

Title: Changes and Continuities in Adoption Social Work: Adoption in Scotland since the 1968 Act.

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Abstract

This paper charts changes and continuities in the social work role in adoption since 1968. The Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 established the Children's Hearing System, Scotland's unique approach to child welfare in which lay volunteers make decisions on compulsory intervention relating to children. Although the Act was not intended to reform adoption practice, it has had two major impacts. Firstly, as adoption moved from 'relinquishment' to more complex and contested legal routes, the Children's Hearing came to occupy an integral role in decision making for children in need of care and protection. Secondly, since 1968 adoption has become understood as a resource for children who are unable to remain within their birth family or kinship networks. Using documentary analysis of adoption files and interviews with key informants, the research focused on three key periods; 1968, 1988 and 2014. The study found that fragmentation of the social work role has decreased the potential of adoption records to be a resource for adopted individuals curious about their origins and story. Paradoxically, over this period there has been growing understanding of the identity needs of adopted people. Such unintended consequences suggest the need for more a thoughtful approach to adoption record keeping.

Key Words: Adoption; Historical perspective; Social work records.

Introduction

This paper explores changes and continuities in the social work role in adoption over a fifty-year period. It is informed by empirical research undertaken as part of Social Work Scotland's celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. This landmark Act established social work as a profession situated within local authorities, and was strongly grounded in 'social welfarist' principles. Daniel and Scott trace a 'golden thread from 1968 of commitment to the value base of social justice, prevention and the power of the community' (2018: 20). The organisation of social work within local authorities and the third sector has varied over this time, but a commitment to social work as a generic value-based profession has remained. Although not intended to reform adoption practice, the Act made provision for a Children's Hearing System in Scotland to address the circumstances of children and young people in need and those involved in offending. The Children's Hearing continues to be the initial legal forum for child welfare and youth justice issues. As adoption has moved from 'relinquishment' of babies to more complex and contested legal routes, the Children's Hearing came to occupy an integral role in decision making for children in need of care and protection in Scotland. Whilst practice has been much amended by subsequent legislation and Guidance, the 1968 Act lives on both in structure and spirit in social work with children in need of compulsory measures of care. The Children's Hearing approach of a panel of lay members considering the needs of children remains a cornerstone of the child welfare response in Scotland (Grant et al., 2019; Plumtree, 2014).

Throughout many social and theoretical developments, adoption endures as a formal means of providing children in need of alternative permanent care with the opportunity to be brought up within a family environment. Over the past 50 years, ideas about the nature of family and childhood have broadened across the U.K., so that families who adopt have become more diverse. For example, the number of same sex couples adopting in Scotland has increased (National Records for Scotland, 2018). The factors that inform social work assessments of parental capacity and risk to

children are different, and the rights of children are better recognised. During this period, a deeper understanding has emerged of the impact of separation and loss (Bowlby, 1953). The work of McWhinnie (1967), Triseliotis (1973) and Brodzinsky (2011) has increased understanding of the development of adopted people's identity and of the importance of access to information about origins over the lifespan. Assessment approaches have expanded to include these theoretical developments. However, social work methods of assessing prospective adopters have changed little. The reliance on a relationship with an assessing practitioner who explores key areas of family life emerges as surprisingly enduring.

The key social work role in adoption has grown both in significance and sophistication since 1968. This is largely due to the majority of adoptions in Scotland being made through the removal of parental rights and responsibilities from birth parents by the Court (Castle et al., 2000; Thomas, 2013). Adoption for a diverse group of children from the care system makes Scotland, and other UK nations, 'almost unique' in Europe (Ward and Smeeton, 2016). The UK has had comparably higher rates of domestic adoption (as a proportion of population) than most other countries (Palacios et al., 2019: 5), except for the US and Canada (Smith et al., 2014). Criticisms have been made in relation to adoption policy being against parental wishes (Dale, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2018; Gupta and Featherstone, 2019). However, the Scottish Government sets out four permanence options: returning or remaining at home with birth parent(s), Permanence Orders, kinship care orders or adoption (Scottish Government, 2015). This paper focuses specifically on the changing nature of the social work role in adoption and the implications for adoption case records, arising from a qualitative study which explored the broad research question:

What have been the major changes and continuities in the social work role in adoption assessment and support in the Scottish context since the 1968 Act?

