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Be(com)ing a prospective adoptive parent

**THE EXPERIENCE OF BE(COM)ING  
A PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENT  
IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY BRITAIN**

**DONNA PEACH**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Huddersfield

November 2017

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## **Abstract**

Creating adoptive families for 'looked after children' requires the continuous recruitment of prospective adoptive parents. The British government's demand for an increase in the number of children adopted led to the extension of legalised constructs of who can become an adoptive parent. However, our understanding of prospective adopters' remains anchored to a pronatalist ideology that perpetuates a hegemonic view of motherhood and fatherhood. These socio-political dynamics interweave placing pressure on social workers, prospective adopters and children to replace the biological promise of perfect pronatalism with an idealised expectation of legally permanent familial solutions. In this thesis, I employed a social constructionist methodology to undertake two studies, the first of which thematically analysed discourses in the 2012-2013 National adoption week campaigns. The analysis found pronatalism rhetoric dominated the repertoires and notable by its absence was the non-construction of British, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) adoptive families. Other emotive discourses construct adoptive parents as 'selfless' with critical undertones for those who were too 'nervous' to take on the responsibility. The second study examined the lived experiences of 21 adults who self-identified as prospective adopters. Three emerging themes illuminated the complexity of adoption as a route to parenthood. Participants' experience of negotiating pronatalist dominant views of adoption influenced how they made sense of adoption as a choice and determined their sense of readiness. Contemplating adoption with their friends and families identified the complex social-familial factors that influenced their motivations to adopt. Finally, their experiences led them to reconstitute their sense of self as they prepared for a future that may or may not include becoming an adoptive parent.

## Table of contents

Abstract	3
Table of contents	4
List of tables	7
List of figures	8
Abbreviations	9
Acknowledgements	10
Dedication	11
<b>Chapter One – Introduction</b>	<b>12</b>
1.1 Development of the thesis	15
1.2 Contribution to knowledge	17
1.3 Overview of the thesis	19
<b>Chapter Two – Setting the context</b>	<b>21</b>
2.1 The birth of adoption	23
2.2 Adoption of Children Act 1926	25
2.3 The Great Depression	26
2.4 Postwar development	28
2.5 Rise and fall of adoption	29
2.6 Labouring over the rebirth of adoption	34
2.7 Chapter Summary	37
<b>Chapter Three – A review of the literature</b>	<b>39</b>
3.1 Scope of the review	41
3.2 Construction of the prospective adopter	42
3.3 Construction of the adopted child	48
3.4 Matching prospective adopters and children	52
3.5 Transition to adoptive parenthood	54
3.5.1 Transitioning to parenthood after infertility	60
3.5.2 Beyond white wedded heteronormativity	62
3.6 Barriers to adoption	66
3.7 Adoption in 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Britain	68
3.8 Chapter summary	75

<b>Chapter Four – Methodology</b>	<b>77</b>
4.1 The phenomenological approach	78
4.1.1 Study of the lived experience of prospective adopters	81
4.1.2 Defining a sample	82
4.1.3 Semi-structured interviews	87
4.1.4 Transcription	90
4.1.5 Ethical considerations	92
4.1.6 Data analysis	94
4.2 National adoption week campaign study	95
4.2.1 Methodological approach	96
4.2.2 Method	97
4.3 Chapter summary	98
<b>Preface to findings chapters</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Chapter Five - National adoption week 2012-2013 campaign analysis</b>	<b>102</b>
5.1 Deconstructing myths	105
5.1.1 Myth – Age	107
5.1.2 Myth - Health and economic status	110
5.2 Becoming family	113
5.3 Converging people and policy	120
5.4 Chapter summary	125
<b>Chapter Six - Traversing dichotomies</b>	<b>129</b>
6.1 Wanted and not wanted	130
6.1.1 Wanting not wanting a biologically related child	131
6.1.2 Pragmatic negotiations	135
6.1.3 Wanting to adopt a child to complete a family	139
6.2 Choice and no choice	142
6.2.1 Negotiating choice	143
6.2.2 Choosing/not choosing biological intervention	146
6.2.3. Contrasting perceptions of a positive choice	150
6.3 Ready or not ready	154
6.4 Chapter summary	164

<b>Chapter Seven - Negotiating socio-familial contours</b>	<b>168</b>
7.1 A complex construction	170
7.1.1 Contemplating the adoption of a 'damaged' child	171
7.1.2 Conflicting normalities	177
7.2 Challenging expectations	181
7.2.1 Expectations of parental coupledness	181
7.2.2 Expectations of extended family members	185
7.3 Countering concerns	190
7.3.1 Considering the needs of children	191
7.3.2 Concerns about being an adoptive parent in the world	197
7.4 Chapter summary	200
<b>Chapter Eight - Making sense of be(com)ing self</b>	<b>203</b>
8.1 Intrasubjective perceptions of a private self	206
8.2 (Re)Creating life as a prospective adopter	214
8.2.1 Making sense of a temporal self	215
8.2.2 Temporal prospective adoptive relationships	220
8.2.3 Be(com)ing normal: Adoption as an equal route to parenthood	223
8.3 Experiencing the missing of experience	226
8.4 Chapter summary	236
<b>Chapter Nine - Thesis summary and conclusion</b>	<b>237</b>
9.1 Summary of major findings	238
9.2 Review of findings in relation to existing research	240
9.3 Implications of research findings	243
9.4 Limitations of the research	245
9.5 Chapter summary	246
<b>References</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>283</b>

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## List of tables

Table 2.1	Adoption orders by date of entry in the adopted children's register 1974 – 2011	33
Table 2.2	Looked after children adoption figures year ending 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2011-2016	34
Table 3.1	Integration of the stages, processes and principles of change	58
Table 4.1	Research participants by mode of interview and gender	85
Table 4.2	Interview schedule	88
Table 4.3	Features of Jefferson transcription system	91
Table 5.1	Number of adopters approved by age during 2014-2015	108



## List of figures

Figure 2.1	Tower Cressy, Aubrey road, Camden Hill.	24
Figure 2.2	Dennis O'Neill with his brothers Terry and Freddie.	28
Figure 3.1	The number of looked after children and those adopted in England and Wales between 2011 and 2016	73
Figure 4.1	Recruitment webpage	83
Figure 4.2	Emerging themes and sub-themes from the phenomenological analysis	101
Figure 5.1	Number of national adoption week articles 1997-2016	103
Figure 5.2	Themes emerging from analysis of NAW campaigns 2012 and 2013.	105
Figure 6.1	Theme one: Traversing dichotomies	130
Figure 7.1	Theme two: Social and cultural contours	169
Figure 8.1	Theme three: Making sense of be(com)ing self	205

## **Abbreviations**

Adoption Leadership Board (ALB)

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)

Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)

CoramBAAF Adoption and Fostering Academy (CoramBAAF)

Department of Education (DfE)

In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF)

National Adoption Society (NAS)

National Adoption Week (NAW)

National Children's Adoption Association (NCAA)

Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Parenting Assessment Record (PAR)

Public Law Outline (PLO)

Statistical First Release (SFR)

Transition to Adoptive Parenthood (TTAP)

Transtheoretical Model (TTM)

United Kingdom (UK)

An international internet-based marketing firm (YouGov)

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## Dedication

*"Because the processes in the Local Authority agencies can just be so shambolic, and because they're shambolic, children are just left, and it's heartbreaking and um and that's what happened to me and I wish I could have told somebody that at the time, and that it was just too, it was just too painful, it was just too raw, and I couldn't stand, I wanted to scream at the world, but I couldn't scream at the world."*

The above comment derives from the experiences of Cassandra, whom along with my other participants generously shared their emotional experiences so that we can improve our understanding, practice and policies. I am eternally grateful to each of them.

## Chapter One - Introduction

*"Reason, seriousness, mastery over the emotions, the whole murky affair which goes by the name of thought, all the privileges and showpieces of man: What a high price has been paid for them! How much blood and horror is at the bottom of all good things?" (Nietzsche, 1887, pp. 3-4)*

The prominence of adoption as a social policy ensures a consistent focus on the recruitment of prospective adoptive parents. Ward (2011) estimates only 18% of those who made enquiries in response to the annual national adoption week campaign pursue an assessment. As such, we know little of the 82% of people who are interested in adoption but have yet to become an adoptive parent. Indeed, Scott and Duncan (2012) suggest there could be up to 4.6million people in England who would consider becoming an adoptive parent. Despite this, we draw most of our understanding of prospective adopters from the retrospective accounts of those who have already become adoptive parents (Akker, 2001; Kenrick, 2009). Furthermore, we situate our examination of their experiences within socially dominant parameters of pronatalist informed parenthood. Therefore, I employed a social constructionist approach to complete two studies that interrogate the construction of prospective adopters' in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. The first study provided a critical examination of the discursive construction of prospective adopters in the 2012-2013 national adoption week recruitment campaigns. The second study analysed the lived experiences of 21 prospective adopters domiciled in the UK.

The existence of domestic child adoption in Britain serves multiple functions, one of which is to protect vulnerable children and provide them with a secure permanent home. Thus, adoption legislation and policies have arguably two broad outcomes; firstly, they reinforce the importance of the family as a social structure to meet the needs of children. Secondly, child adoption facilitates a means by which the state can relinquish its responsibility for publicly 'looked after children' back to the more private sphere of family life. Adoption has formed part of Britain's legislative

infrastructure since 1926 and remains a key focus of government policy, particularly in deciding the future of looked after children. Rushton (2003) scoping review led him to assert the recruitment of prospective adoptive parents is essential to the continued existence of adoption. Indeed, increasing the numbers of children adopted has been a major government policy since the election of Blair's Labour government in 1997. Subsequent British governments have continued to develop child adoption legislation and use media campaigns to increase the number of people who might present as a prospective adoptive parent.

One of the government's motivating principles was to reduce the amount of time prospective adopters would have to wait to receive approval and to have a child placed with them. This emphasis on reducing the time taken to complete care proceedings saw the introduction of the Public Law Outline (PLO) in 2008 (Masson, 2010). In addition to reducing the timescales, legislation was passed to increase the diversity of who could be considered a prospective adopter to include gay, lesbian and unmarried adults (Hicks, 2005; Wood, 2015). Notably, in response to the lack of adoptive placements for children with a Black, Asian, or other ethnic minority population the Children and Families Act 2014, repealed the duty to ethnically-match a child with their adoptive parents. Further changes at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century saw an increase in the routes to becoming an adoptive parent. These routes included the placement of infants with their potential adoptive parent during care proceedings.

Simultaneously, a marketplace was developed to recruit, train, and approve prospective adopters (Clifton & Neil, 2013), which some argue has contributed to the commodification of adoption (Higgins & Smith, 2002). These changes were favourable in meeting their goals, with the office for national statistics (ONS) reporting an increase in the number of children adopted (ONS, 2012). This rise in adoption occurred at a time when the number of 'looked after children' also rose significantly following the death of Peter Connolly in 2007 and the impact of austerity policies since the fiscal crisis of 2008. The government reaffirmed its focus on adoption in 2013 (DfE, 2013), but despite this, two years later the Adoption

Leadership Board (ALB) suggested there had been a 40% decrease in adoptions since 31 March 2014. The Adoption Leadership Board has suggested the decrease in adoption follows the Court of Appeal's judgements known as *Re B* and *Re B-S* which offer guidance to the decision making in family courts (Gupta & Lloyd-Jones, 2016). Recognising the ethical and multifaceted complexity of the social work role in adoption, in May 2016, the British Association of Social Work launched an inquiry. The ALB figures published in January 2017, show a further 13% decrease in the number of people applying to become adopters, leading them to assert there are now more adoptive families waiting for a child than children waiting for adoptive parents.

The socio-political dynamics detailed above highlight the complexity of adoption and the role it has in the state's provision for a 'permanent' outcome for 'looked after children'. In addition to these dominant social structures, it is important to remain mindful that prospective adopters do not exist in isolation. Furthermore, their existence precipitates reflection on the experiences of children, young people and their birth families whose lives have been touched by adoption. As with all familial relationships, adoption does not guarantee permanence (Jones, 2003). Notably, Selwyn, Wijedasa & Meakings (2014) national review of adoption disruption reveals the fragmented means by which we understand this principal issue. Importantly, the knowledge produced within this thesis offers a critical examination of the social, historical and methodological intersections that influence how we construct prospective adopters (Foucault, 1989). I argue that at a time when the concept of what constitutes an adoptive family is more diverse than ever, it is essential that we understand the experiences of adults who have contemplated adoption but have not adopted a child.

## 1.1 Development of the thesis

The initial seed from which this thesis germinated was my interest in the potential for critical social psychology to explore how we contemplate who we are in relation to others. My appreciation of the value of social constructionism and qualitative methodologies to understand what it means to be human began during my BSc degree in psychology. My undergraduate thesis used phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of grandparents who parented their grandchildren. This interest in the application of qualitative analysis to understand familial relationships and aspects of 'self' continued during my MSc in Family and Child Psychology. My postgraduate dissertation explored the maternal role in the development of infant self-awareness, which taught me to recognise that despite its limitations there was immense value in the application of hermeneutic phenomenology. Throughout this thesis, I had experienced quandaries when applying the phenomenological method, arising primarily when traditional methodological principles conflicted with the maintenance of a hermeneutic approach (Heidegger, 1953/2010). The foundations of these dilemmas are not novel, and I discovered it is in the experience of these challenges where I began to make sense of phenomenology.

My doctoral journey began in April 2013 at a time when the British government expressed a desire to increase the number of children adopted, (Gove, 2012; Lords select committee, 2012, 2013) which in turn meant an upsurge in the recruitment of prospective adopters. Given the paucity of empirical research regarding the transition to adoptive parenthood, there was a reason to be concerned about the uncertain implications of adoption policy on both adults and children. Notably, the social motivations for child adoption have changed at various times across history responding to issues such as poverty, neglect and illegitimacy. Importantly, the discourses that support the socio-legal basis of adoption construct the birth mother in a negative light and her child as 'in danger or dangerous'. The discursive landscape constructing these birth families subsequently positions the adoptive parent as a middle-class saviour (Kim, 2015; Norwood & Baxter, 2011; Reeves, 1993, p. 412). At the start of the



21<sup>st</sup> Century, adoption is a means to provide alternative familial care for children deemed to have suffered abuse or neglect and for whom the state has assumed 'parental responsibility'. However, it is important to understand the changing social context of what is considered a safeguarding issue and the triangulation of the relationship between the state, parents and children (Parton, 2010). In the case of adoption, prospective adopters are simultaneously an apparatus of the state and a potential adoptive parent. Arguably, a focus on their experiences provides a unique lens to understand the implications of this multifaceted relationship.

