

Birth fathers' perspectives on the adoption of their children from care.

This proposal and the associated ethical submission has now been approved by the University of East Anglia Department of Social Work and Psychology.

Introduction

This proposal is based on a pilot study on this subject, which I carried out between February and October 2007 as part of a portfolio to complete my MA (Clifton 2007).

Most children are adopted in England after care proceedings in which the majority are birth parents have either opposed the adoption plan or not consented (Neil 2000). Social workers proposing adoption for children in these circumstances understandably find it difficult to engage parents in the process of planning for adoption.

Birth *fathers* have proved particularly difficult to engage, a difficulty that has been interpreted as indifference of their child's fate (Clapton 2007). Although birth fathers of adopted children have been previously studied (see *Relevant literature* below), the nature of adoption has changed within the last 30 years.

This generation of birth fathers is more socially marginalised, harder to reach, and is, by reputation, both troubled and troublesome for their children and to welfare agencies.

For those children who require adoption, the birth father's role is still important for the child in promoting a strong sense of identity. In relation to *future* children of this vulnerable group of fathers, the aim is to engage more successfully with them so that fewer children need to be looked after by local authorities. In either case, a better understanding of father perspectives is essential to achieve better outcomes for children.

In recent social care policy, there has been a strong push to maximise the involvement of fathers in the care of their children and to concentrate in particular on vulnerable or marginalised fathers (Department for Education and Skills 2006; 2007; Department of Health 2004). The aim of these policy changes is both to benefit children and to attend to the needs of fathers and the barriers to their positive involvement with their children. Moreover, since 2003, the introduction of the adoption support provisions of the Adoption and Children Act (2002) entitle birth fathers and other birth relatives to an assessment of their own support needs in relation to their child's adoption.

However, there is a mismatch between ambitious social policy for fathers and the reality for the most vulnerable fathers. The available literature concerning birth

father's perspectives suggest that fathers feel excluded from decisions about their children and have views which are not usually heard (Clapton 2003; 2007). Services for children and families are still mainly provided by women for women and children (O'Brien 2004) and the development of gender sensitive practice now required by law¹ is still in its infancy. Adoption agencies have rapidly developed adoption support services since 2003 but are still poor at engaging birth fathers (Commission for Social Care Inspection 2006, p19).

In any case, little is known about the perspectives of *this* vulnerable group of fathers, how to engage them and how to offer services that they might find relevant. Finding out more about those perspectives, I would argue, is a key to targeting future research, provision and practice development.

The purposes of the proposed study.

This is a proposal to elucidate birth fathers' perspectives regarding the adoption of their children, their hopes and feelings about their children, their perceptions of themselves as parents, their feelings about future contact and other related issues. Although this study focuses specifically on fathers whose children are adopted, it is intended that it will throw light upon the key stages that precede adoption planning: the family support and child protection processes.

It is hoped that the study's findings will:

- ❖ help social workers' and other professionals to better understand the perspectives of fathers during family support and child protection activity;
- ❖ inform and inspire new strategies for engaging fathers positively in the child protection process, perhaps enabling more children to remain at home safely.
- ❖ challenge stereotypical thinking about this group of fathers enabling more differentiated thinking.

Where adoption is the preferred plan it is hoped the study will:

- ❖ enable adoption agencies to develop strategies to make better use of the potential birth fathers have to enhance their children's lives; and
- ❖ inform discussion as to how to offer these birth fathers adoption support services in ways most likely to be acceptable and useful to them.

In addition, it is hoped this research will:

- ❖ generate significant new data about birth father perspectives enabling more focussed follow up studies by means of quantitative and qualitative research.