Methodology

The model for this research was one of researcher and practitioner collaboration between the four authors. A literature review and documentary analysis of a selection of adoption files drawn from the 50-year period was completed. Documentary analysis was guided and supported by semi-structured interviews with expert informants.

Ethical Statement

A research protocol was developed for the project and agreed by the Director of the Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland and the Chief Executive of Scottish Adoption, following recommendation by the Social Work Scotland Executive. Interview participants were provided with information on the background and conduct of the research, and provided written consent to being interviewed as well as audio recording and storage of data. Pseudonyms and descriptors are used throughout this paper to replace names of interviewees and individuals from the adoption files.

Literature Review

The literature review focused upon practice and policy developments in the Scottish context over the specified period, with other UK and international research selected to help compare and situate the Scottish experience. This informed the interview schedule. Literature contemporaneous with the case file sample provided context for the documentary analysis.

Informant Interviews

Supporting qualitative interviews were undertaken with five key informants with long service in adoption work, including law, social work, and adoption panel chairing. Key informant interviews are an established means of exploring significant aspects of social phenomena over time (Moshra et al., 2020; Walsh et al., 2008). Experienced professionals were sought whose perspectives could encompass as much of the period since 1968 as possible, and in sufficient depth. Interviewees were

identified through both partner agencies' networks and selected to represent practice across Scotland.

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' perspectives on changes and continuities in adoption practice and policy, and focused on the period from assessment of prospective adopters and registration of a child for permanence (or their historical equivalent) through to granting of an adoption order. Interviews were audio-recorded and detailed notes taken from the recordings, which were thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is a potential limitation of the study that the choice of key informants may have biased the findings towards their perspectives. There were however few other potential participants in Scotland with the informants' length and breadth of experience. All of the interviewees were reflective in their accounts, describing the changes they had practiced through and contributed to, rather than pursuing an obvious agenda. Although oral histories have been criticised as less reliable than written documents, a strength is that the information they provide goes beyond simply what happened (Hajek, 2014).

An additional interview was conducted with two informants who have been involved in archiving adoption files at Scottish Adoption, one of whom was also a social worker. This informed the approach to sampling and data collection for the documentary analysis.

Adoption Files

Sampling

Scottish Adoption holds a range of historical records for adoptions carried out by churches or local authorities, in addition to records for their own adoptions. The legal changes from 1968 to 2018 were taken into consideration when determining time periods from which to sample adoption files. Prior to 1968, adoption was governed by the Adoption of Children (Scotland) Act 1930, where legal consent was provided by birth families for adoption. Domestic adoption began to take a different

legal tone in Scotland, alongside the rest of the UK, following Rowe and Lambert's 'Children Who Wait' (1973). The Adoption (Scotland) Act 1978 provided the legal means for dispensing with birth parent consent to adoption and the 'freeing' of children for adoption. Changes in society and social work led to the passing of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, influenced by a children's rights discourse and a greater emphasis on parental rights and responsibilities. The Children's Hearing (Scotland) Act 2011 shifted the governance of children's hearings but did not make substantial changes to the role of the children's panel in complex decisions about children's futures. These legal and societal changes influenced the selection of dates: 1968, 1988 and 2014, each separated by significant legislative developments (Clapton and Hoggan, 2012). Adoption records reflected changes over time in data storage, including microfilm, microfiche, and electronic records. As the 2014 records did not contain the child's full case history, the last known full adoption record (for an adoption that took place in 2012) stored on behalf of a local authority was added to the sample. Otherwise the selection of records from each period was randomised.

Analysis

From 1968 one entire adoption file was analysed incorporating 25 documents, and a selection of documents were read from a further five adoption files. From 1988, one entire adoption file was analysed and a selection of documents were read from four further files. From 2014, three entire adoption files were analysed. Given the size of the sample, it cannot be claimed that these records are representative for each year. However, the themes identified were consistent across the sample, made sense, and were legitimate interpretations of these records (Scott, 1990; Cohen, 2009).