To interrogate the complexity of prospective adoptive parenthood, one of the first objectives of this study was to understand the current government rhetoric, which discursively constructs prospective adopters. A thematic analysis of the language used in the national adoption week (NAW) recruitment campaigns of 2012 and 2013, provided insights into the discourses used to define prospective adopters. The examination of those NAW campaigns also highlighted the challenges inherent in designing the main study so to avoid reducing access to participants' subjective experience. A review of the literature revealed most studies of prospective adoptive parenthood were retrospective in design (Rushton & Monck, 2009). Therefore our understanding mainly derives from adults who have already adopted a child. The prominence of a retrospective research approach is unsurprising as 82% of adults who contact an adoption agency in response to a NAW campaign, fail to proceed to assessment (Ward, 2011). Thus, to locate those who identified as prospective adopters but who had not adopted, presented both an exciting task and a valuable opportunity for this current study.

Additionally, the intersubjectivity of a researcher in the process of making sense of other peoples' experiences is integral to the phenomenological method (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Willig, 2007). Therefore, one of the first issues I addressed was how my experience as a social worker would influence this study. As a social worker, I have assessed prospective adopters, and as such, I recognised I would need to

be critically reflective of how my professional experience influenced the research process. Indeed, to fail to do so would risk making the experience of others invisible to my 'self' (Mortari, 2008). Interestingly, I found my experience as a social worker was not as invasive on the design of the study as that of my positioning as a phenomenological researcher. Furthermore, I found my social work knowledge and practice skills invaluable in supporting participants' experience during their interviews, which at times involved their expression of distress and loss.

As I prepared to recruit participants for my chief study, I was conscious of trying to avoid creating constructions of who might be an adoptive parent. To counter this, I put out a broad call for adults to come forward be they couples or single people. The only condition to participating was that they had to have thought about becoming an adoptive parent but had not done so. I advertised on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook and in two local shops Greater Manchester. The response from social media was so positive I stopped recruiting online after only a few days. However, this mode of recruitment, albeit successful did influence and thereby limit who came forward to participate. Regrettably, there were no responses from the cards placed on shop notice boards. Finally, all the participants who shared their experiences have contributed to the development of this thesis, and the rich knowledge I gained throughout this process extends far beyond my doctorate.

## **1.2 Contribution to knowledge**

Despite the prominence of child adoption as a social policy in Britain, there is a paucity of research about the construction and experiences of prospective adoptive parents. As such, in its exploration of prospective adoptive parenthood this thesis addresses a topic that is of significance to many children, families and the state. The social constructionist method situates the knowledge produced within its historical, social and political landscape; thereby providing the opportunity to examine the

interrelationship between the social context and the individuals' experiences. A novel and critical examination of the discourses used by adoption agencies during the 2012-2013 NAW campaigns demonstrated the prevalence of pronatalist repertoires that arguably constrain the construction of prospective adoptive parenthood. In Chapter five, I also evidenced how the assertion of prospective adopters as purveyors of myths conflicts with newspaper articles that maintain the constructs on which those 'myths' exist. My second innovative study conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 prospective adoptive parents domiciled in Britain. The use of a critical social constructionist paradigm provided unique insight into how they experienced be(com)ing prospective adopters allowing the detail of individual experience to transcend homogenous norms. More specifically, the analysis demonstrated the complex negotiations undertaken by prospective adopters in negotiating pronatalist informed norms as they contemplate adopting a child. The hermeneutic phenomenological lens also explored their private experiences in addition to ones they shared with partners, friends and family members.

The contribution made by this thesis has the potential to assist the social policy makers, social workers and adoption agencies in reviewing how they recruit and assess prospective adoptive parents. This knowledge is important if we are to encourage engagement with and then appropriately support those who contemplate adoption (Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016; Wallis, 2006; Ward, 2011). Although the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology used in the second study is not unique some of the challenges, it raised in the decision-making processes and the data collected were novel. That, in turn, raised interesting lines of enquiry and reflection about the participant as an expert and the requirements of the researcher to be 'all knowing'. The philosophical issues highlighted within this thesis facilitate postdoc enquiry, particularly about the implications for social work practice and the assessment processes for prospective adoptive parents.

### **1.3 Overview of the thesis**

The social constructionist basis of this thesis required knowledge to be situated in time and place (Lang, 2011; Watson, 2007). Consequently, it was essential to position the knowledge produced within this thesis in its historical context while simultaneously permitting interrogation of the social construction of my findings. Therefore, following this introduction Chapter two presents the historical context of adoption as it developed in the UK. In doing so, it discusses the socio-political dynamics that contributed to the foundations of adoption in Britain, which now interweave into the experiences of contemporary prospective adopters. The chapter traced adoption from its legal conception into 21st Century Britain and acknowledged some of the lives tragically affected by individual and social circumstances. In doing so, it navigates the social context that saw the birth of adoption and subsequent Adoption Act 1926, followed by the Great Depression and the impact of world warfare. It highlights how the British government negotiated its responsibility to address underpinning social poverty and the subsequent neglect and abuse experienced by children. Finally, Chapter two documents the rise and then fall in adoption figures following the enactment of the Abortion Act 1967 before reviewing the revival brought about by Blair's government since 1997.

In addition to understanding the contribution of socio-political structures to the contemporary experiences of prospective adopters, it is crucial to examine previous adoption research. The role of research as a means to understand and construct the prospective adopter can be traced back to the 1920's and arguably functions to co-construct knowledge (Pathirage, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2008; Rehner Iversen, 2005). Therefore, Chapter three provides a critique of the contributions research studies have made to the multifaceted concept of adoption. In particular, it situates pronatalism as a formative ideology underpinning adoption, which I argue, in North America and Western Europe perpetuates a hegemonic view of motherhood (Dow, 2016). Chapter three also

interrogates various social constructions that influence the focus and methodology of research studies across the last century.

The qualitative theoretical structure of the thesis is discussed in the fourth chapter, which begins by positioning me as a qualitative researcher. Thus, Chapter four reflects on how I influenced the design and delivery of the two studies that comprise this doctoral thesis. It serves to introduce the thematic analysis used to explore how National adoption week recruitment campaigns discursively construct prospective adopters. Subsequently, Chapter four presents the phenomenological assumptions, which underpin the qualitative analysis of the interviews from 21 participants who self-identify as prospective adopters. Finally, the methodology chapter concludes with a short preface to the findings chapters.

Chapter five is dedicated to presenting and discussing the thematic analysis of the 2012 and 2013 NAW campaigns. The three emerging themes of 'deconstructing myths', 'becoming family' and 'converging people and policies', assist in understanding the socio-political landscape upon which adoption is situated. The findings from the main phenomenological study that explored the lived experience of prospective adopters are discussed throughout chapter's six to eight. In Chapter six, prospective adopters' experience of traversing dichotomies are examined in relation to what they 'want' or 'do not want'; their experience of 'choice' and whether they feel 'ready' to become an adoptive parent. Chapter seven examines how participants contemplate adoption amid a complex landscape of social constructions of children waiting for adoption. It further explores the incongruity of what is or is not normal when contemplating adoption, including how they navigate implicit and explicit expectations. Chapter eight detailed how participants reconstitute their sense of self when not be(com)ing an adoptive parent, this can lead them to examine their potential to (re)create a life for themselves while missing the experience of adopting a child. Finally, a conclusion is provided in Chapter nine, which summarises and revisits the implications of the research findings for the future of adoption policy and practice.

## Chapter Two – Setting the context

“I wonder how far Honourable Members realise the antiquated and positively inhuman position in which illegitimate children are placed by the Bastardy Laws of to-day. From the outset, these children are materially handicapped, and legally they may be said to be outcasts.” (Neville Chamberlain, 1920)

Strategies by which British society has or has not, supported the care of children are reflected in the complex relationships between the state and the public. Therefore, to understand the experiences of prospective adopters' in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain it is necessary to situate how we legislatively construct adoption amid pronatalism ideologies. In doing so, this chapter lays the foundations of the emerging stereotypes regarding prospective adopters and the families from which adopted children are born and how these have influenced the policies and practice of Government and adoption agencies. An initial examination of the historical development of adoption serves two purposes; firstly, it sets the context of how the tropes associated with various stakeholders who invest in or have a relational experience of adoption emerged. For example, the Bastardy Laws Amendment Act (1872) outcast children who were born illegitimately and despite the passage of time, the stigmatisation of illegitimacy has continued to be fundamental to the advance of adoptive practices (Rossini, 2014). Secondly, it enabled interrogation of different individual and social paradigms. For instance, although pronatalism encourages childbearing as a fulfilment of married adulthood (Park & Hill, 2014), the idealised British family remains anchored to white, middle class, able-bodied, purported heteronormative traditions.

Throughout history, most adopted children have originated from lower socio-economic families, and despite legislative interventions such as the Poor Act 1815, later amended in 1934, too many families continue to suffer significant hardship (Care, 2011; Dorling & Pritchard, 2010). Furthermore, modern attempts to develop Beveridge's (1879-1963) welfare state have also failed to protect children and their families from

experiencing neglect (Gupta, 2017; Stevenson, 2007). Subsequently, state intervention into families where children are deemed to have suffered or likely to suffer abuse or neglect continues to provide a means for identifying children who are suitable for adoption. Changing social norms reflected in legislation provide examples of the relationship between social policies and adoption. For example, a correlation of abortion legislation and reduced adoption figures occurred in America between 1961 and 1975 (Bitler & Zavodny, 2002). Similarly, in England, there was a decline in the rate of children adopted in Britain following the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961 and the enactment of the Abortion Act 1967, as demonstrated in Table 2.1.

Thus, we see the pronatalism based promotion of family encouraging a reliable supply of infertile adopters for children otherwise 'outcast' from society. Also, familial changes in Western societies are constant and reflected in demand for and expectations of prospective adopters. As such, in this Century we have witnessed changes in legislation via the Adoption and Children's Act 2002, which, in a positive step, saw the inclusion of single and non-heterosexual adopters. However, despite high profile campaigns, there has been a continued failure to achieve sufficient ethnic diversity in the recruitment of prospective adopters. This deficiency has left many children from Black and minority ethnic populations without adopted families. Consequently, the Children and Families Act 2014 removed Local Authorities' duty to find ethnic matches between children and their adopters. Importantly, changing legislation and social policies exist within a complex myriad of an individual's social experiences. Therefore, this Chapter provides the outline of the development of adoption over the last two centuries, setting the scene for the review of the literature in Chapter three and findings later reported in Chapters five through to eight.

## 2.1 The birth of adoption

Unsurprisingly, during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, poverty and child neglect remained vital concerns, which triggered the development of legislation that aimed to protect children. Appalling societal inequality and deprivation led to the deaths of children from not only malnutrition and disease but also murder. One example is of Selina Wadge, a poor and unmarried woman with two illegitimate sons, the eldest being six-year-old John, and his younger brother Henry (known as Harry) aged two years. After a series of traumatic events, 28-year-old Selina was found guilty of unpremeditated murder, having dropped Henry down a well. Her execution by hanging on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1878 compounded this tragedy (Hager, 2017).

Other mothers in dire circumstances would give their children away to women known by the disparaging term 'baby farmer' (Keating, 2001; O'Halloran, 2009). The purpose of baby farming was to re-home infants, and this was often successful; however, at other times, appalling neglect occurred, and many infants were murdered (Keating, 2001; O'Halloran, 2009). Following the infamous Brixton case where five babies died of neglect, the 1871 parliamentary select committee was established to consider how legislation could protect infants. Motivated by public outrage and organised campaigns, legislative changes slowly began to take place with the introduction of the 1899 Poor Law Act, and 1908 Children Act (Keating, 2001).

However, the real pressure to formalise adoptive practices arose between World War I and World War II. At that time, the principal private adoption agencies were the National Children's Adoption Association (NCAA) and National Adoption Society (NAS), financed by voluntary donations and fund-raising benefits (Keating 2001). The foremost of these, the NCAA established by Miss Clare Andrew achieved prominence by having Princess Alice Countess of Athlone as its Patron. These early adoption societies wanted to secure legal parental rights for adoptive parents so they could be confident of permanently keeping their adopted



child and thereby remove any concern that birth parents may wish to retrieve their child when they reached the age of employability (Keating,

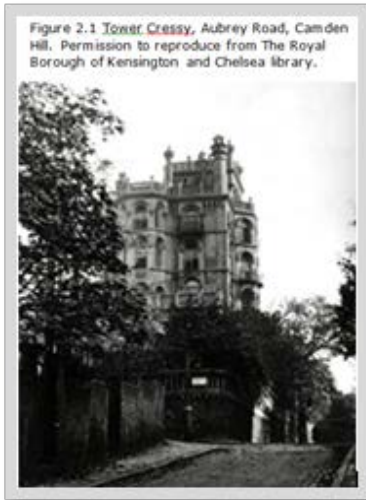


Figure 2.1 Tower Cressy, Aubrey Road, Camden Hill. Permission to reproduce from The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea library.

2001). These adoption agencies were economically wealthy, and babies were temporarily homed in mansions such as Tower Cressy, on Hampton Hill, while they waited for placement with their adoptive parents. Prospective adopters were people financially able to make donations to fund the work of the adoption agency. Between April 1919 and October 1920, the NCAA approved 2,310 children and 1653 prospective adoptive parents to create adoptive families (Keating, 2001).

This economic relationship between prospective adopters and the adoption agencies fostered an unwillingness to scrutinise the suitability of those seeking to adopt. As such, the NCAA was reluctant to ask too many questions of potential adoptive parents in case they felt dissuaded. Furthermore, Keating (2001) asserts Clare Andrew was uninterested in the plight of unmarried mothers and only concerned with the needs of childless prospective adopters. When giving evidence to the Hopkinson Committee, who were contemplating the enactment of the 1926 Act, Clare Andrew, defined her clientele as predominately from the emerging middle and professional classes, such as police officers (Keating, 2001). Notably, the fundamental illegitimacy of many of the children added to the social stigma of adoptive families. Therefore adoptive parents sought to cloak the relationship with their child to ensure public respectability. Interestingly, parliamentary committee debates on the issue of secrecy recorded dissent, although they finally enacted legislation that hid adoptive relationships from wider society.

## **2.2 Adoption of Children Act 1926**

During the interwar years, significant changes to families and their relationship with the state began to take place. During this period, the government enacted several laws which reconstructed regulatory roles and responsibilities, with a focus on the welfare of children. As described above, there was a growing awareness of the need for children, and the adults who had assumed parental care for them, to have some security in the permanence of adoptive arrangements (O'Halloran, 2009). Subsequently, the Adoption of Children Act 1926 regulated child adoption in England and Wales, and prevented parents from informally giving their children away to relatives or strangers (Keating, 2001; Walker, 2009). In turn, the 1926 Act furnished the state with increased responsibilities to safeguard children and assist in the provision of their permanent familial care (Keating, 2001).