Relevant literature

Briefly stated, the main relevant research is by Clapton (2003). Clapton's study of 30 birth fathers of children placed for adoption in previous decades provides a rich account of their experiences. These birth fathers believed that their

perspectives were ignored and that they were excluded from decision-making regarding their child. It also demonstrated similarities between birth fathers and birth mothers in respect of the impact of the loss of the child to adoption in the lives of parents. Several studies of birth mothers during the 1970s and 1980s (for example, Bouchier et al 1991) showed that, contrary to previous belief, the relinquishment of the child for adoption was a very significant life event leaving most mothers with issues of long-term grief, concern for the well-being of the child and continuing feelings of parenthood.

Clapton's study refers back to adoptions most of which took place decades before. Although this proposal is inspired by his work, the relevance of his study is questionable in relation to present-day birth fathers many of whom have lost their children in the course of care proceedings. This study aims to apply similar qualitative methodology to this new group of birth fathers.

Summary of the pilot study

During March and April 2007, I interviewed five fathers who had lost their children to adoption. The interview subjects were recruited through contact with children's social workers. The subjects were fathers of children who had been adopted or placed for adoption between April 2005 and February 2007. In the case of four of the men, the children were involved in care proceedings.

A grounded theory approach was used for the pilot study. Verbatim transcripts were produced of audio-recorded interviews. These were open coded and partially axial coded. Time did not permit the completion of the coding process and some tentative interim findings were put forward on the basis of the coding that was carried out and by selecting themes relevant to the research question. The interim findings were as follows:

- ❖ These fathers experience an acute and continuing sense of loss and worry about their child.
- ❖ They felt overwhelmed and disadvantaged by the assessment and court process in care proceedings;
- ❖ Several were strongly focussed on the possibility of meeting their child again when he or she attains adulthood;
- ❖ There is a range of rationalisations and coping strategies the subjects use to help them make sense of what happened and live day by day. However, they have many unresolved adoption related issues, which affect their [adopted] children and their lives after adoption.
- ❖ Persistence is needed to reach these fathers. They find a conventional counselling service irrelevant to them. They are more likely to value a service that starts with practical aims and offers the chance to meet other fathers in the same situation

In the report of the pilot, I concluded that the methodology had been successful in gathering rich data from which theory could be built regarding these fathers' perspectives. I identified a number of possibly significant issues, which could not

be fully explored within the constraints of the pilot study. For example:

- ❖ How these fathers deal with the life changing loss resulting from their child's adoption;
- ❖ The implications of this for taken-for-granted masculine identities;
- ❖ Likely significant differences in dealing with loss and in using coping strategies between fathers who to some degree assented to adoption compared with those who opposed it;
- ❖ For the latter, how to interpret informants' resistance to accepting that their care of their child had been problematic;
- ❖ Whether "typologies" of distinct groups of fathers may emerge from the data to inform practice and direct further research.
- ❖ Fathers' situations in relation to the adoption plan varied. The adoption plans for *all* the children in the pilot were set in motion because of child protection concerns. But not all cases went into care proceedings: one father was asked to relinquish his child (on pain of care proceedings if he did not) and one father was not part of the child's household when the care was seen as problematic.

I recognised that the research design needed to be developed in the following ways to take the study forward:

- ❖ The above issues could not be resolved and other possible issues identified without a full-scale study;
- ❖ Since the sample from the pilot included just one subject who was other than White British, the ethnic diversity of the sample should be increased, recognising recent work on the possible influences of ethnicity on fathering (Phoenix & Hussain 2007);
- ❖ Fathers who represent the range of vulnerabilities often associated (e.g. Masson et al 2008, p20-21) with parents in care proceedings (parental substance misuse; mental health problems; domestic violence; learning difficulties, etc) should be included in the sample;
- ❖ Subjects should be sought from a variety of sources and not just through local authorities that might filter out the most challenging subjects.

These learning points have been built into this revised research proposal.