Once sampled, documents were anonymised by author two before analysis by authors four and two. Randomly selected cases from the sample were subsequently read by authors one and three, to further check validity of the interpretation. Emergent themes from the initial textual analysis of entire adoption files and analysis of the interview data guided purposive selection of further

documents for detailed analysis. These included case notes relating to assessment of adopters and synopses of adoption case committees from 1968, adoption panel minutes from 1988, and 'Form Es' and 'Form Fs' from later files. The 'BAAF' forms E and F for permanence and adoption were standardised assessments for social workers in Scotland during the two later sample periods. The 'Form E' relates to the child and requires a history of the child and birth family, full information about the child's health and development, and views of the birth family. The 'Form F' is the companion form, detailing the assessment of prospective adopters. It requires a full chronology of the individual or couple's lives up until applying to adopt, their motivation to adopt and any issues around childlessness and infertility.

Adoption case files contain valuable information about individual adoptions, and provide insights into social work practice from the time of their recording (Hayes and Devaney, 2004). However, limitations include the variability of contents, that most documents were written by social workers, and had been included in the file at a social worker's and archivist's discretion, creating a possibility of bias or distortion (Scott, 1990). Following Rapley (2018) a social constructionist approach was taken, analysing activities described in the files, and interpreting how the social work role was produced, negotiated and represented. This was a hermeneutic task requiring interpretation of the literal meaning, as well as the latent meaning of the text as a whole (Hayes and Devaney 2004; Scott 1990). The first step was trying to understand the viewpoint from which the recordings were made (Scott 1990). The review of contemporary literature and informant interviews provided a sense of the discourse framing adoption at each period, and informed development of a coding scheme designed to be as inclusive as possible in identifying themes. To address the issue of subjective interpretation (Scott, 1990; Hayes and Devaney, 2004), each of the research team was involved in reading the anonymised adoption files. Themes identified within the documentary analysis were triangulated with findings from the interviews and literature review.

Findings

Drawing on the literature review, documentary analysis and key informant interviews, the research identified changes and continuities in social work assessment and decision-making related to adopters, children and birth parents. These identified changes that combined to create fragmentation of the social work role in adoption, and in adoption records. This theme is explored in the discussion section.

Changes and continuities in assessment and decision-making

Adopters

The documentary analysis demonstrated clearly that the social work assessment of adopters has grown over time. Although many of the core components of adoption assessments from 1968 are alluded to in modern assessments - relationships, support networks, occupation and income, accommodation, health, understanding of adoption and the motivation to adopt– the process appears more robust. It challenges adopters, requires more detail and expects a greater level of reflection. When asked what had changed over the period, a social work interviewee who was practising in 1968 suggested, *'everything and nothing'*, indicating the task had altered little but that, in line with these findings, assessments had grown longer and more complex. Some sense of the changes over time is provided by the following extracts from social work assessments of prospective adopters from each period. Each describes the prospective adopters' approach to the tasks of adoptive parenting in different ways.

'Mr. Smith has fixed up his study with book cases etc. all his own work, he feels he could use a son or two around the house, to hand up nails and do a bit of gardening whilst Mrs. Smith wants a girl this time, in the hope that she would bake something' (1968).

'Punishments – This is something we will have to think about it we would both agree on the way someone is punished depending on what they have done', 'Neither of us has specific roles to play – we work as a team and take our share of whatever is to be done', 'Sexual roles are not of prime importance – each person is free to be as they wish. Within reason of course'. (1988).

'They have engaged with the whole process of preparation and assessment in a very positive way and their openness to consideration of all the concepts and issues discussed indicate they would be able to manage the role of foster carers with a view to adoption of a child placed with them' (2014).

Substantial differences were identified in the volume of information recorded in the written assessments across the three periods sampled. In the 1968 records, the typical length of the social worker's assessment was two pages, consisting of a write-up of an office appointment and a home visit. In the 1988 records, the Form F was between fifteen and twenty-two pages. By 2014 this had expanded to sixty-one to seventy pages. This partly reflects the inclusion within the Form F of references and health checks. One informant reflected that the inter-country adoption Form F had paved the way for a more comprehensive assessment of domestic adopters.