More specifically, the 1926 Adoption of Children Act formalised the adoption of 'infants', a term then used, to define any unmarried person under the age of 21 years. Also, we begin to see the first legal discourses that constructed prospective adoptive parenthood, as the law defined parents as needing to be at least 25 years of age. The 1926 Act also stated that adopters had to be a minimum of 21 years older than the infant they adopted. Notably, the 1926 Act made provision for both married couples and individual applicants to become adoptive parents. There were exceptions, for example, a sole male applicant wishing to adopt a female child required the special consideration of the court. This decision suggests an implicit concern underpinning the social construction of the role of single adoptive fathers, which needed more attention than that of a single mother. Indeed, parenthood outside marriage for both men and women remained an issue throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and this influenced the development of adoption in British society.

The intervention of the state into private family life and the legal reassigning of parental authority required the consent of the child's birth parents or guardian. However, if the court was satisfied that a birth

parent unreasonably withheld their consent, it can dispense with this requirement. Thus, birth parents cannot withhold consent as a means to subvert the power of the state. In contemporary times, the weight given to consent is still a complicated matter that demands careful judicial reflection. The 1926 Act legally constructed how an adopted child would have legal rights to their adoptive parents' property as if they were lawfully born (within wedlock) to the adopters and vice versa. Furthermore, adoption necessitated permanent severance between the infant and their family of origin. Administratively, this led to the creation of the Adopted Children's Register and alterations to the original record of the child's birth to signify was adopted. This practice served to conceal information from the child, their birth family and the public while permitting the state to have a private traceable link between their recording systems. These legislative structures helped to socially construct the relationships between parents and their children, which in turn contributed to the definition and expectations of prospective adoptive parents. Importantly, laws are rarely permanent, and a challenge in 1975 by adult adoptees, created a change in legislation, which allowed them to access their original birth records.

### **2.3 The Great Depression**

Further evidence, of prospective adopters being utilised to fill the void between birth parents, children and the state is evident when we explore the impact of the Great Depression. Parliamentary focus on the welfare of children continued throughout the 1930's, alongside severe economic depression and later during Britain's war with Germany (Keating, 2001). As in contemporary Britain (Dowling & Dowling, 2017; Millar & Bennett, 2016), the austerity measures imposed at that time, made those who were already poverty-stricken, more vulnerable (Gazeley & Newell, 2011). Importantly, two legislative statutes conceived in the 1930's reflect the government positioning of responsibility for neglected children. Firstly, the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 criminalised parents for the neglect and abuse of children, which I argue that despite imposed austerity, absolved the state of responsibility. Across the decade, multiple

factors by which children could be made available for adoption grew, as did the interest in people wanting to be adoptive parents, and a decade after the 1926 Act, over 5,000 children were adopted each year (Keating, 2001). Secondly, despite this rise in the number of adoptions and the expected increase of orphans' due to wartime deaths, the enactment of the 1939 Adoption of Children Regulation Act designed to tighten the regulation of adoption societies was postponed. Evidently, the number of adoptive parents rose in line with the number of children adopted. However, state-imposed secrecy on adoption makes it impossible to determine the full scope of adoptive practices (Keating, 2001).

The desire for secrecy continued because a child born illegitimately remained socially stigmatised (Davis, 1939) particularly in light of legislation which sought to penalise unmarried parents. A campaign by the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child led to the Legitimacy Act 1926. However, the state did not give equal regard to a child born outside of marriage until the Family Reform Act 1987. In some cases, unmarried parents adopted their own children as a means of legitimising them, until a change in legislation after the war prevented this (Keating, 2001). For decades, prospective adopters had dual roles of parenting children who had suffered neglect and secretly legitimising children born outside of marriage. The enduring shame of illegitimacy contributed to a need for adopters to present the children as their biological offspring. Thus, the need for a child to be of similar physical appearance to their prospective adopters facilitated a desire to reproduce genetic similarities for fear of exposure. A further factor to consider in contemplating the historical underpinnings of prospective adoptive parenthood was the continuing ambivalence of Local Authorities to supervise and regulate private adoption and fostering arrangements despite changes brought about by the Adoption Act 1958 (Suwalsky et al., 2012). This lack of regulation led social commentators at that time, to remark it was more difficult to obtain planning permission for a building than an adoption order (Holman, 1973).

## 2.4 PostWar development

During World War II, over a million British children were displaced having been evacuated from major cities to keep them safe from bombing (Jones, 2010). However, there were reports of children being maltreated and used as unpaid servants in the very homes that were meant to keep them safe (Waugh, Robbins, Davies, & Feigenbaum, 2007). Concerns regarding the welfare of adopted children were evident when Lord Davies raised queries about the trafficking of adopted infants in 1943 when he sought the enactment of provisions laid out in the proposed Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act 1939. Regrettably, children were not always safe in the care of the state, as highlighted by the death of Dennis O' Neill. In 1945, 12-year-old Dennis O'Neill died because of extreme physical violence and appalling neglect while living in foster care. Dennis suffered a heart attack after his foster father brutally beat him. Dennis' death brought into public consciousness how those who are deemed able to protect other peoples' children can fail to do so. Furthermore, these avoidable tragedies increased the demand upon the state to assure society of its capacity to safeguard children.

Figure 2.2 Dennis O'Neill (centre) with his brothers Terry (left) and Freddie. Permission to reproduce from Adam O'Neill.



The state's response to Dennis' death saw Sir William Monckton conduct an inquiry, which led to the formation of the Public Care of Children Inquiry, known as the Curtis committee after its chair, Dame Myra Curtis. The committee examined all types of 'away from home' care, including adoption. Concern was evident about the motivations and capabilities of those who cared for children away from home, and the demands on the State to take responsibility in overseeing the needs of children. The subsequent comprehensive Children Act 1948 created local authority departments that were dedicated to protecting children deemed

to be at risk. However, there was an absence of concern, about adopted children and the Curtis report (1946) remained positive about the benefit of adoption for children and their adoptive parents.

In his review of the Adoption of Children Act 1949, Lawton (1950) noted two significant amendments, firstly that prospective adopters could now adopt a child who was not a British subject providing that the single adopter, or if a couple, the prospective adoptive father was British. Secondly, the new legislation reversed the clause in the 1926 Act to ensure that from that time on prospective adopters must treat an adopted child as if they were a biological child in relation to property (Lawton, 1950). In addition, the 1949 Act made several minor amendments to the 1926 Act, which altered who could become a prospective adopter and when. Although the age restrictions on who could become an adoptive parent remained in place, these were notably not imposed on an adult who already had a genetic or familial relationship with the child (Lawton, 1950). Furthermore, all prospective adopters had to have had the child in their care for three consecutive months before the court would finalise the Order. By virtue of the 1949 Act, we also saw the emergence of readopted children. Thus, prospective adopters could adopt a child who had experienced a failed adoptive placement. However, the issue of what constituted adoption continued to be a matter of inquiry; a further review commenced in 1953, and the continual process of reviewing legislation continues to the present day.

## **2.5 Rise and fall of adoption**

The adoption of children continued to rise, and by 1949, more than 17,000 children provided an abundant supply of babies for childless couples who sought to adopt (Keating, 2001; O'Halloran, 2009; Rossini, 2014). Research around this time reflects the pronatalism view that a woman's life is unsatisfying if she does not become a mother, demonstrated in Kiser's (1939, p.68) exploration of the topic.

*"I firmly believe that most childless women are physically unable to have children and to [sic] poor to go through treatments. For life without children is a very dreary dissatisfied [sic] life, judging by myself and my friends." (Kiser, 1939, p.68)*

The above narrative supports the emergence of pronatalism discourses that suggest infertility is a loss to be endured. Kiser's (1939) research focused on white married women, and it is important to note at that time society expected women to be homemakers rather than pursue careers. In Britain, there was also an emerging National Health Service and a discussion about educating young people about contraception. Throughout the 1950's, British society continued to change, and the rate of adoptions began to drop to 13,000 per annum, which equates to about a third to a quarter of all children who were then born outside of marriage. Although, it is important to note that this adoption figure remained twice that of 1939, and adoption figures rose again at the end of that decade (Rossini, 2014). Also, change is seen within emerging discourses that differentiate between a good and an unfit prospective adoptive mother and further expectations of the adoption process become defined (Rossini, 2014). Furthermore, narratives that support the adopted baby as legitimate become intertwined with those of the good prospective adopter, one who waits patiently for legal processes and approvals to be undertaken, rather than a desire to adopt by private means (Rossini, 2014).

We gain insights about research into adoption from an article published in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine by the Hon. Mrs Geoffrey Edwards (1954, p.1044), who highlights how deliberations on adoption were occurring in the absence of 'comprehensive scientific study'. Edwards (1954, p.1044) expressed concern at the rise in the number of adoptions and the role of social workers in the adoption process. In doing so, she sought to position the needs of the child as central to the debate:

*"Many adopters want a perfect child: female, of course beautiful, clever, a social success, who will pass examinations with ease and marry young into the aristocracy. The ideal adopters are those who*

*take the child as they have taken each other, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health; and who will devote themselves to the child's wellbeing just as they would have done had he been born to them." (Edwards, 1954, p.1044)*

Arguably, for the first time, the principle that a child's needs are central to the adoption process arose in the 1954 Hurst Committee; this remains relevant today. This centrality of the child's needs in adoption as higher than those of biological parents and prospective adoptive parents echoed in research at that time. In 1955, Miriam Elson, a clinical social worker, wrote eloquently about the complicated separation and attachment tasks facing the adopted child. She distinguished biological parents as 'natural' and adoptive parents as 'real'. In her view, Elson suggests the adopted child:

*"Must be able to establish his own family, secure in his acceptance of the worthiness of the ancestral stream that produced him, little is known of how the child gains integration within family, society and self." (Elson, 1955, p.137)*

This focus on the importance of a child achieving an integrated self is fascinating and precedes Bowlby's (1969) publication of 'Attachment and Loss'. The above statement suggests Elson, (1955) understood the importance of a relational self, although at that time there was little understanding of how a child developed their understanding of themselves and the world in which they lived. Indeed, this is also reflected in the Kirk and Mass (1959) study of 1500 Canadian and American adoptive couples and their attitudes and experiences of integrating their adopted child into their family. Kirk and Mass (1959) suggest that greater effort is required to protect the integrity of the adoptive family structure and that concealing the truth of their adoptive relationships is a means to achieving this. This suggestion supports Elson's (1955) previous assertion of the importance of an integrated social self, but this conflicted with legislation and social expectations at that time. As such, it prevented adopted children from developing a full understanding of self, which integrated their ancestral stream and adoption identity.



In 1967, the UK saw the introduction of the Abortion Act and that year records report 22,322 terminated pregnancies took place. Subsequently, in England and Wales, there was a decline in the number of adoptions with the following decade adoption figures halved from 25,000 in 1968 to 12,748 in 1977 (Table 2.1). Although the demand for prospective adopters fell because of the impact of the Abortion Act, there remained a need for the state to intervene in private family life; which was amplified by the horrific assault and murder of 7-year-old Maria Colwell in 1973. The Children Act 1975 followed, and this saw the creation of a comprehensive adoption service and the first general agreement that the needs of children should be paramount to the needs of parents. Thus, ending the presumption that parents are best placed to advocate for their children's needs (Hendrick, 2003). As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century ended, we saw the introduction of the Children Act 1989 enacted by a British Conservative government which encouraged a turn away from risk assessment towards working in partnership with families. This legislative change contributed to a continuing decline in the number of children adopted. Table 2.1 represents data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) archives recording 7,044 children adoptions in 1989, which reduced to an annual figure of 4,323 a decade later. However, tracing reliable data on adoption figures is difficult as the four countries of the UK collate and publish their data at different times of the year. Presented in Table 2.2 are the CoramBAAF collated figures for England and Wales between 2011 and 2016. It is notable that the 2011 adoption figures differ in each table with (ONS) figures reported as 4,777, and CoramBAAF has a notably lower number of 3,354.

Be(com)ing a prospective adoptive parent

Table 2.1 Adoption orders by date of entry in the Adopted Children's Register 1974–2011 in England and Wales (ONS)

Year	Total	Male	Female
2011	4,777	2,369	2,408
2010	4,550	2,302	2,248
2009	4,725	2,392	2,333
2008	5,065	2,522	2,543
2007	4,637	2,315	2,322
2006	4,978	2,445	2,533
2005	5,556	2,790	2,766
2004	5,555	2,773	2,782
2003	4,809	2,337	2,472
2002	5,671	2,866	2,805
2001	5,977	3,011	2,966
2000	4,943	2,449	2,494
1999	4,323	2,116	2,207
1998	4,382	2,213	2,169
1997	5,300	2,605	2,695
1996	5,962	2,988	2,974
1995	5,797	2,880	2,917
1994	6,240	3,142	3,098
1993	6,854	3,406	3,448
1992	7,341	3,661	3,680
1991	7,170	3,605	3,565
1990	6,533	3,362	3,171
1989	7,044	3,480	3,352
1988	7,390	3,675	3,513
1987	7,201	3,545	3,505
1986	7,892	4,042	3,634
1985	7,615	3,856	3,587
1984	8,648	4,437	4,211
1983	9,029	4,640	4,389
1982	10,240	5,305	4,935
1981	9,284	4,799	4,485
1980	10,609	5,428	5,181
1979	10,870	5,593	5,277
1978	12,121	6,259	5,862
1977	12,748	6,548	6,200
1976	17,621	8,939	8,682
1975	21,299	10,786	10,513
1974	22,502	11,503	10,999

Table 2.2 Looked after children adoption figures year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011-2016 (CoramBAAF)

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
<b>England</b>	3100	3470	4010	5050	5330	4690
<b>Wales</b>	254	246	329	345	383	340

Following the enactment of the Children Act 1989, there was a reduction in the number of 'Looked After' children which correlate with the reduced number of adoptions (Rowlands & Statham, 2009). Table 2.1 reflects that in a decade the number of adoptions reduced from 7,390 in 1988 to 4,382 in 1998. Following his election in 1997, Prime Minister Tony Blair returned adoption to the foreground of public policy as a positive outcome for children who were 'looked after' by the state. Although the 1989 Act remains the substantive piece of legislation regulating social work with children and families, the then Labour government and subsequent governments introduced new adoption legislation. The following section will examine the development of adoption in Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## 2.6 Labouring over the rebirth of adoption

In 2000, Prime Minister Tony Blair ordered a review of adoption policy and practice as he considered systemic problems limited successful adoptive outcomes for children. The White Paper (2000) outlined 'major problems,' regarding prospective adopters, including the finding that the application procedure was unfair and biased. There was also concern that post-placement support for adoptive families was inadequate. In response, the Labour government introduced a multi-pronged approach which included monetary investment, setting targets for the numbers of children to be adopted and creating legislation to modernise the legal framework (HMSO, 2000). New adoption standards established what those involved in adoption could expect and included six-month timescales to decide on a prospective adopter's application. This top-down governmental approach included structural changes and consequences for the adoption agencies that did not conform; additionally, performance

targets were to be set, measured, and published. Importantly, at no point in the White Paper (2000) was there any consideration of the experience and purpose of adoption in 21st British society.