Proposal for developing the literature review

There is a comparatively small literature available concerning birth fathers of adopted children. Fatherhood literature is now extensive. Much of it will not relate directly to this specific adoption focussed topic. However, it is anticipated that the full literature review for the PhD thesis would, where relevant, touch upon themes such as:

- Research into "involved fatherhood" (e.g. Palkovitz 2002). This literature highlights the benefits for children *and* fathers of higher levels of father involvement. The comparison between involved fathers and vulnerable fathers would be explored to elucidate how the fathers who may be subjects of this study may be missing the benefits available to involved

- fathers and whether there are implications for future work with vulnerable fathers.
- Work on “situated fathering” (e.g. Marsiglio et al 2005) in which a theoretical framework is advanced for understanding fatherhood in the context of a wide variety of physical, psychological and social factors. In the review, I would seek to apply this analytical framework to the situations of fathers whose children are adopted.
 - How fathers cope with loss in general and the loss of children in particular. In the case of the group of fathers studied, how might the grieving process be modified by the particular circumstances of the child’s adoption?
 - Gender studies in relation to the formation and maintenance of masculinities including young masculinities and the formation of concepts of parenthood (Connell 2000; Frosh et al 2002). This literature would be analysed for its possible application to vulnerable fathers as representing marginalised masculinities and whether a father’s positioning in terms of “hegemonic masculinity” has implications for their ability to adapt to a parental role.
 - The relationship of men and fathers to family support services analysing current practice, what fathers are thought to require from welfare agencies and the potential to move towards more father friendly service provision.
 - Studies of the experiences of mothers and fathers who surrender children or have children removed from them for adoption (Mason & Selman 1997). The aim would be to explore what is known about the common experiences of parents in such circumstances and whether or not fathers are distinct in any significant respects.
 - An examination of post adoption studies considering birth relatives’ feelings and perspectives (e.g. Neil 2007), services provided and examining the implications for fathers in particular.
 - Literature regarding contact, search and reunion (e.g. Neil 2006; Neil and Howe 2004) to explore similarities and differences between fathers and other birth family members

In view of the proposed methodology for this study (see below), particular emphasis would be given in the literature review to raising the theoretical level of understanding of the issues in order to have a better idea which issues may warrant deeper exploration with participants at the interviewing stage (Bryant & Charmaz 2007 p20). This will mean seeking literature from diverse sources representing parallel phenomena that may elucidate emerging themes.

I anticipate that the completion of the review and the analysis of data will proceed in tandem with insights from each informing and focussing the direction of the other.

The research question

“What perspectives and experiences do birth fathers of children adopted from care have in relation to their child's adoption?”

Birth fathers here include those:

- who have parental responsibility for the child *and* those who do not but who are accepted as the child's birth father;
- who, whilst not child's birth father, are part of the child's household at the time of the child's admission to care.

Children adopted from care means in this context children who have been

- placed for adoption or
- adopted from local authority care (whether "voluntarily" accommodated or following care proceedings).

Perspectives stands here for

- insights,
- understandings,
- rationalisations,
- pervading sets of attitudes,
- beliefs and opinions.

Experiences means

- The father's story of the adoption with all its surrounding circumstances and
- Its ramifications especially for his emotional life, physical and mental wellbeing and sense of identity.

Methodological approach

The aim of the study is to help elucidate birth fathers' beliefs, feelings and views in depth using a grounded theory approach (for example, as set out in Strauss & Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006).

I propose qualitative methodology because of the comparative paucity of information already available about the birth fathers' view of the world. Insufficient is known about the study group to confidently predict the main issues that may emerge.

Additionally, a researcher is likely to experience the same difficulty social workers have in engaging birth fathers and in gaining their consent to take part in the study. An approach which is more open to hearing the respondents' perspectives rather than attempting to take them through a pre-determined survey is more likely to build the necessary rapport and trust with the subjects. A case study approach would make best use of limited number of fathers who can be recruited.

A quantitative approach to the topic is inappropriate because clear variables on the basis of which to construct hypotheses cannot be identified and obtaining a large sample is impractical.