'Form F has gone through all sorts of fashions as well. That the people themselves wrote it, we wrote it, you know we've now sort of got a half-way house. I think it is interesting the way that the inter-country Form F was way ahead of the domestic Form F at the time that it was prepared'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

The documents also highlight changes in the process of assessment and decision-making. The number of recorded contacts between social workers and adopters increased from an office visit and two home visits in 1968, to between eight and twelve visits in 2014. In 1968, the final decision for

approving adopters and matches between adopters and a child/children was made by an 'adoption case committee'; each record included a short synopsis report detailing ages, housing, occupation and marital status of birth parents, and a brief 'reason for adoption' for the adopters. In the 1988 records, adoption processes relating to registration, approval, linking and matching were evident, with minutes of these meetings included and being between two and five pages long. In 2014 these were slightly fuller. The increases in recording appeared driven by concerns about accountability for decisions and evidencing decision-making in Court. There was a loss of 'soft information' as it was crowded out by a focus on 'evidence' and accounts of the decision-making process. Descriptions of birth families became less balanced. Increasing fragmentation in the records is apparent, as only the Form E and formal adoption documents from the local authority records are kept in the later adoption files.

The Form Fs indicated a collaborative relationship between social workers and prospective adopters in each period, in contrast to an investigative assessment approach (Triseliotis et al., 1997: 142). Over time, adopters' own words were increasingly quoted within the Form Fs, often using technical terms such as 'attachment' and 'funneling'. In 2014 these appeared to be in response to questions from the social worker, and in one Form F, the adopters used a third-person voice when writing about themselves. This indicated a 'reflective turn', in which standards for approval were explained to adopters and they were asked to evidence these.

The changes in process identified in the documentary analysis reflect an overall shift from adoption primarily meeting the needs of the adults involved to being a resource for children (Kellmer-Pringle, 1967). As one interviewee described it, in 1968 the parenting that adopters were expected to do *'was much more similar than what they would have done. They went to hospital, they didn't get pregnant, they went to hospital and brought a baby home'*. The task of adopters has shifted along with the needs of children whose journey to adoption has been altogether more complex (Thomas, 2013). Concurrently, there is greater emphasis on the impact of separation, loss and trauma, and the physical sequelae of a difficult start to life for children. In a 2014 record, the Adoption Panel

highlight the importance of placing the adopter's strengths within the context of a child's needs:

'Their life experiences and ability to reflect give them empathy and understanding for children who have had difficult early life experiences'.

Children

The ways that the needs and experiences of children are described in adoption files undergo remarkable changes over the period. In 1968 there was less explicit consideration of the impact of adoption on the child, as the priority seemed to be finding a 'normal' family for the child. Children's 'adoptability' was emphasised, using phrases such as *'a perfectly healthy girl'*. Nevertheless, there was some appreciation of adopted children's needs, as adopters were asked if they would be happy to tell the child about their adoptive status. This echoes other research of adoptions from similar periods, of whom the majority knew from an early age of their adoption (Howe et al., 2000). In the 1968 records there was a particular emphasis on physical and health descriptions. The concept of a healthy baby in need of a loving family in the infant adoptions of the 1960s perhaps reflects the optimism of the time.

'The late 1960s was a moment when there was recognition of widespread social problems, but also, in marked contrast to later times, a confidence that they could be addressed'

(Brodie et al., 2008, p. 701).

Even by 1988, an optimistic approach to child development is highly evident. One social worker describes a two-year-old boy Michael in need of an adoptive placement as follows,

'He is always described as a normal, healthy, happy child who shows no ill effects from his previously unstable life with his natural mother'.

Michael had undergone six moves in the first 15 months of his life. The records document Michael's mother Lucy's extreme ambivalence through her reported speech and her repeated rejection and

reclaiming of her son from foster care. Lucy had spent much of her own childhood in local authority care and vacillated between trying to offer Michael a different experience and violently rejecting him. Michael was placed with first time adopters who were recorded as having been '*attracted by his ordinariness*'. There is no suggestion in the records that Michael's adoptive family were prepared for any potential issues in his development, or expected to 'therapeutically parent' Michael.