Blair's premiership oversaw the enactment of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which came into full effect on 30<sup>th</sup> December 2005 replacing the Adoption Act 1976. In doing so, the 2002 Act sought to ensure that, as in the substantive Children Act 1989, a child's best interests are central to decisions made relating to adoption. There was now a duty placed upon Local Authorities to provide and maintain support services for adoptive parents. Notably, although there is provision to support contact between adopted children and their birth relatives, the focus of supportive services is on the maintenance of adoptive families. A formative principle underpinning both the 1989 and 2002 Acts is that delay in making decisions to secure permanence in planning for a child was considered prejudicial to their welfare. Interestingly, Clapton and Clifton (2016) divide the history of adoption into pre-post 1980 era's which they define as (pre) the relinquishing of babies to childless couples and (post) an alternative method by which the state could provide permanent care for 'looked after children'. Although their view has merit, this simplified paradigm negates the complexities that have remained present in the history of adults becoming parental figures for children not born to them. As this chapter demonstrates, constructing the children adopted before 1980 as 'voluntary relinquishment' (Clapton & Clifton, 2016, p.154) dismisses the dominant social-biological forces that did not support the poor and the unmarried parents (mainly mothers) of children born outside of marriage.

To increase the potential for children to achieve permanence via adoption, the 2002 Act extended who could apply for an Adoption Order and included unmarried couples whether of different or same sex. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 increased the restrictions upon prospective adopters adopting a child internationally. However, it also introduced a mechanism where they could appeal and seek an independent review if they were not approved to adopt a child

domestically. Thus there is a suggested presumption of approval for those who come forward to adopt which echoes the high regard for adopters discussed throughout this chapter. Positively, the Children and Adoption Act 2006 permits the Secretary of State to suspend international adoptions if there are concerns about a country's adoption practices. This legislative approach supports the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, which advocates recognising the value of continued relationships, religious persuasion, racial origin, cultural and linguistic background. Similarly, these principles are reflected in domestic law with the 2006 Act making provision for the enforcement of a child arrangement order for contact under s8 of the Children Act 1989.

Further changes arose via the Children and Families Act 2014, which removed the duty upon Local Authorities to consider a child's ethnicity when matching with an adoptive parent. This change in policy reflects the continuing dominance of white middle-class heteronormative values and the positioning of children from Black, Asian and Minority groups as 'hard to place'. Another notable change in the 2014 Act related to the enactment of the foster-to-adopt route to becoming an adoptive parent. In this scenario, people receive approval for the two-fold role of fostering and adoption. This legislative change aims to reduce the disruption of care experienced by children and in turn, requires prospective adopters to consider if they could assume this dual role. The expansion of who can be an adoptive parent and the additional routes to adoption take place amid the Government's commissioning of a competitive child adoption market. Furthermore, the growth of this marketplace was led by quantitative targets that saw marketing officers become crucial to the successful recruitment of prospective adopters (Clifton & Neil, 2013). Arguably, understanding this ever-changing context is vital to identifying the way in which enduring socio-political dynamics interweave into the experiences of contemporary prospective adopters (Keating, 2001; O'Halloran, 2009).

Change in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was not limited to legislation, and in August 2015, the highly regarded British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) charity, which had led been integral to the

development of adoption research, policy and maintained the adoption register succumbed to economic adversity. CoramBAAF was founded to continue to work of BAAF; its aims include the promotion of practice, standards and, understanding of the implications of adoption across the UK. However, CoramBAAF did not assume responsibility for maintaining the UK Adoption of Children register, which was instead taken up independent bodies for each of Britain's four-country nations.

## **2.7 Chapter summary**

I have demonstrated how the initial construction of adoption was a complex combination of social and political factors, which simultaneously aimed to protect children from harm and furnish them with the opportunity for a permanent adoptive family (Keating, 2001; O'Halloran, 2009). Although the 1926 Act legislated the adoption process, it made little provision for who would be a suitable adopter other than defining age and gender while broader social and political discourses also served to hide the prevalence of adoption in British Society (O' Halloran, 2009). This chapter identifies the different influences, which contributed to the formation and development of adoption policy, practice and legislation. As I travelled through the historical synopsis, prospective adopters were ever present but primarily hidden in the legislative and social practices that focused mainly on state provision and inadequate parenting. This focus, changed during the 20th Century, firstly, with the number of adoptions being formally registered and increasing in amount to up to 17,000 each year. Secondly, the death of Dennis O'Neill highlighted the dangers for children away from home, but there was an assumption that there was an absence of risk to adopted children.

As the postwar years unfolded, I have evidenced the renewed provision for research and an examination of the impact of adoption for the development of the adopted child's sense of self. These changes were in conjunction with changing social dynamics and legislative principles, which have extended the definition of who can be a prospective adoptive parent. However, understanding of prospective adopters should extend

beyond legal descriptions, and the following chapter explores the literature that contributes to the construction of prospective adoptive parenthood.

## Chapter Three – A review of the literature

*“While adoptions concern only a limited number of individuals in a society, the handling of the matter of the disposition of a human life can both reflect that society as well as act back upon it”. (Fanshel, 1957, p.80).*

This chapter builds on the emerging themes evident throughout the historical synopsis presented in Chapter two and critically examines how our understanding of prospective adopters has continued to develop. In doing so, it continues with an archaeological and genealogical influenced approach, which allows examination of the prospective adopters amid the concept of adoption that has emerged over time (Foucault, 1989; Nietzsche, 1996). From a social constructionist standpoint, it is important to position knowledge from those who influence laws and policy and that emerging from theory and research, in their time and place (Pathirage, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2008). A challenging approach which interrogates the continuity of their contribution to contemporary views be they apparent or invisible (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). However, this relational approach to knowledge provides an opportunity to dialogically critique the multifaceted nature of being in the world, as opposed to implementing a Cartesian informed separation of time and place (Shotter, 2000).

Therefore, interrogating the intricate relationship between epistemology and ontology within the literature is essential if we are to fully comprehend the experiences of prospective adoptive parents (Pathirage, Amaratunga, & Haigh, 2008). This tension is most evident when pronatalism discourses intercept adoption narratives. The resultant compound dynamic simultaneously promotes the importance of biological parenthood amid the need to recruit adults to parent children with whom they share no genetic connection. The review traverses this biological-social web of adoptive parenthood and explores pertinent issues such as heteronormativity, and the commodification of adoption. From this exploration, it becomes evident that there remains disparity between the



policy-driven desire to have an increasing number of children adopted and meaningful reflection on the experiences of prospective adopters. Indeed, this consideration steers us to interrogate our understanding of prospective adopters as consumers in an increasingly marketised social work environment (Swain, 2016). This chapter presents a challenge to simplistic dichotomies of readiness and expands our understanding of the intricacies of (pre) contemplation, for those thinking about adopting a child.

The historic synopsis has already revealed the need for the state to have safeguards in place to ensure it has some accountability for the safety of children. Unless an adult is already known to the state because of concerns about their parental capacity, they can become a biological parent without a formal determination of their suitability. A substantial proportion of adults who choose to adopt do so after experiencing infertility; although there may be no real concerns about their parental capacity, they must complete the parenting assessment record (PAR). The process of state approval serves multiple purposes, one of which is to provide the basis upon which to justify the legal order of adoption (Pustilnik, 2002). Thus, the state, influenced by the social norms and knowledge of human behaviour available at any given time defines who is a suitable adopter. Within this dynamic, the approval process includes the provision and construction of rigorous assessments of prospective adopters. These purportedly apply theoretical concepts of readiness to and propensity for relational attachment (Paulsen & Merighi, 2009; Prochaska et al., 2005; Timberlake, Mudd, & Cullen, 2003). However, I argue such theories remain anchored to restrictive views of selfhood, which negate a comprehensive view of prospective adopters' experiences and how this could influence our understanding of adoption. Therefore, this review of the literature examined: how does the literature inform an understanding of prospective adopters' experiences?

### **3.1 Scope of the review**

In addition to defining the critical stance taken in this review, it is also necessary to outline the selection process for this corpus of literature. To this end, I adopted a methodical approach (White & Schmidt, 2005) by using the following keywords to conduct a literature search: adoption, adoptive, prospective, pre-adoption and pre-adoptive (with/without the hyphen), mother(hood), father(hood), parent(hood). Also, as a feminist researcher, I wanted to ensure the inclusion of feminist perspectives. Therefore, I also included the words feminism and feminist. Notably, it is necessary to add feminist terms because subject categories prevalent in database groups do not always include feminist journals (Mertens, 2005). These keywords formed the basis of multiple search terms, varying both combination and order of words to ensure a comprehensive search. Furthermore, I used Google Scholar as an additional means of identifying relevant literature (Beckmann & von Wehrden, 2012; Gehanno, Rollin, & Darmoni, 2013). Adoption studies, as is typical to most Western social science research, predominantly derive from North America, Canada and Western Europe; although a small range of studies undertaken in Israel and Brazil were located in the literature search. From a critical social psychological perspective, recognising the socio-political and cultural context of research is vital if we are to make sense of how knowledge is situated.

I recognise that my positioning as a critical social psychology researcher and social worker also influenced how I interrogated the research corpus under review. Therefore, the themes identified and examined have come to the fore as important, while others will have remained unobserved and unexamined. However, as far as my subjectivity permits, I endeavoured to make both my explicit and implicit assumptions transparent (Yanchar, Slife, & Warne, 2008). Notably, this reflective process is integral to the psychological enquiry (Gergen, 2011; Richardson & Slife, 2011) and further aided by my doctoral supervisory team's examination of this thesis (Hellowell, 2006). Although the review provides a comprehensive critique of relevant research, it differs from

systematic reviews, guided by positivism and which aim to find an objective outcome (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006).

### **3.2 Construction of the prospective adopter**

One of the founding ideologies, fundamental to any research on parenting is the concept of pronatalism. Pronatalism views promote the biological production of children for societal purposes and arguably have an enduring coercive influence on the social role of women (Brown & Ferree, 2005; Hollingworth, 1916; Laufer-Ukeles, 2014). Notably, a pronatalism outlook views biological parenthood as an integral part of being an adult (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist & Lövgren, 2013). Traditionally, the normative transition to parenthood is constructed as a married heterosexual couple biologically conceiving a child (Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011). However, the trajectory to parenthood for heterosexual adults then separates, illuminating the biological and social differences of women and men (Fox, 2009). There is a vast history of research into the biological and social experiences of mothers. However, research is often criticised for perpetuating a hegemonic ideology of motherhood (Arendell, 2000; Cowdery, 2005; Dow, 2016; Locke & Budds, 2013). In comparison, there is a paucity of research about fatherhood, although this has begun to emerge (Featherstone, 2009; Fisher, 2005; Gupta & Lloyd-Jones, 2016; Herland, Hauge, & Helgeland, 2014; Johansson, 2011; Millings, 2010).

Similarly, we see an imbalance between the research into adoptive motherhood (Ben-Ari, & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Fontenot, 2007; Miall & March, Park, 2006; Wegar, 1997; Williams, 1990), outweighing that which focused specifically on adoptive fathers (Baumann, 1999; Cook, 2014; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Golombok et al., 2014; Wheeler, 2013). Furthermore, Hicks and McDermott (1999) argue that the prominence of pronatalist views contribute to the rejection of some gay and lesbian prospective adopters because of their sexuality. However, legislative changes, such as those enactment by the Adoption and Children Act 2002, led to a corpus of studies that explored the transition to adoptive parenting for lesbian and gay adopters (Brown, Smalling, Groza, & Ryan,

2009; Fontenot, 2007; Hicks, 2005, 2006; Jennings, Mellish, Tasker, Lamb, & Golombok, 2014; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007; Wood, 2015). As such, we have begun to see the emergence of studies using sexual identity to explore comparisons between heterosexual and gay and lesbian adopters (Goldberg, & Smith, 2008; Goldberg, Kinkler, & Hines, 2011; Goldberg, Kinkler, Moyer, & Weber, 2014). However, I argue that this is also problematic, as the pronatalist underpinnings of such studies continue to anchor parenthood to an adult's sexuality, thus limiting the scope of how we understand their parental experiences.

Social constructions of the family in British society, built on the norms of heterosexual marriage contribute to contemporary conceptions of adoption. These are evident in Edwards (1954) examination of adoptive parent's capacity to create a familial bond with a non-biologically related child when she reflects on the 'familial' ties legally construed between married adults. Founding anthropology exploring the importance of genetics construct adoptive parents as 'other' to biological parents but recognise the use of legal structures to create families (Finkler, 2001). Therefore, it is important to reflect how such studies suggest prospective adoptive parents might consider their future adopted child to be 'other' to a biologically related child. Adoption orders provide a sense of permanence that not obtained with fostering (Biehal, Ellison, Baker, & Sinclair, 2010; Selwyn & Quinton, 2004). However, the necessity of adoption reflects the impermanence of biological families and the same is true for adoptive relationships (Jones, 2003). Indeed, a comprehensive study from Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings (2014) reflect that adoptive family disruption rates, in the UK range between 4% and 19% depending on factors such as the age of the child at the point of placement.

Quantitative methodologies and the development of psychometric tests to measure intelligence dominated research in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. As such, we begin to see the construction of a prospective adoptive parent as someone who values intellect alongside an increased societal interest in intelligence development. For example, building on earlier research that examined the intellectual development of adopted

children (Skodak & Skeels, 1945; Skeels, 1936; Skodak, 1939; Skodak & Skeels, 1949), Marie Skodak's (1949) longitudinal study explored the mental growth of 100 adopted children in the same family between 1936-1946. Skodak's (1949) North American study focused on children of North European descent who had been subject to a prior intelligence test before being placed for adoption aged 6 months. As stated in Chapter two, it is important when reflecting on such studies that we do not lose sight of the impact of social stigma that can serve to enforce adoption. As such, I remain mindful of the profound loss of the North European mothers, many unmarried, who were forced to have their child adopted as depicted in the film, *Philomena*.