I propose to adopt a symbolic interactionist perspective as the philosophical underpinning for the methodology. This approach places the researcher as part of the social world being explored rather than separate from or above it. Since, from this standpoint, social reality is seen as being socially created and maintained, grounded theory, codes, categories etc are not regarded as objective entities to be discovered but as crafted and constructed from what respondents say (Charmaz 2006 p10). What I will strive to achieve in this study, therefore, is not objective truth about birth fathers but a sense that the findings accurately portray and hopefully even illuminate aspects of the perspectives, choices and social context of the respondents.

Consistent with this approach of regarding social research as a co-creation of meanings (Doyle 2007) between researcher and participant, within the boundaries of time and practicality I will introduce elements of "member checking" into the design (Charmaz 2006 p111). All participants will be invited to read and comment on the transcript of their interview. A minority of the sample will be invited to meet for a subsequent interview to review themes arising from their own interviews, to comment on emerging categories in the data and point up gaps in researcher understanding.

Sample

It is clear that there are groups of birth fathers that are not represented in the pilot sample. Groups of "at risk" fathers unrepresented or underrepresented in the pilot should be sought as set out above.

Since the aim is to chart the perspective of *recent* fathers of children placed for adoption or adopted, only fathers of children placed within the last 10 years will form part of the sample. This start point is separated by some 25 years from the decline of the previous adoption paradigm.

One implication of this decision is that there are likely to be variable periods of time for each father since his child was placed or adopted. The length of time since adoption may well affect the father's perspectives, feelings and attitudes in significant ways.

Rather than try to limit variation, I would actively seek a temporally varied sample since it could contribute data concerning the modification of fathers' perspectives over time. There is a strong temporal dimension in grounded theory interviewing (e.g. "What did you feel then?"/ "What do you feel now?") which would be combined with this sample variability to map possible differences of father perspectives over time.

I would not propose to restrict the sample to those fathers where the child had been involved in public care proceedings. As I have suggested above, the great majority of children who are adopted from care *are* subject to care proceedings. But even those children who are not adopted after care proceedings are often the focus of intensive family support and safeguarding procedures arising from serious concerns about parenting. I propose therefore that the sample should simply be determined by the fact that the subject's child has been placed for adoption or adopted from careⁱⁱ.

Approximately 20 subjects would be sought. Grounded theorists emphasise that the *quality* of the sample is more important than its size and that too much data could hinder the investigation (Morse 2007 p230-231). The exact size and composition of the sample would be determined by the stage at which it was judged that "theoretical saturation" had been reached.

In the pilot study, all subjects were identified from an adoption agency database. An approach to subjects was made through their children's social worker with the possibility that some potential subjects who were on poor terms with social workers might have been excluded and others might have excluded themselves because of suspicions of the source of the approach. High organisational sensitivity to risk (see *Ethical Considerations* below) will also have excluded a few possible informants.

It is proposed to seek subjects, therefore, from a wider range of additional sources which could include direct advertising, adoption support agencies, voluntary organisations such as the Post Adoption Centre and NORCAP, youth offenders institutions, prisons and the probation service. In addition, "snowballing" or chain sampling would also be considered.

From the experience of the pilot study and similar studies (e.g. Reeves 2006), recruiting informants will require persistence and flexibility and many interviews are likely to take place in the subject's home rather than at official venues. The tone and content of information produced for possible subjects is likely to be of particular importance and it is proposed to seek feedback from a participant group of fathers on this issue.

Since this form of qualitative investigation is an iterative process in which reading and literature reviewing, data collection and analysis will need to proceed *concurrently*, it would be essential to the project from the beginning that theoretical sampling was undertaken. That is, the aim would be to identify emergent categories and themes and seek data from subsequent subjects to look for significant difference.

Because of the nature of the concurrent process set out above, it is proposed to begin data collection in February 2009. Hopefully, information from early data collection would strengthen and further focus the final version of this proposal

due to appear in April 2009.