'It is hugely different now... we did not talk about therapeutic parenting. And it wasn't therapeutic parenting'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

Our small-scale review of adoption files suggests that social workers have generally sought to maintain children in their families, or extended families, before looking to adoption. The 2014 records give a large volume of assessment detail regarding the children and the birth family. However, this is very negatively framed, as it is primarily aimed at convincing the Court of the need to grant an Order to secure adoption for the child.

For example, in one adoption file from 2014, the only positive description given of the birth mother was fleeting and couched in negative terms: '*While at times mild mannered and polite she is prone to angry outbursts which can be destructive to self and others*'. Vulnerability in relation to her mental health was identified but not elaborated upon. This contrasted to the numerous negative labels attached to her: 'chaotic and transient lifestyle', 'egotistic traits', 'irrational', 'hostile and uncooperative', 'aggressive', 'obstructive'. At a time when she was heavily pregnant, instances of her going to bed in the afternoon were provided as evidence of poor routine.

One interviewee highlighted this issue.

'I think social workers may have a fear of saying something positive – I think that is a change.

The legal system is so complex I do not think that it is child driven'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

This informant, who had experience of sharing adoption records with adopted adults, raises the problem with files largely focused on legal facts and the family's difficulties.

'When you are about to share a record with an adoptee you are much more worried if there is relatively little soft information – the soft information is what they want. Sadly, the soft information is often not recorded. Soft information – is the information around people, e.g. in the house there were lots of toys on the floor for the child, mum took little Jimmy onto her knee. It is so important for the adoptee so they can see that they were noticed by the birth parents'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

Another interviewee added:

'It is really important that people can look back at the papers and see what happened and why decisions were made. Why was I removed from my parents? What was it ultimately that led to that decision?'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

The multiple uses of adoption documents emerge as an issue. In 2014 the BAAF 'Form E' was used to describe the child, the birth family, the child's need for placement and the history leading up to permanence planning. Another social work informant felt that the information recorded in the form is not necessarily helpful at this stage.

'People do not use it to record what as a matching tool needs to be there. So when there is a list of children's placements, it doesn't indicate how many moves a child has had. It doesn't indicate whether they went into respite every other weekend. They don't track what a child hasn't had. Yes, the negative experiences are there. But what isn't drawn out is therefore what gaps does this child have when we place them'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

Birth parents

Just as the profile of children shifts across the period, so does that of birth parents. Legally there was clarity in 1968. The birth mothers were 'consenting' to both the contact with agencies and in 'relinquishing' their child for adoption. One social worker interviewee noted, '*it was a sharper, more ruthless system.*' As later became clear (Clapton and Hoggan, 2012) the processes were open to significant abuse.

'Some of the mother and babies home stuff was fiendish. It was punitive. It was punitive that they looked after their babies for 6 weeks, which is how it was in Glasgow. It was hugely open to abuse. And at a time of great trauma for them [birth mothers], what did they hear of what we said?'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

It is difficult to estimate the legacy for future social work practice in adoption of the cruelty and lasting shame and grief that some women experienced in this period. Birth mothers faced a range of barriers: from social stigma to lack of financial and social support, lack of housing or work to support themselves and their child, and in some cases family or religious pressures not to have a child outside marriage (Yelloly, 1965).

The Advisory Council on Child Care's 1970 Guidance encouraged the construction of a realistic, balanced and holistic view of the family by the social worker. However, there arguably remains an assumption that birth mothers were 'voluntary' social work clients. Mothers of 1988 and 2014 were involved with child protection and child welfare systems along a continuum of voluntariness.

Although the birth mothers of 1988 and 2014 were subject to intensive state scrutiny seeking to determine their capacity to parent the child in question, there was still evidence of good working relationships between the child's social worker and the birth family in the records for both periods.

There were also documented attempts of social work agencies exploring kinship alternatives with birth families before considering a 'stranger' adoption.

However, birth fathers had little locus in the adoption of 'relinquished babies', and the tendency to treat birth fathers as peripheral in adoption (Clapton 2003; 2007) remains incompletely addressed by social work. One interviewee recalled her efforts to include a birth father in an adoption case of the 1970s. The child was later placed with the benefit of extremely significant paternal medical history.