Interestingly, Skodak's (1949) findings facilitate a view of relative sameness for adopted and non-adopted children. At a time when the socially expected desire was for biological parenthood, studies that support a comparable view of intelligence for those children waiting for adoption, arguably, encouraged infertile couples to consider adopting. As a phenomenological researcher, the language used in the construction of 'otherness' and 'sameness' is of interest; particularly, as phenomenology aims to understand the subjective experience of the individual within their social reality (Davies, 2011; Kriegel, 2008; Thanopoulos, 2012; Willig, 2007). A critical exploration of the same, interwoven throughout this thesis, provides a means to understand the enduring themes and constructions of adoptive parenthood, as both comparable and different to parenthood achieved by birth.

Kirk's, (1964), seminal research 'Shared Fate' consists of a collection of studies undertaken between 1951-1961, with over 2,000 adoptive parents across North America and Canada. In Kirk's chapter, 'Adoptive Relations in the Making', several themes are addressed including gendered response to involuntary childlessness; the dominance and societal rewards for biological reproduction; social tensions between biological and adoptive parenthood preparation and loss; tensions between individual and societal expectations. These are enduring themes, and it is clear Kirk had regard for the relationality of societal structures and

people's experiences. However, the social expectations of mothers at that time limit his views of motherhood. For example, he describes the preparation for motherhood as being instilled in childhood developmental play, yet negates the societal structures, which constructed fatherhood in 1950's America & Canada. Unsurprisingly, identification of the male view of 'childlessness' was not an aspect of Kirk's research survey (1959-1961, p.2). As such, the genealogical influence of epistemological and ontological assumptions such as pronatalism, (adopted) motherhood and (adopted) fatherhood (Hepburn, 2008; Lang, 2011; Watson, 2007) are absent from Kirk's seminal work.

Fundamental to the landscape within which Kirk was working, was the social expectation of married heterosexual couples who were expected to produce children and enjoy permanent family relations. When we relate this principle to adoption, it implies a need for a personal motivation for parenthood to be supported by a societal provision for adoptive relationships when biology fails. Thus, in relation to prospective adopters, pronatalist derived conceptions of a normative family can act as a barrier to pursuing adoption as a route to parenthood (Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016). Other theoretical concepts also contribute to pronatalism ideology as illustrated in the gendered bio-social constructions of maternal parenting of Kirk's, peers': Ainsworth, (1970); (Harlow, 1958); and Winnicott, (1953). Indeed, Western society's construction of motherhood has been subject to sociological and psychological exploration for more than a century (Holmes, 2006; Locke & Budds, 2013; Shalev & Lemish, 2013). Thus, although, Kirk's research is seminal to contemporary adoption research, it is important to remember that his study was itself underpinned by 40 previous years of research (Logan, 2013; MacDonald & McSherry, 2013; March & Miall, 2013). Indeed, Brooks & Brooks (1939), reported that research into adoptive relationships became prolific after 1924. What is evident from the references Brooks and Brooks draw on is the prevalence of studies that explore the role of nature versus nurture on the development of adopted children.

Mia Kellmer Pringle (1967) reviewed adoption research in UK, Canada and America between 1948 and 1965, and provides a seminal account to assist our understanding of the social function of adoption. In her paper, she raised the issue of the influence of supply and demand upon selection of prospective adopters. She comments, "so long as there are many more would be adopters than children there will be considerable incentive for people to negotiate in private" (Kellmer Pringle, 1967, p1). As depicted in Chapter two, this construction of adoption as subject to the influence of market forces has been constant and remains so today (Duncan & Scott, 2012). In her review, Kellmer Pringle (1967) categorised previous studies as:

- Predictive and follow up studies of child development;
- Those that compared outcomes of adopted and non-adopted children;
- Clinical studies which were often comparative;
- Often focused on the child;
- Focused on adopted parents whose children were in treatment;

Kellmer Pringle's review found adoptive parents were older and economically better off than other first-time parents were. Notably, this delay in becoming an adopter was viewed as predictable given the 'requirement for adopters to be sterile' (Kellmer Pringle, 1967, p.13). The age of an adoptive parent remains subject to the provision of law. However, there is an additional social expectation reflected in the delay in achieving a transition to adoptive parenthood after an inability to conceive. This need to delay supports a biological determinist view of parenthood which if unrealised perpetuates a sense of loss, (Becker & Nachtigall, 1994; Bokaie, Farajkhoda, Enjezab, Heidari, & Zarchi, 2012; Christine, 1994; Sandelowski, Harris, & Holditch-Davis, 1989; Shalev & Lemish, 2013). It is upon this epistemology of biological determinism that family ideologies emerge and then become applied to the construction of the adopted family (Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard,

2011; Wegar, 2000). This ideology fosters the assumption that adoption is lesser than biological parenthood, which implies that an adoptive parent would not love their adopted child as much as a biologically produced child. Adoption practice is thus inextricably linked to constructions and conceptions of the family is also evident in studies such as Maas and Engler, (1959), who found uniformity in white-collar suburban couples adopting 'perfect' babies. These ideals do not just pertain to children but also to prospective adopters who are required to be in good health and therefore reliable in their capacity to care for their adopted children (Lindsay & Hill, 2002; Taylor, Paphiti-Demetriou & Hill, 2011).

Much of the formative research relates to Caucasian adopters and children, making racial difference invisible. However, some research took place in 1950's and 1960's America with a focus on what was then termed 'Negro' adoption (Aldridge, 1974). A master's thesis published by Patsy Hirt, (1960) compared '40 Florida Negro couples who adopted children during the years 1957-1959 both via legal means and informally. Against a backdrop of slavery that formally ceased less than a century before, the restrictive issues of racism that limited the acceptance of non-white adopters are prevalent throughout Hirt's study. The study used case records rather than talking directly to the adopters and found no statistical difference between the characteristic of couples who were approved legally and those who adopted independently. The issue of race and its (in)visibility in adoption remains an issue which lacks consistent interrogation, this of concern as in America 55% and in England, 18% of adopted children are of minority ethnicity (Selwyn et al., 2014). This topic is explored in following sections of this chapter as I examine the construct of the adopted child and the process of 'matching' children with prospective adopters.



### 3.3 Construction of the adopted child

In the previous section, we began to see the emergence a relationship between the perceptions of the attributes of a child waiting for adoption and the social status of the prospective adopter (Blackstone, Buck, & Hakim, 2004; Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016). As demonstrated in Chapter two, adopted children often originate from disadvantaged backgrounds, albeit the nature of what is determined to be a disadvantage is influenced by changing social norms. The arising issues are multiple and complex, and they contribute to how the adopted child, and therefore the prospective adopter is perceived. For example, the reasons for a child being available for adoption such as economic disadvantage, family ideologies of marriage or neglect and abuse permeate how we make sense of who they are. The different social constructions which evidence concepts of the adopted child are evident in the literature. Studies about adopted children often focus on their additional emotional and behavioural needs and disabilities (Bibhuti 2000; Rosenthal, 1993; Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005; Vasquez & Stensland, 2016; Wind & Brooks, Barth, 2005). This conception is furthered by literature that relates to the experiences of adoptive parenting identifying challenges and the support they will need (Collins et al., 2014; Resch et al., 2010). Child developmental research that intersects with studies examining adopted children led Peters, Atkins, and McKay, (1999) to develop five explanatory models:

- (a) genetic or "biosocial" factors,
  - (b) pathogenesis of the adoption process,
  - (c) long-term effects of impaired pre-adoption childrearing,
  - (d) referral bias in adoptive parents, and
  - (e) impaired adoptive parent-adoptee relation
- (Peters et al., 1999, p. 297)

Although Peters et al. (1999) conclude that the evidence for each model is at best mixed, the behaviour of adopted children continues to lead some adoptive parents to suspect undisclosed pre-adoptive abuse (Ward, 2012). The origins of what children are adoptable ranges from

babies removed from their often young unmarried mothers; to children who have been looked after by the state following concerns of actual or likely significant harm. We have also seen the emergence of attachment theory (Fonagy & Target, 1997), and studies which interrogate the impact of adverse childhoods on child development, (Collishaw, Maughan, & Pickles, 1998; Kaniuk, Steele, & Hodges, 2004; Mäntymaa, Puura, Luoma, Salmelin, & Tamminen, 2006; Ponciano, 2010). Additionally, we see a distinction made between infants and children older than 5 years who become categorised as hard to place (Kaniuk et al., 2004; Palmer, 2013; Pinderhughes, 1996). Included in the 'hard to place' categorisation are children with disabilities, (Collins et al., 2014; Helton, 2011; Resch et al., 2010) and children of non-White British heritage (Harris-Waller, Granger, & Gurney-Smith, 2016; Paulsen & Merighi, 2009; Sharma, 2008; Snyder, 2011; Willing & Fronek, 2014). Further exploration of transracial adoption is addressed later in this chapter, but here it is worth highlighting the intersection of pronatalism and adoption with consideration of the concept of 'adoption matching', a process applied not only to the black child but also to the disabled child.

A study of families with children who have 'special needs' (Unger, Deiner, & Wilson, 1988) focused on the adopters' cognitive and social learning variables, which they categorised as:

- (a) Competencies" or skills that the parent felt were necessary to adopt a child with special needs
- (b) Expectancies" or what parents perceived are the consequences of adoption and what they thought would be the effects on their lives and the child's life when they adopted him or her;
- (c) Subjective stimulus values" or the personal importance of this child or adoption to the parent;

- (d) Encoding" or the parents' overall awareness of the availability and problem of children with special needs waiting for adoption;
- (e) Self-regulatory systems" or the sense of responsibility and duty felt by the parent to help and give to others.  
(Unger et al., 1988, p.319)

Using a sample of 56 adoptive families Unger et al., (1988) conducted structured interviews with the adoptive parents. They found most (89%) of the adopters had been foster carers before becoming adoptive parents, and 71% had previously known and become emotionally attached to the child they fostered. Notably, they considered adoption because of their attachment to the child, which is conceptually different from deciding of unknown children based on an abstract list of characteristics, such as age and disability. However, considering the nature of their sample, there is a limit to which their findings illuminate understanding of other families who might consider adopting a child with disabilities. The literature consistently situates parenting a child with a disability as more 'challenging' than 'ordinary' (Kingston, 2007). Arguably, these concepts of 'not perfect' or 'damaged' children, influence perceptions of older children and those who have experienced trauma and disruption in their lives (Conder, Mirfin-Veitch, Sanders, & Munford, 2011). However, once we strip away these conceptual covers, we find that at their heart is the biological promise of perfect pronatalism.

As mentioned previously, children in transracial adoptive placements are more publicly visible and this can lead them to ask more questions about adoption (Vashchenko, D'Aleo, & Pinderhughes, 2012). Using semi-structured interviews, Vashchenko et al., (2012) spoke to 41 Chinese born girls adopted by American parents of western-European descent. The interviews were structured with children asked 59 questions and their responses were coded and subject to quantitative analysis. Although some of the children reported unfavourable experiences which included having to continue to answer questions about their ethnic origins, the

researchers conclude the frequency of these interviews was comparable to the number viewed as favourable. However, they caution against diluting the impact of the negative experiences that outweighed positive experiences for a quarter of their participants. This approach is of concern when the report recognises that many of the children would be unable to detect more nuanced yet still negative discourses. Vashchenko et al., (2012), recognised the limitations of their study, such as in the design and geographical coverage. However, their research provides a basis to understand the impact of adopted children's experiences of public discourses about adoption.

Throughout this review, those who are adopted are present in the literature, although the focus is mainly on the adults who make or apply policy. Within the corpus, those adults who place themselves forward as prospective adopters are a focus of some scrutiny, but the birth parents and relatives remain mostly invisible. However, by capturing the dreams of adoptees, Partridge (2006), serves to illuminate the adopted shadows in which notions of birth parents exist. Some of these dreams represent loss and the experience of birth mother distress; others raised confusion about identity and a feeling of separateness. Dreams of being reconnected and searching for birth families were also reported, which encouraged some adoptees to search and find their birth mother. Finally, other dreams supported a theme of integration that reconciled the dual experience of belonging to a birth and adoptive family. Similarly, Blomquist (2009) provides some feelings expressed by adopted children:

*"I feel I was a helpless pawn as a baby. People who didn't even know me made decisions for me. How did they know what was best for me?" (Marie S., age 12 years).*

*"My parents say my mother gave me up because she couldn't raise me alone. I worry if one of my parents leaves or dies if the other one will give me up". (John H., age 9 years).*

*"My adoptive parents are my parents and always will be. I've spent my life with them, and I love them. I just hope they understand I need a part of my birth parents, too. I still may be the same person, but I'll feel more like I belong to the human race. I'll feel complete". (Emily P., age 15 years).*

(Blomquist, 2009 p.14-15)

### **3.4 Matching prospective adopters and children**

The concept of 'matching' in relation to adoption has changed over time although there has always existed a belief that 'most babies were good and most adopters were decent' (Amatruda & Baldwin, 1951, p. 208). As described in Chapter two, the early hidden nature of adoption, meant that those adopting children wanted to represent them as their biological child. Representating relational bonds includes matching physical features like hair colour (Giles, Johnson, & Dembroski, 1969), and intellectual similarities (Scarr & Weinberg, 1983). It is vital to reflect that adoptions were occurring at a time when society continued to have hierarchical views about adoption. In their study Dembroski et al., (1969) found college students were less supportive of a working-class couple adopting a child of a graduate student, than a middle-class couple adopting a child with a disability. A family ideology fosters the views of those participating students and reflects the research findings of Kadushin, (1970) who found older, disabled or ethnically diverse children were adopted by those who were older and of lower socio-economic class than other adopters were. Similarly, Gato & Fontaine (2016) found a heteronormative bias when analysing the attitudes of university students toward same-sex adoptive couples.

However, as adoption placements disrupted, there became a need to give greater consideration to matching the likely needs of the child and the parental capabilities of the adopters (Barth & Berry, 1988; Helton, 2011; Nalavany, Ryan, Howard, & Smith, 2008; Ward, 1997). Previous

studies highlight a volatile combination of children with high-level needs due to their age, number of placements or experience of abuse (Smith, & Ryan, 2015; Smith, Howard, & Monroe, 2000; Ward, 2012); alongside studies of adoptive parents who are positioned as inflexible with unrealistic expectations of their adopted child (Foli, 2010; Mohanty, Ahn, & Chokkanathan, 2017). The weight of adopters' preferences about the child they adopt and the compromises they may make factor in a study of adoption matching (Farmer & Dance, 2015), in which they make specific note of Quinton's (2012) conclusion that:

"There is virtually no research on the extent to which children's needs are matched with the capacities of adoptive parents to meet them. For this reason, we do not know to what extent attention to matching makes a difference to outcomes." (Quinton, 2012, p. xvi).