The rationale for the proposal for an early start to data collection and analysis is set out by Silverman (2004 p 2) who suggests that learning data analysis is best based upon doing it. He explains the implications for PhD project planning as follows:

...I have little time for the conventional trajectory of the PhD in which students spend their first year 'reviewing the literature', gather data in the second year and then panic in the third year about how they can analyse their data. Instead, my students begin their data analysis in the first year- sometimes in the first week. In that way, they may well have 'cracked' the basic problem in their research in that first year and so can spend their remaining years pursuing the worthy but relatively non-problematic tasks of ploughing through their data following and already-established method.

Data collection

Data collection will be by means of audio-recorded interviews, transcribed verbatim and imported into *Nvivo* for coding. The main data will be supplemented by a record of basic demographic data (see below) and by observational notes recorded shortly after the interviews.

Subjects will be asked to respond to an opening question based upon the research question. This question allows subjects to say what they wish about any aspect of their position as father to their child placed for adoption or adopted. The subject will be encouraged to expand on any issues that they raise. Only after the subject had nothing further to say on these issues would they be invited to comment on subsidiary issues not already mentioned.

Other topic areas for exploration will include:

- ❖ The participant's role and relationship with the child and its meaning for him.
- ❖ The reasons for the adoption.
- ❖ Involvement in every stage of the adoption process.
- ❖ Thoughts and feelings about his child's adopters.
- ❖ The impact upon the participant of the adoption.
- ❖ Whether and in what ways the adoption has affected him.
- ❖ His ongoing involvement with the child now and in future.
- ❖ What adoption support has been available to him and thoughts about what should be available to fathers in future.

Data from the pilot interviews will be analysed further to enable me to review and revise this list.

I had originally intended to interview participants just once. However, because it is possible that important issues may emerge in subsequent analysis which were not fully explored or remained tacit in early interviews, I plan to ask participants if they are prepared to be re-interviewed if necessary (Charmaz 2006 p54).

I intend to seek basic demographic data from each informant (age, ethnicity, marital status and so on) so as to allow emerging themes to be related to demographic categories. This could assist later purposive sampling and perhaps contribute to the formation of typologies.

Data analysis

Analysis will follow the techniques and procedures set out for developing grounded theory (for example, Strauss and Corbin (1998), Charmaz (2006)). This process is based not on existing theories but on a close and sensitive reading of the data.

Each interview script will be open coded. Open codes will be defined and grouped into trees for ease of access within *Nvivo*. In order to identify possible categories and move on to the next stage of focussed coding, I will examine all data collected under selected open codes, comparing and relating them to other codes and writing memos and drawing diagrams to attempt to elucidate their properties and dimensions. From this it is hoped to develop key categories from which middle range theory relating to this group of fathers may be derived.

It may be that the analysis may suggest typologies of birth fathers, which would be helpful in organising the findings for future research and practice development.

Ethical considerations

Underpinning philosophy

I suggest that the philosophical approach set out above (under Methodological Approach) provides a helpful background to addressing ethical issues for this study. Researchers and informants are seen as having equal standing as social participants, taking action and making choices. This accords well with my own values deriving from social work and with the BPS Code of Practice setting the scene for intended cooperation, transparency, respect and trust between researcher and respondents.

Informed consent

Informants will need to be able to give informed consent to participating in this project. I propose that this should be verbal consent given following explanations backed up by written information. I will prepare an information sheet about the project available online and in hard copy to be sent to each potential participant. Verbal and written information will be provided in these areas:

- ❖ The purpose and scope of the project.
- ❖ Why it is important.
- ❖ The method I propose to adopt.

- ❖ What is involved in taking part.
- ❖ What will happen at the interview.
- ❖ What will happen after the interview: debriefing. Receiving script and report.
- ❖ What will happen to the recording: how anonymity will be protected.
- ❖ How will the data be used.
- ❖ Participants' right to withdraw from the project at any time.
- ❖ Circumstances in which confidentiality will be broken: serious risks to the subject or others

Attending to the participant after the interview

I will always allow time to reflect on the interview with the informant after the interview. I will offer to supply a copy of the interview to the informant if desired and/or a copy of a research summary in due course.