'I think the big change, and I can't put this legislatively but when I was working in Glasgow putative fathers had no role, we interviewed women. Because I can remember a young woman coming, she must have been 19, 20, 21. And she was in a stable relationship and legally I had no need to see the father. But he presented himself and made himself known. And I felt really bold but really right in taking him to see the baby in foster care. And he took photos, and I said, "You can't have those just now", and he gave me the film and he came and got them later. He had no right legally... I mean, it's hard to explain it... but it's also hard to justify it, but it was the law. You kind of scratch around for when did I do something right that I wasn't supposed to do! But at least this baby was placed with the adopters knowing'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

This father would have wanted the opportunity to be considered as the potential carer for the baby. However, there was no legitimate means of putting the father before the Court, which '*felt unjust*' to the interviewee.

Relinquishment of children did not end in the 1960s. The random sample of records from the 1980s contained a higher proportion of adoptions with parental consent than literature or practice wisdom would have predicted. In one 1988 case, the social work department attempted to trace the estranged husband of a mother who had asked the local authority to find an adoptive placement for

her older baby. Her husband was not the biological father of the baby, yet as he was married to the mother he was assumed to enjoy parental rights and responsibilities for the child.

The other two relinquished children's files from the 1988 sample were more legally straightforward. One family were relinquishing a third child who had suffered neonatal abstinence syndrome at birth. The birth parents who were both HIV positive following a history of heroin addiction, intended to retain the care of the older two children with family support. There was evidence of counselling support being offered to the birth parents during this period. One interviewee recalled the experience of offering support groups to birth parents in the changing context of adoption over the 1980s.

'It was new. I can still remember our nervousness at bringing groups of birth parents together. It was fascinating and it was interesting and it wasn't scary when you did it, but it felt scary planning it'

(Experienced adoption social worker).

Discussion

A starting point for the research design was that texts serve a range of functions beyond their stated purpose (Hayes and Devaney, 2004). Our analysis of adoption files indicated a shift towards documenting evidence for legal and social work processes. Decision-making about what to record, and what to retain, was informed by a focus on processes rather than providing information to be accessed in the future by the adult adoptee or birth parents. This analysis was supported by interviewees' concerns about the long-term impact for adopted children and their adoptive and birth families. Other research has highlighted the importance of clear and accurate information being shared sensitively, and in appropriate ways, to support those affected by adoption to deal with loss, grief and accepting difficult information about why children were separated from birth

parents (Grant et al., 2019, Gupta and Featherstone, 2019). This is despite the greater 'transparency' of adoption over time, including more open access to records (Palacios et al., 2019: 38).

The social work role in adoption over the 50-year period has fragmented. The 1968 adoption files reflect the 'holding' of the adoption by one worker who had a locus with each corner of the 'adoption triangle'. Later records show a division between what can broadly be understood as the tasks of 'child protection' and 'family finding'. Social work practice becomes organised so that the child has a social worker with responsibility for the work of assessing and presenting the child's needs in a complex variety of potential fora. There is an increased turn towards evidencing problems within the birth family. Meanwhile adoption records become more fragmented and less coherent as documents are held in different systems and sites.

The 'electronic turn' (Garrett, 2005) in social work, with expectations of voluminous recording of assessment activities and decision making, has been criticised for decreasing professional autonomy and prioritising the management of institutional risk. This reflects the way the 'managerialism' ideology described by Daniel and Scott (2018) has impacted upon children's services (Rogowski, 2012).

'Social care records have thus become primarily ways of achieving accountability, providing an electronic audit trail showing that correct procedures have been followed. This privileging has subordinated a crucial part of the professional sense-making process, namely reading and understanding complex cases, unfolding across time and space'

(Wastell and White, 2014:144).

This 'turn' in social work has significant impacts for individuals and families affected by adoption. Adoption records are not only texts for use in the legal and administrative fora of permanence in Scotland, they also tell a story (Brown et al., 2020). The identity needs of adopted people have become better understood within social work practice over the past 50 years. Increasing openness

over the period can be traced, with the importance of allowing for the possibility of search and reunion being established over time. Yet paradoxically, the records that adopted people may access to understand their own stories have become more fragmented and shaped by the need for institutional accountability. 'Soft information' is squeezed out by the legal undertones of the documents and the complete absence of photographs in the records was notable. This is of particular concern as many adult adoptees seek information relating to their birth parents' physical characteristics, personality and appearance (Wrobel and Dillon, 2009; Wrobel and Grotevant, 2019).