Despite the lack of evidence about matching, Farmer and Dance (2015) conclude that matching is likely to be improved by having a wider pool of adopters to choose from and for a group of professionals rather than a single worker being responsible for making the placement decision. Interestingly, their survey of adoption managers showed that in the absence of evidence, attitudes to matching principles varied widely. They found decisions about same race placements was prioritised by 36% of managers, with others implementing timescales to their decision making to reduce delay for placing BAME children. In addition, Farmer and Dance (2015) undertook a comprehensive case review, purposively selecting children categorised as 'hard to place'. Their analysis reflects the complexity of classifying the needs of children and the abilities of adoptive placements. However, the expressed preference of adopters about the type of child they envisaged parenting remained a critical issue. By analysing prospective adopter form, they found 64% of placements were well-matched. Importantly, despite various processes within local authorities to reflect and decide on the merit of placements, they also found that rushed decisions would lead them to choose a prospective adopter from their agency rather than widening the search. They determined that this factor contributed to adoption breakdown.

Worryingly, they rated a third of within-agency placements as inferior when compared to almost a fifth of inter-agency adoptions. That said, a fifth of adoptive placements viewed as inferior should be a concern for us all.

In a survey of approved adopters' experiences of agency support during the linking and matching process Farmer & Dance (2015), almost half of respondents felt the length of the process was right and that they had support. Her report reflects a broad range of linking mechanisms that are currently available for prospective adopters including activity days and websites. These activity days also provide prospective adopters with the opportunity to identify potential children for themselves. However, feedback to the survey indicated that prospective adopters felt disempowered by the adoption system and admonished for being proactive in wanting to be considered as a potential adopter of their chosen child. This issue highlights the tension in the legitimacy of the state 'objectively' having the power to determine the matching of prospective adopter and child while using the internet as a means of engaging prospective adoptive parents (Pustilnik, 2002; Roby & White, 2010).

### **3.5 Transition to becoming an adoptive parent**

Despite the complex historical, socio-political construction of adoption, research into the transition to adoptive parenthood (TTAP) has been sporadic. The knowledge emerging from these largely North American and Western European studies, reflect how most adopters are Caucasian, heterosexual, married and infertile (Barth & Berry, 1988; Bartholet, 1993; Brodzinsky, 1984; Daly, 1988; Fontenot, 2007; Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005; Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt, & Har-Even, 1991; Katherine McKay, Ross, & Goldberg, 2010). Studies which focus on this transitional route to parenthood have for the past 25 years focused upon issues of infertility (Bharadwaj, 2003; Bokaie et al., 2012; Goldberg, Downing, & Richardson, 2009; Jennings et al., 2014; Sandelowski et al., 1989; Weinstein, 2013), international adoption (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Paulsen

& Merighi, 2009; Welsh, Viana, Petrill, & Mathias, 2007; Wilbarger, Gunnar, Schneider, & Pollak, 2010) and children with special needs (Bibhuti, 2000; Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005; Wimmer, Vonk, & Bordnick, 2009; Wind, Brooks & Barth, 2005).

Although most research on adoption originates from America, and the UK, some geographical exceptions are found in Israel (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007, Levy-Shiff, Goldshmidt & Har-Even, 1991), and Brazil (do Amaral Costa & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2009). A dialectic approach to the understanding of the experiences of single adoptive women was used by Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik, (2007), who completed in-depth interviews with 13 Israeli women aged in their 40's when they decided to adopt. Using a narrative case and cross-case analysis they distinguish between the private and public self, perceiving a duality between autonomy, empowerment, free choice and a deep sense of deficiency and difference' (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007, p. 826). The limitations of this study are inherent in the specificity of its research focus and design; however, it reflects how qualitative approaches can illuminate our understanding of TTAP experiences.

Research conducted by Do Amaral Costa and Rossetti-Ferreira, (2009) is of interest to this current study because of its qualitative design, which included an interview with a Brazilian couple before the placement of their adopted children. In this study, they report the prospective adopters imagining their potential child amid their explorations of being a prospective adoptive parent. The short-longitudinal design of some studies have facilitated a before and after transitional view (Do Amaral Costa & Rossetti-Ferreira, 2009; Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009). However, many studies occur post-placement with prior experiences, therefore, being relayed retrospectively (Bibhuti, 2000; Brown et al., 2009; Daniluk, & Hurtig\_Mitchell, 2003; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, & Smith, 2008; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007). A retrospective view is also derived from adopters' evaluation of adoption agency preparatory services (Rushton & Monck, 2009; Selwyn, del Tufo, & Frazer, 2009) and their influence on post-adoption family adjustment (Seebek, 2012). The



limitation in retrospective analyses is raised in a study by Wind et al. (2005) who explored adoption preparation for children with and without special needs. They assert there is a contributory value of prospective knowledge when informing the development of adoption services (Wind et al., 2005).

Following a review of the adaptation to adoption literature (McKay et al., 2010), McKay & Ross (2010) undertook a pilot study of the transition to adoptive parenthood for adults in Ontario, Canada. It aimed to explore the after-placement support needs of adoptive parents by applying family stress theory. Potential participants were informed about the study via adoption agencies, email within the local council and online forums for adoptive parents. 13 individuals responded, and purposive sampling reduced this to 8, one of whom was interviewed as a couple thus 9 people were interviewed. McKay undertook all semi-structured interviews, 5 in the participant's homes and 3 via the telephone. A question guide used included queries about mental and physical health, relationship satisfaction, the decision to adopt and whether adoption met their expectations. The thematic analysis led to the emergence of two meta-themes: 'challenges' and 'facilitators' then overlaid by the concept of a 'unique transition to parenthood' (McKay & Ross, 2010, p.606). The focus of this research was on the transitory period after children have been placed thus any reflection on prior experience was retrospective and therefore limited in its scope.

The positioning of parenthood beyond the desire to have a biological child is a complex issue that requires further consideration. There is a need to transcend simplistic dichotomies of readiness and expand our understanding of the intricacies of (pre)contemplation. Interestingly, Proschaska et al., (2005) suggest you can determine a person's readiness to adopt by their completion or intention to complete three steps. They define these steps as:

- 1) Accepting that it is more important to be a parent than to have this child biologically;

- 2) Researching and finding that adoption is right for you;
- 3) Sharing your adoption plans with others.

Prochaska et al., (2005) use these steps to segregate a linear developmental process, thereby positioning individuals in earlier and later stages of change. The time limits they construct at each stage serve to reinforce and further define, the assumption of these parameters. Their model suggests that the stage of pre-contemplation is when a person does not intend to take the three steps in the next six months. Whereas contemplation is defined as intending to take the three steps in the next six months; with preparation being an intention to act in the next 30 days; and finally, action meaning to have taken the steps in the last six months. The experiences shared by participants in this current research study show many years are spent in (pre) contemplation. This finding immediately challenges any presumption of change in our 'self', being staged in six-monthly segments of time. Furthermore, Chapter seven explores the complexity of prospective adopter's experiences of sharing their plans for adoption with others. In doing so, the next chapter also demonstrates how this questions Prochaska et al. (2005), six-months staged model of contemplating partners, friends and family of prospective adopters.

Be(com)ing a prospective adoptive parent

Table 3.1 Integration of the stages, processes and principles of change Taken from Prochaska et al. 2005, p. 140

Precontemplation	Contemplation	Preparation	Action	Maintenance
Consciousness-raising				
Dramatic relief				
Environmental evaluation				
	Self re-evaluation			
		Self-liberation		
			Reinforcement management	
			Helping relationships	
			Counterconditioning	
			Stimulus control	
Pros of changing increasing				
	Cons of changing decreasing			
		Self-efficacy increasing		

The state of readiness to parent is an issue that adoption agencies are concerned about during the assessment process (Paulsen & Merighi, 2009; Roberson, 2006; Timberlake et al., 2003). One aspect of adoption approval is the determination of a prospective adopter's readiness to adopt (Welsh, Viana, Stephen, & Mathias, 2008). In their study, Welsh et al. (2008) explored characteristics of adults who wanted to adopt a child internationally. They identified motivations to adopt including, 'just wanting to' and concerns about birth parents, humanitarian reasons and infertility (Welsh et al., 2008, p.187). However, the 256 American participants in that study were limited to a list of 15 reasons that they had to scale from not important (1) to important (4). The quantitative design of Welsh et al. (2008) study also sought to categorise the characteristics of the prospective adopters so they could be measured; these categories included social support, psychological functioning and their age (Welsh et al., 2008 p. 193). Similar, to other studies (Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Jurnik, 2007) they found adoptive parents were aged late 30's or 40's, they were highly educated and received high incomes. Other findings were reported

by Welsh et al. (2008) but not critically analysed; such as adopting couples report infertility to be a bigger motivator to adopt than single adopters.

In their study of 125 couples, Goldberg, Smith and Kashy (2010), explored several pre-adoptive relationship factors to understand the quality of relationships before and after adoption. Couples were yet to become adoptive parents but had completed their assessment for adoption; they were interviewed separately over the telephone before a child was placed with them. Participants were sent a questionnaire, and the process was repeated three to four months after the arrival of their adopted child. A further survey was sent to each parent one year later. The quantitative design of Goldberg et al. (2010) study led to the use of measurement scales. Of interest to this current research is the measurement of shared commitment to adoption. At the pre-adoptive stage, the question put to participants was "Which of the following best describes your situation now?" Answers were collated on a Likert scale:

- 1 = I am far less interested in adopting than my partner;
- 2 = I am somewhat less interested;
- 3 = My partner and I want to adopt equally;
- 4 = My partner is somewhat less interested;
- 5 = My partner is far less interested.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as participants had completed the adoption assessment process, 92% of couples viewed themselves as equally committed. However, Goldberg et al. (2010) report disappointment in the lack of variability in this shared commitment to adoption and reflect that their construction of that variable limited ability to determine its effects. This issue highlights a key contribution to knowledge provided by the current research. Firstly, recruiting participants from the general populous who self-identify as prospective adopters led to the inclusion of many people who felt committed to becoming adoptive parents but had not yet contacted an agency. Secondly, the qualitative design and interview schedule encouraged participants to share their experience of

contemplating adoption. This approach enabled rich descriptive narratives of the experiences they had shared with others including partners, family members and friends to emerge. From the sharing of those experiences, we can gain insight into the complex considerations that each person negotiates with themselves and others. In contrast, this reflects the limitation of a Likert scale design that necessarily simplifies topics to permit statistical comparison. The findings detailed later in this thesis emerged from qualitative analysis, that can contribute to quantitative research by refining hypotheses which can help improve generalised understandings.

Often, studies of prospective adoptive parents rely on the experiences of participants who have already engaged with an adoption agency (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Jurnik, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2009). Indeed, many studies include people who are approved as adopters and waiting for the placement of a child. Therefore, such studies only offer retrospective insight into what constitutes readiness before contacting an adoption agency. However, previous research informs us that people can contemplate adoption for several years before they approach an organisation, and BAAF figures suggest many people do not pursue the process beyond an initial enquiry (Wallis, 2006). One unique contribution this thesis provides is an insight into the contemplations of those who identify as prospective adopters, but many of whom, have yet to contact an agency. The experiences shared by participants in this doctoral study allow exploration of the issues they contemplate as they consider becoming an adoptive parent.

### ***3.5.1 Transitioning to parenthood after infertility***

Most studies about those who apply to adopt after experiencing infertility do not critique the pronatalist underpinnings of parenthood which can influence their research design and those they recruit to participate in their studies (Daly, 1988; Goldberg et al., 2009; Heisler & Ellis, 2008). Interestingly, Daly's (1988, 1993) studies drew participants from a group

of infertile parents, of whom she belonged. Although she acknowledges her positioning, there is a lack of interrogation of her subjective experience and its potential influence in her study (Frost & Holt, 2014). These issues combine to reinforce the reported outcome for adults who have experienced years of infertility, is that adoption is chosen as a last resort to parenthood (Bartholet, 1993; Dickens, 2006; Leon, 2002; Masson, 2008).

A focus on the passage of time for couples defined as infertile who have yet to decide to start the adoption process is explored by (Sandelowski, Harris, & Holditch-Davis, 1991). Their research suggests that the transition to adoptive parenthood differs from pregnancy, as there is no bio-cultural discourse for them or their family and friends to draw on (Sandelowski et al., 1991). They also note the complexity of the transition to adoptive parenthood in light of the loss of idealised expectations for both the adopters and their prospective child (Sandelowski et al., 1991). Using a framework of self-psychology (Noy-sharav, 2002) explores the concept of good enough adoptive parenting. There are aspects of Noy-Sharav's (2002) clinical thinking, which serve to perpetuate gender-based assumptions of parenthood, which are frequently anchored to a view of infertility as a wound to one's self. These beliefs assumptions within the assessment process that prospective adopters require time to mourn the loss of their potential to conceive a biological child. Although, there is research evidence to support that this is indeed a reality for some prospective adopters (Daly, 1988).

The theme of managing time spent waiting for a child to be placed was the focus of a follow-up paper by Sandelowski, Harris, & Holditch-Davis, (1993). Using data from 86 interviews with 37 infertile couples and two wives' journals, they employed sociological and narrative theories to explore how time spent waiting was articulated (Sandelowski et al., 1991). This study highlighted complex agentic experiences and individual actions taken to manage the lack of structural staging in this pre-adoptive period (Sandelowski et al., 1991). Often these studies are retrospective in design, leading Wind et al. (2005) to argue that studies that focus

retrospectively on the process of prospective adopters preparation to adopt, such as Barth & Berry, (1988), could be influenced by the outcome when making sense of their previous experiences.