Based upon my experience in the pilot study, I expect that some participants will ask me after (or even during) an interview for advice about issues such as post adoption contact or other personal dilemmas. Whilst it is clear that I should resist a role incompatible with the researcher role, I would intend to listen carefully, clarify and redirect subjects to appropriate sources of help.

Data storage and confidentiality of data

Participants' identifying data such as names, addresses, mobile numbers etc will be kept only in hard form in a filing cabinet in my office which is locked when not in use.

Other data will be anonymised before use.

I will make clear to participants that what they say to me is confidential with the exception that if they should say anything which indicated that someone was in danger or that a serious offence had been committed, then that Information could not be kept confidential.

Risk assessment

The study would necessarily raise highly emotive issues. However, for most potential participants, the opportunity to be heard at length on an issue of such importance to them is likely to outweigh possible emotional or other harm. This has certainly proved to be the case for participants in the pilot study. As an experienced social work practitioner I do know how to interview sensitively, deal with distressed people and signpost people to appropriate support services. I will emphasise the participant's choice to not answer certain questions, terminate the interview, take a break etc.

I believe that the risk of other harm to anyone is very low. However, I am concerned to maximise safety for others and myself. I intend to carry out a simple risk assessment procedure before undertaking an interview with a participant taking into account any information indicating possible risks. I will follow best

practice social work guidelines in avoiding potentially violent situations, ensuring that someone else is aware of where I am, when I am expected to return and that I have access to a mobile phone. I will take steps to terminate an interview if it appears that to continue would create or exacerbate a risky situation for the subject, another person or myself.

Ethical approval from another source

Since I will be seeking participants through official bodies such as councils and the probation service, I will always clarify whether these bodies have a research governance procedure and apply to the appropriate body for approval where such a procedure exists.

Timescale

The outline plan attached below is approximate and indicates the main activities undertaken at a particular stage of the project.

Reporting and Dissemination

In outline, I will seek to disseminate the findings in the following ways:

1. Through the preparation of my PhD thesis summarising the results of the study and discussing their significance.
2. Through writing journal articles based on some of the main messages to emerge from the project and drawing upon material in the thesis.
3. By seeking opportunities to make PowerPoint presentations within the School of Social Work and Psychology and to outside audiences relevant to the subject area: e.g. the BAAF Eastern Region Group and other professional adoption groups; Children and Young Peoples Directorates; adoption and fatherhood conferences.

These are some ideas at this early stage which would need to be reviewed in the light of the nature of the findings from the project and their relevance to particular constituencies.

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ⁱ In England, the Equality Act 2006 which has been in force since March 2007 requires public bodies when carrying out all their functions to promote equality of opportunity for women and men.

ⁱⁱ I use the everyday term "in care" here to describe "children looked after" by local authorities under the provisions of the Children Act 1989. Some such children are looked after following care proceedings and the making of a care order under Section 31 of the Act; others are voluntarily "accommodated" at the request of parents under Section 20. Most children who are adopted from care are already subject to a care order. In all cases where a local authority plans to place a child for adoption they must have a clear mandate to do so, either through the signed and witnessed agreement of the parent or (more commonly) following the making of an additional court order, a placement order. Most fathers (who may or may not have parental responsibility for their child) in this study will have refused to consent or actively opposed the placement of their child for adoption and been overruled by the court's decision to make a placement order. There is a distinction between children placed for adoption and adopted. Children placed for adoption remain "children looked after". Although birth parents still legally retain their parental

responsibility for their child, they are usually prevented from exercising it. They may oppose the making of an adoption order but are unlikely to be able to do so successfully. On the making of an adoption order, the birth parents' parental responsibility is permanently removed.