As the interviewees in this study highlighted, social work records have become more negative about birth families to provide evidence in formal processes of the need for separation and permanence for the child. Many of the 'later life letters' that featured in files demonstrated the care and warmth that social workers felt and demonstrated in their practice with birth families. For the most part the texts show that social workers knew the families and the children well. Yet symbolic and detailed representations of the small acts of affection within birth families became harder to find in records as the years went on.

Limitations and indications for future research

The collaborative nature of this research project was a strength, including the perspectives of an adoption practitioner, a child protection practitioner, and two researchers in the field. Collaborative enquiry foregrounds knowledge relating to practice concerns and prioritises 'practical problem solving' (Denis and Lomas, 2003: 2). This focussed the study on findings of direct interest and applicability to current adoption practice. A more theory-driven approach to the creation and analysis of data may have yielded broader conclusions. The findings may also have been shaped by the choice of key informants and the limited sample of files it was possible to include. The paper concentrates on the practitioner experience and therefore necessarily offers a partial perspective on

adoption over the period. This is in line with the nature of the original Social Work Scotland commission for the study. Nevertheless, the social work role in adoption is somewhat understudied as compared to the experiences of adopted people, adoptive families, and birth parents. The chosen research methodology therefore offers a fresh perspective on the development of adoption practice over the period studied. The findings suggest a need for further research focused on how social work practice is sustained and may be challenged in the field of adoption. As highlighted by initiatives including the Mirra Project (Shepherd et al. 2019) and Scotland's Independent Care Review (2020), a far sharper focus on the significance of case records for care experienced individuals and their families is urgently required in social work (Brown et al., 2020). A principle underpinning this study was that understanding past practice potentially lights a path to the future. Further research which analyses archived materials to better understand current practice is to be welcomed.

Conclusion

Shifts within Scottish society and in social work itself have contributed to huge changes in the profile of children adopted in Scotland. The profile and legal position of birth mothers and birth fathers have similarly seen major changes across the period, as has the understanding of filial attachment and the implications of separating siblings. Expectations of adopters have changed greatly. Adoption has come to be viewed as a resource for children rather than childless couples. Adopters are no longer only expected to care for a child 'as if' born to the family; there is an expectation of this and more, with 'parenting plus', or 'therapeutic parenting' emerging as ways to describe the additional tasks of adoptive parenting.

Nevertheless, this study reveals that there have been significant continuities as well as changes in the social work role in adoption since the 1968 Act. Throughout the period, social workers were required to provide a compassionate, balanced and future focused response to families and

children. Theoretical and legal developments have informed more complex and sophisticated ways of assessing children's needs and potential adopters' capacity to offer attuned parenting to a child. These developments have had both benefits and costs.

The complexity of the legal and administrative fora to be negotiated to secure a child in adoption do not appear sensitive to the needs of any party in the 'adoption triangle'. Neither do the requirements for social workers to record their work within a risk-averse, 'managerial' paradigm. Rather these developments mean that social workers balance more competing demands in their practice, making a focus on the current and lifelong care and identity needs of the child more difficult to retain. An important implication arising from these findings is the impact of the fragmentation of the social work role in relation to adoption in the case records that make up adoption files. Files over the period of study become a more disparate record of the administrative and legal steps to adoption, reflecting the more contested nature of the work. The capacity of the files to tell the child's story coherently and answer identity questions and curiosities in later life concomitantly decreases.

Furthermore, records retained within adoption files bear decreasing marks of the positives within birth families. As Clapton has highlighted, the way that language is used in adoption records can further polarise the descriptions of birth families and adoptive families under a 'child rescue' narrative (2018: 130). There is decreasing evidence of strengths in the relationships social workers have built with birth parents and children across the journey to adoption. This lack of 'soft information' was identified by interviewees as a significant issue in adoption records counselling. Overall the study highlighted increasing complexity and sophistication in the legal routes to adoption and in the social work task over the past 50 years. Unintended consequences emerged for adopted people, adopters and birth family members.

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