### ***3.5.2 Beyond white wedded heteronormativity***

As discussed in Chapter two the dominance of the biological paradigm ensured adoption limited to people who identified as heterosexual until the Adoption and Children Act 2002, came into force in 2005. This bias also intersects with research on adoption which explored genetic and inter-racial factors, (Barn & Kirton, 2012; Finkler, 2001; Jansen & Ross, 2001; Skodak & Skeels, 1945; Taylor, Mapp, Boutt-Queen, & Erich, 2010; Wegar, 2000) and biological influence on parent-child adoptive relationships (Suwalsky et al., 2012; Suwalsky, Hendricks, & Bornstein, 2008). Undoubtedly, the historical development of adoption and its interrelationship with parenting research aids the construction of who is an adoptive parent (Hendricks & Bornstein, 2008; Hepburn, 2008). The issue of biological and non-biological relationships has also underpinned the legal developments of child adoption law, which empower the state to sever biological, familial bonds and replace them with adoptive relationships (Pustilnik, 2002). The appearance of being biologically related has also influenced the historical experience of adoptive families (Garn, Bailey, & Cole, 1976). However, there has been a counter-argument for the benefit of appearing different, with international adoptions making it visibly evident that there is no biological link. This issue raises a challenge to colour blind adoption policies developed on inherent views of white superiority that by default position BAME adopters as inferior (Fenton, 2001; Gillum & O'Brien, 2010; Sunmonu, 2000; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012)

To explore what is often constructed as the unexplained absence of black adopters, Sunmonu (2000), conducted a mini-survey in the national black newspaper titled *The Voice*. He found that in addition to concerns such as racial matching and finance, other deterrents were cultural

acceptance and a belief by potential adopters that they would not be approved. These concerns of Black prospective adopters are longstanding and resonate in previous studies undertaken in America (Hirt, 1960). Indeed, adoption policies in Britain have served to dismiss the ethnic needs of non-white children, and have therefore failed to do little to recruit black adopters (Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). In 2001, Fenton completed a small-scale study, which concluded that adoption agency responses to enquiries from Black adopters were poor. We should consider it an outrage that ten years on from Kaniuk's (1991) study black prospective adopters continued to feel rebuked by adoption agencies. However, there is an absence of outrage, and a generation on from Kaniuk's study we continue to have an absence of adopters from BAME communities. This concern rises further when we consider how BAME children continue to be disproportionality represented in our 'looked after children' figures (Owen & Statham, 2009; Coram BAAF, 2016). This absence of Black adopters has led to legislative changes in the Children and Families Act 2014, which removed a duty for racial matching when placing a child with a prospective adoptive parent. While this measure may create some opportunity for children to be placed with adoptive families, it does not address the pervasive issue of increasing the recruitment of BAME prospective adopters.

It is essential that we do not consider Black adoptees and adopters to be a hegemonic group, we need to make their experiences visible and to understand the impact of white colonialism. Cuthbert, Murphy and Quartly (2009), deliver a feminist response as they consider the plight of Aboriginal families in Australia. They raise concerns about the lack of attention given to poor and disadvantaged non-European, women whose babies are likely to fill the statistics of state adoption targets. They raise concerns about the modern approach to expedite adoption for children other than babies and orphans actively pursued in Australia, America and the UK. Cuthbert et al. (2009) draw attention to the political use of language that purports the value of adoption while academic literature asserts an anti-adoption bias (Wegar, 2000). Although, feminist writers such as mother Bordo (2005), value adoption as a means of making



families, she recognises the pronatalist implications of women who are not mothers. Bordo's representation of being a white woman who adopted a black female child is further interrogated by Cuthbert et al. (2009) who challenge what they describe as her lack of critical reflectiveness in the use of her language.

While arguments that interrogate discourses are valuable, alongside these, the likelihood of transracial adoption for BAME children in Britain has increased since the enactment of the Children and Families Act 2014. The debate about the value of a family experience for children and the contest of inter-racial experience continues. Without a doubt, there is a need to look meaningfully at broader adoption constructs and practices that serve to alienate Black adopters. However, as transracial placements do exist, we can learn from research such as Barn's (2013) exploration of how white adoptive mothers can be mindful of discourses that serve to improve racial and ethnic socialisation. These issues remain complicated when there is a need to challenge assertions of racial integration to validate placing BAME children with white adopters. That is of relevance when research demonstrates that commitment to racial and ethnic socialisation dilutes over time (Thomas & Tessler, 2007).

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 extended who could become an adoptive parent, via the inclusion of gay men and lesbian women as prospective adoptive parents in England, Wales and Scotland (Hicks, 2005). That decision simultaneously prompted a renewed interest in the transition to adoption research over the last five years. Studies predominantly originate in North America and Canada with a focus on lesbian (Ryan & Whitlock, 2007; and gay male adoptive couples (Berkowitz, 2011; Downing, Richardson, Kinkler & Goldberg, 2009; Gianino, 2008) and comparative same-sex and heterosexual studies (Goldberg, Downing & Richardson, 2009; Goldberg & Smith, 2008, 2009). Although notably there are British studies, undertaken by Hicks (2005) and Woods, (2015), these remain sporadic.

An ecological study considered the decision-making processes for 32 American gay male adoptive couples (Downing et al., 2009). The research focus was on the decision-making process in the type of adoption route chosen: international, public domestic or private domestic. They found that gay male couples' decisions were akin to heterosexual couples about race, age and health of their adoptive child. However, converse to heterosexual couples, male same-sex couples' decision making was also influenced by the anticipation of discrimination that they and the child could encounter. In particular, Downing et al. (2009) explain that most American states require adoptive couples to be married, yet there is no legal marriage provision for same-sex couples. They counted the frequency of participant responses and tabulated these under the heading of each route to adoption. Most frequent was 'private domestic adoption' and then 'desire for an infant' depicting the wish to bond with a child and influence their earliest development. Unfortunately, the limited ethnicity of the participants and the frequency, underpinnings of emergent themes, do limit the transferability of the learning from their study.

In Britain, the Adoption and Children Act 2002 permitted unmarried, gay male and lesbian women to adopt children. However, this legislation took a decade to be enacted across the whole of the UK. The legal, social and personal complexities of same-sex adoptive parenting extend beyond adoption laws; reflecting socio-cultural issues at local, national and international levels. Adoption researchers are now beginning to explore this phenomenon and are producing specific insight on adoption for gay men (Berkowitz, 2011; Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Gianino, 2008,) and lesbian women (Goldberg, 2006; Golombok, 2002; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007). Other studies include both homosexual and heterosexual adoptive parents to make comparisons (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg, Kinkler & Moyer, 2014; Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler & Richardson, 2012). I note the use of language in this regard in that homosexual adults are defined in the research literature as 'gay male' and 'lesbians'. However, heterosexual adults are referred to as a 'heterosexual couple', which I suggest negates the diversity that each gender brings to the parental relationship.

In addition to research studies categorising adoptive parents by their sexuality (Farr, Forsell, & Patterson, 2010), they are also distinguished by their marital status. The negotiation of personal choice for single women contemplating adoption was previously studied in Israel by Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Jurnik, (2007) in their phenomenological study of 13 adoptive mothers. All of their participants were aged in their 40's when they adopted, and thus their reflections of choices they made are through a retrospective lens. Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Jurnik, (p. 827, 2007) suggest women consciously separate the choice between motherhood and intimate relationships leading them to distinguish between 'man as parent' and 'man as intimate partner'. Furthermore, they couch this in terms of women being less dependent and more empowered in the choices they make to achieve motherhood and a perception of being strong enough to challenge dominant cultural norms. The experiences shared by participants in this study extend our understanding beyond heteronormative views of gender bias exploring the multifaceted choices of parenthood that participants experienced.

### **3.6 Barriers to adoption**

Clifton and Neil, (2013) sought the views of adoption agency workers and found 22 key findings dominated the marketing methods used by the agencies. Although beyond those considerations, they revealed the importance of the relationship between prospective adopter and the agency. They highlighted the necessity for the organisation to accommodate the needs and pace of the prospective adopters 'journey' toward adoption. Interestingly, Lunken's (1995) study of a voluntary agency managed by adoptive parents to provide information to others found similar challenges of exploring publicity materials. This study reflects the concerns and reflections occurring in adoption practices at that time with the changes in adoption, which encouraged contact with birth relatives, an economic recession and the complexity of the needs of older children waiting for adoption. Almost a generation later, we continue to face these complex challenges to adoption. In 2006, Wallis reported that

Black prospective adopters continue to experience a vastly poorer response from adoption agencies when compared to their white counterparts. Despite this, all of the Black respondents to Wallis' survey had pursued with their interest in adoption.

In other NAW studies, Wallis (2006) and Ward (2011) surveyed people who had not pursued adoption after making an initial enquiry. Wallis reports significant differences between the views of professional and non-professional applicants, regarding how positively they felt adoption agencies received them. Other findings showed that some prospective adopters have concerns about having insufficient economic and social resources. Interestingly, Wallis (2006) reported that 58% of participants were inspired to apply because of media coverage during NAW. However, many had considered adoption before enquiring and were not assumed to be acting spontaneously in response to the campaign. Ward's findings reflect that women, most of whom were part of a couple, make 90% of initial enquiries. Most respondents were aged between 31 and 40 years of age, and 41% were considering adoption after experiencing infertility. Almost half of those who replied were categorised as professionals and a quarter worked in the caring professions. Despite highlighting these characteristics as 'targetable' in market research, more than half had not pursued adoption following their initial enquiry, and 10% indicated that they believed that most people who apply are unlikely to be approved. BAAF commissioned a survey of Welsh residents (YouGov, 2013, p.140) which revealed that a substantial number of people considered their economic status, and whether they smoked, would prevent them from becoming an adoptive parent. These studies raise the enduring question of perceptions about who is viewed as a suitable prospective adoptive parent (Barth & Berry, 1988; Daly, 1989; Goldberg, Smith & Kashy, 2010; Kirk, 1964) and how are messages about the valuing of difference and diversity communicated within NAW newspaper campaigns.

Ward (2011) suggests people are less likely to adopt if they perceive a difference between the child they want to adopt and the children available for adoption. Previous research supports her view that

prospective adopters still prefer healthy babies, (Rushton, 2003; Wallis, 2006), although notably, 45% of respondents report they would consider a child up to the age of 7 years (Ward, 2011). That suggests a need for campaigns to communicate more efficiently with prospective adopters, about the potential needs of the children waiting to be adopted. In addition, these issues raise challenges to our concept of the formation of early attachment and belongingness (Barth & Berry, 1988; Clarke & Clarke, 1976) and the identified attachment needs of adopted children (Cohen & Farnia, 2011; Niemann & Weiss, 2012; van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenberg, 2009).

The NAW recruitment drive must navigate these complex and at times conflicting needs and desires of the state, adoption agencies, prospective adoptive parents and children. Predominantly, its purpose is to recruit adults who will be able to provide children with love and stability. Previous studies relating to NAW have explored the views of professionals and enquirers, but no prior research has analysed the repertoires used during the NAW campaign. I argue it is essential to identify the discourses utilised in the campaigns and limits of the subjective positions accessible to prospective adoptive parents. Knowledge of what subject positions are available will contribute to our understanding of who may identify themselves as prospective adopters. Therefore, Chapter five will thematically analyse the discourses of prospective adoptive parenthood emerging from the 2012 and 2013 NAW newspaper campaigns.

### **3.7 Adoption in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain**

Government statistical first release (SFR) records began in 2009 and revealed the number of children available for adoption has doubled in the four years up to 2013 to 15,300 (Department for Education [DfE], 2013). Although, reports show a 15% increase in the number of children adopted, children who have not been adopted because of the lack of suitable prospective adopters, quadrupled from 80 to 360 over the same period (DfE, 2013). That is unsurprising as Ofsted (2013) report the number of people approved for adoption in the year April 2011, to March 2012 was

only 3,640. The political prominence of the recruitment of prospective adopters is also evident in parliamentary processes including the House of Lords (HoL) select committee's pre-legislative scrutiny of adoption (HoL, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Alongside this, the government published its 'adoption action plan' (DfE, 2012), in conjunction with the expert working group on adopter recruitment report entitled 'redesigning adoption', (Dunkley et al., 2012). These reports and the select committee's detailed review, clearly outline how adoption is a permeable concept, which evolves amid changes in societal attitudes.

In March 2012, the Coalition government published its Adoption Action Plan in conjunction with the 'Expert Working Group on Adopter Recruitment' report entitled 'Redesigning Adoption,' (Dunkley et al., 2012). These deliberations occur in conjunction with the Department of Education's commission of market research by advertising agency Kindred and Work Research (Scott & Duncan, 2013); its aims were to:

*Gain a greater understanding of the capacity within the population for adoption and fostering and to gain greater knowledge of the attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering among specific segments of the population. (Scott & Duncan, 2013, p.4)*

The market research included 18 in-depth interviews with individuals and couples, which they state, 'should not be viewed as a study in its own right' (Dunkley et al., 2012). This qualitative phase was asserted to be respondent led and phenomenological. They adopted a three-sectional approach to each interview to cover the following areas of exploration:

1. The personal journey;
2. The received wisdom,
3. Attitudinal and behavioural insight.

The sample of those interviewed was purposive to be as inclusive of changing population demographics (Dunkley et al., 2012). Although the research asserts a phenomenological methodology, the qualitative data was analysed using content analysis, which I argue limits the exploration of their being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1953/2010). A critical insight proffered from this identified characteristics and demographics that were not predictive of likelihood to adopt. However, the researchers considered their quantitative study would address this issue. There are valuable references to participant dialogue included in the document, but sadly, there is no qualitative analysis of this data. Also, there is insufficient evidence of how they recruited participants and who conducted interviews and the analysis. Thus, there is a limit as to the insight of the co-construction of the knowledge produced. The quantitative phase of market research collated online survey data from 4,948 adults in England. Using a Likert scale design, they calculated the percentage response to questions during the 45-minute survey. Unreliable data, such as those completed too quickly were removed, and quotas were imposed to ensure a national representation of age, gender and region. From this data, the market researchers' findings include:

- A key audience has been identified as a priority target, totalling up to 3.6m adults in England. Our findings suggest that, within this group, approximately 658,000 people feel they are very likely or certain to consider adopting at some point in the future, and approximately 590,000 people feel they are very likely or certain to consider fostering at some point in the future.
- There is significant overlap between people's barriers and motivations to adopt, and their barriers and motivations to foster.
- Individuals are motivated to adopt or foster for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of children themselves and society.

- However, many people are being held back from engaging with adoption or fostering, by anxiety emanating from their perception of the process of becoming an adopter or foster carer, the experience of adoption or fostering itself and their ability to carry it out successfully, the effect an adopted or fostered child would have on their own life and that of any existing children they may have.

(Scott & Duncan, 2013, p.4)

The findings from their survey of 4984 respondents and 18 in-depth interviews were used to produce a marketing proposal for adoption. From their data, Scott and Duncan (2013) identify what they term a 'priority target audience' of up to 6.3m adults, of whom they determine 658,000 are likely to consider adoption. They assert people are motivated to adopt a child in order to benefit themselves, children and society. However, many do not proceed due to concerns about the process, and the effect adoption could have on their lives. To overcome barriers Scott and Duncan (2013) argue that reassurance is required to allay fears of ability to bond with an adoptive child and that continued support will be available post-adoption. Extrapolation of their results led Scott and Duncan, (2013, p.12) to identify the shared characteristics of their target audience: altruistic, previous experience of fostering or adoption; aged 25-44 years old; married, or heterosexual and single, actively practising a religion; working in higher managerial, intermediate managerial or skilled manual work.

