings, and letter writing.
 - Provide stimuli such as case studies, vignettes, newspaper articles, videos, blogs, song lyrics to create distance whilst also be able to discuss particular situations, circumstances, emotions, experiences etc.

Key Research Challenges, Design and Ethics

- Dissemination.
 - Identity revealed and sharing demographic details.
 - Creative responses e.g. infographics.
 - Summarising or grouping participants and sharing multiple quotes e.g. participants who has adopted siblings in the last four years claimed...

Concluding Comments

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- Adopters are a neglected community, and their voices seldom heard. Research with adopters plays a vital role in changing this.
 - Researchers must collaborate with adopters to design research that will enable adopters to share their adoption experiences.
 - Research that focuses on adopters' experiences has the potential to initiate positive shifts in adoption policy, practice and process for *all* those involved in adoption, as well as ensure that any changes are evidence-based.