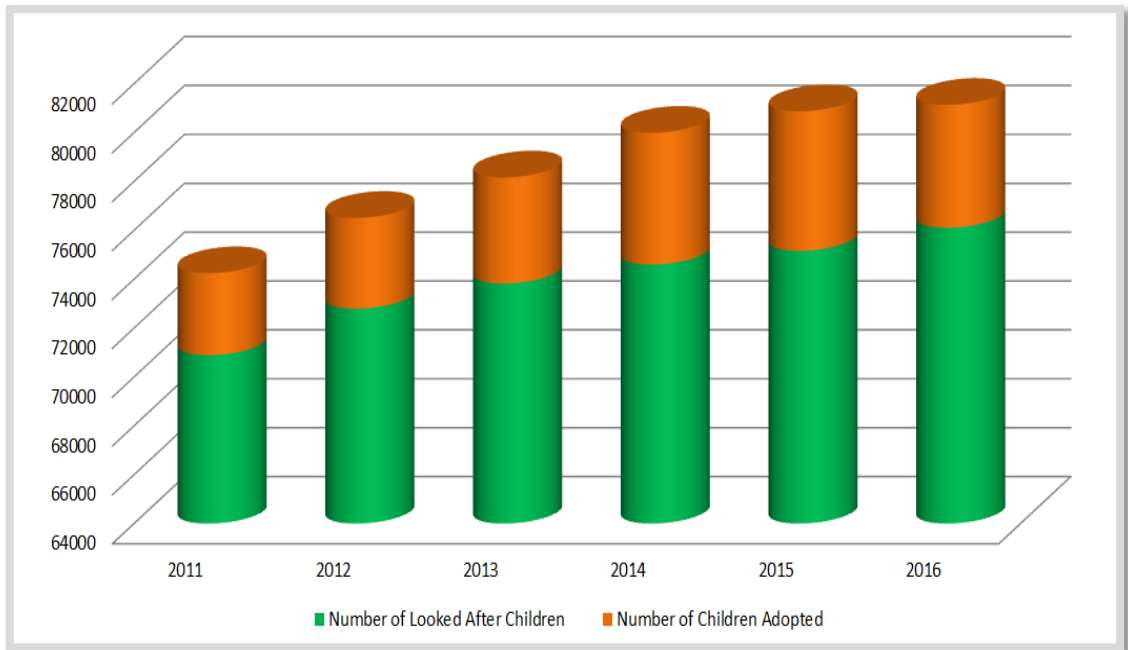
Clifton and Neil, (2013) also conducted 25 in-depth telephone interviews with adoption agency social workers and marketing professionals. Their study is useful in situating the prospective adopter amid the complex demands of collaboration and competition between agencies, local authorities and national government (see Figure 3.1). Clifton and Neil (2013) suggest potential tensions between marketing and social work professionals in adoption agencies. One interesting paradox was created by a marketing paradigm which positioned enquirers as customers, and in which one marketing professional, considered



themselves more consumer centred and less intimidating than adoption social workers'. These developments in social marketing, to increase the number of adoptive parents, is located within a wider context characterised by the commodification of social care services and the emergence of the private adoption agency (Higgins & Smith, 2002; Swain, 2012, 2016). The subsequent marketing objectives were twofold, to produce a one-off and an on-going increase in the supply of adopters and foster carers. The market research proposes communication objectives to achieve these goals, which include raising the UK population's level of understanding of adoption, targeting attitudinal and motivational barriers by 'myth busting' and offering reassurance. However, there is no research, which considers the relationship between government rhetoric and adults considering the transition to adoptive parenthood.

In 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain, most children are adopted after a period in public care, in 2016 there were 70,440 children were in the care of local authorities, 56% were boys, and 44% were girls (Coram BAAF). 75% of those children were categorised as white, meaning a quarter of all 'looked after children' are of Black, Asian and minority ethnicity (BAME). In total, CoramBAAF 2016 figures report, 3,310 of 'looked after children' had an adoption decision but were not yet placed with a family. 2,060 children had a placement order but were also waiting for families. 2016 figures saw a reduction in the number of children adopted from 5,360 in 2015 to 4,690 for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016. White children are more likely to be adopted; with figures showing that they constituted 83% of adoptions in 2016, thus continuing the narrative that children from BAME communities; a child with a disability, a child over 5 years old or part of a sibling group are 'hard to place' (CoramBAAF, 2016). The number of children looked after by the state has risen by almost 40% to more than 68,000 (ONS, 2014). However, at that time there reported reportedly remained a shortage of adopters with 15,300 children currently in need of an adoptive family (DfE, 2013). The ONS figures published on 28 February 2017, show that the numbers of looked after children have continued to rise from 67,070 in 2012 till 70,440 by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2016.

Figure 3.1 The number of looked after children and those adopted in England and Wales between 2011 and 2016



The Children and Families Act 2014 repealed the duty of adoption agencies to have regard for a perfect or partial ethnic match between prospective adoptive parents and children waiting for adoption. The government argue that this is to intend to reduce delay for vulnerable children awaiting placements, but it is contrary to the spirit of the UN convention on the rights of the child. The 2014 Act also provides approved prospective adopters access to the database of children waiting to be adopted so they can conduct their own search. That raises a point for discussion on the function of the adoption agency in matching children with a prospective adopter. Interestingly, the provisions of personal budgets, used for example by parents who have a child with a disability, are extended to adoptive parents with the rhetoric that this permits a choice in the services they could receive. These issues are evolving at a time when there is a movement for equality for adoptive parents to receive the same rights to leave and pay as birth parents were enacted in 2015.

Finally, we have seen the introduction of fostering to adoption where prospective adopters can foster a child during the process of care proceedings and would then adopt that child if the court found this to be in

the child's best interests. The Department of Education promotes fostering for adoption as a means of early permanence and BAAF produced guidance (Simmonds, 2013) which is now adopted by CoramBAAF. The dynamic nature of adoption continues to require the role and function of prospective adoptive parenthood to adapt, particularly, to the changing needs of children who need adoptive families. That has led to an increased emphasis on diversity and the development of the notion of the *prospective* adoptive parent; the 'parent-in-waiting' for the child who is 'languishing' (HoL, 2012). The Children and Families Act 2014, enacts the select committee recommendation to permit Local Authorities to place children with a prospective adopter before a decision for adoption has been legally determined (HoL, 2013). This legislative change provides for an expansion of, 'fostering to adopt' placements, which may influence the recruitment strategy for potential adopters. The push for widening the potential pool of adoptive parents is one of the principles that underpin the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The 2002 Act permitted unmarried and same-sex couples to become adopters, creating new parenting opportunities for people who were previously prohibited from adopting (Hicks, 2005). Ofsted (2013) figures reflect that of the 3,640 families approved for adoption in England, between 2011 and 2012, 290 individuals categorised their sexuality as gay, lesbian or bisexual. However, the approval figures remain dominated by heterosexual (4290) adoptive parents. Our discursive analysis of the NAW campaigns further explores the extent to which new adoption discourses have influenced dominant ideologies of the family; which position gender and sexuality as part of, rather than separate from, constructions of adoptive parenthood.

### **3.8 Chapter summary**

This chapter has traversed a labyrinth of macro and micro factors which contributes to the construction and understanding of prospective adopters in contemporary Britain. It has built on the socio-political landscape depicted in Chapter two and embellished this with the complex contribution of ideologies such as pronatalism and how this permeates all aspects of adoptive parenthood. The chapter has situated adoption amid wider constructions of parenthood and associated heteronormative assumptions, race and gender. It has identified the intrinsic link between the legislative changes that permit same-sex couples to adopt and contemporary research that is anchored to the sexuality of adoptive parents.

In addition to such ideologies, this chapter demonstrates the influence of research methodologies to facilitate and limit the knowledge produced. Thus, we see evidence of the combination of methods such as psychometric testing for intelligence with comparisons of adopted and non-adopted children. Such studies reflect and help reinforce the 'otherness' of adoptive relationships, which occurs not only when contemplating adoptive parental-child dyadic relationships, but also in situating adoptive parents in wider society. The further portrayal of adoption as 'other' is strengthened by the commodification of domestic adoption and the social policies that promote adoption as a favoured option for children accommodated by the state. Notably, there is an absence of critical debate on this issue reflecting the absorption of these concepts within our social attitudes (Saucier, 2000).

Therefore, this proposed study is timely and will provide new knowledge regarding the construction and experience of those contemplating adoption. This thesis has interrogated the complexity of prospective adoptive parenthood and explored societal rhetoric which discursively constructs prospective adopters. In Chapter five a thematic analysis of the language used in the National adoption week recruitment campaigns of 2012 and 2013, provides insights into the discourses used to

define prospective adopters. Contemporary Britain has diverse family structures including couples who live together and separately (Ruspini, 2013). Thus, the recruitment drive for the primary phenomenological study encouraged both couples and individuals who are contemplating adoption. The following chapter presents and discusses the methodology underpinning both the NAW thematic analysis and the research designed to understand the experiences of prospective adoptive parents in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain.

## Chapter Four - Methodology

*"Everything we can know through experience and science about the 'causes' of perception and the action they exercise upon us will be deemed unknown. This is a precept more difficult to follow than one thinks: the temptation to construct perception out of the perceived, to construct our contact with the world out of what it has taught us about the world, is quasi-irresistible." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.156).*

Fundamental to the knowledge produced by any research is the methodology underpinning its design. This chapter situates and explains the epistemological landscape against which the study emerged; how we know what we know (epistemology), and the essence of what it means to be human (ontology). In particular, this thesis is concerned with the ontological sense of what it means to be a prospective adoptive parent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. The implementation of any philosophical paradigm as a research tool benefits from reflective interrogation (van Manen, 2007; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Willig, 2007) if we are to understand the opportunities and limitations that influence the knowledge produced. Therefore, a critical examination of the challenges that emerged notably when phenomenological concepts intersected with positivist-influenced research techniques was vital. Implicit throughout this thesis is an undertaking that our lives do not exist in isolation and that all experience is situated in its social and genealogical context (Foucault, 1989, Heidegger, 1953/2010). I recognised the inability of qualitative research to control all the variables, which influence the outcome of research permits positivist critique of the value of its contribution. Although this study occurred during the post-positivist era, Guba (1990) usefully argues that continually referencing difference serves to reaffirm an imbalance of power. I partially concur with this view and suggest the rich complexity offered by the design of this research did not require constant comparison with a positivist paradigm. However, not exploring the methodology in relation to other models would have limited exploration of the rich and intricate diversity that phenomenological research can provide.

Social constructionism asserts all experience is anchored to how we make sense of the world. I, therefore, examined how heuristic phenomenology facilitated the emergence of co-constructed experience (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002). In doing so, I acknowledged the subjective values I embody as the researcher in this doctoral study (Kriegel, 2008; Malone, 2012). Thus, it was vital to recognise how the decisions I took in the design of this research influenced the knowledge produced and that which remained unexplored. The previous chapters in this thesis presented the many voices of theorists, researchers and by proxy their participants whose combined voices chorus to illuminate how we construct prospective adopters. It is also essential to acknowledge that the meanings I made were co-constructed by the thoughts, reflections and interpretations of many others during the process of this study, which includes my research supervisors, and my participants. Equally, there are also 'others', who have influenced who I am, and how I understand the world around me, whose presence in my analysis is less explicit. As such, this current chapter discussed the infrastructure upon which the contribution of knowledge is reliant. Secondly, it facilitates critical reflection of my positioning as I negotiated the complexity of the relationship between the research questions, the applied methodologies and ultimately my thesis conclusions.

#### **4.1 The phenomenological approach**

The concept of Heideggerian phenomenology, used in this study, derives from Greek heritage and the components of the phenomenon (*thing*) and logos (*discourse*) (Heidegger, 1953/2010). The philosophical intricacies of phenomenology are both fascinating and involved, for example regarding the relationship between our familiarity with a phenomenon and the words we use to make sense of that experience. It is important to recognise that phenomenon is not only the thing itself, but also the thing of itself. The phenomenon that Heidegger is most concerned with is the experience of being-in-the-world, otherwise constructed as the 'being of being'. Thus, we can examine what it means

to be a prospective adoptive parent by exploring the experiences of those who inhabit that sense of being-in-the-world. The further inclusion of language or the discourses by which we understand experience is central to Heidegger's phenomenological method. Although discourse can be used to influence, interpret and reflect experience, it is simultaneously complex and limited in its expression. However, the importance of language remains not only in our capacity to interpret meaning but also in the sharing of our experience with others. This study aimed to understand prospective adopters' experiences; therefore, the discussion in this chapter will only extrapolate the application of the essential phenomenological meanings.

"Discourse is the structuring of the attuned intelligibility of being-in-the-world. Its constitutive factors are, what discourse is about (what is discussed), what is said as such, communication and making known." (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p.163/157)

The application of phenomenological philosophy can span descriptive, interpretive and interpretative modes of analysis and the selection from this spectrum has a direct impact on the type of analysis undertaken (Langdridge, 2007). Husserlian phenomenology favours a descriptive approach, which aims to protect the integrity of a person's experience by adopting a method termed epoché or bracketing (Langdridge, 2007). To apply that technique to this study would have entailed my attempting to ignore any previous knowledge that I had of prospective adopters. I take the view that is not possible as in my social work role there have been occasions when I have assessed people who wish to become adoptive parents. Therefore, I approached this study with some experience of adoption that I could not ignore. The other end of the spectrum is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), developed by Jonathan Smith to explore the social cognition of subjective experience (Shinebourne, 2011). Although there are similarities between (Husserlian) IPA and the (Heideggerian) interpretive method chosen for this study; they differ in that IPA is more narrowly defined as an analytical method



that seeks to order or tabulate emerging themes (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Langdridge, 2007).

An underlying assumption of this research was that we make sense of others, the social world and ourselves via our lived experience. The philosophical approach to understanding experience is phenomenology, and its relationship to psychology can be traced back to humanist Johann Goethe (1749-1832) and philosopher Franz Brentano (1838-1917). However, its contemporary use is more commonly traced back to Brentano's student Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and later Martin Heidegger's seminal work, *Being and Time* (1953/2010). Phenomenology has since become a popular research approach in a range of human science subjects, (Bradfield & Knight, 2008; Greenfield & Jensen, 2010; Helle-valle, 2009), which include understanding experiences of motherhood (Johnson, Burrows, & Williamson, 2004; Millward, 2006; Smith, 2013; Sweet, 2008) and fatherhood (Millings, 2010). I adopted an interpretive or hermeneutic approach that allowed me to develop an understanding of the meaning participants gave to their experiences (Langdridge, 2007). Also, this method assumed that no view of experience can be complete and therefore leaves space for other meanings to exist (Dowling, 2007).

The primary reason for choosing a hermeneutic model was its concern with conscious experience and participants' capacity for reflexive self-awareness (Langdridge, 2007). It is anchored to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world, which does not prioritise social cognition above other ways in which we experience the world. Usefully, Heidegger identified several aspects of being-in-the-world that enable an understanding of the ontic (of that which is), thus it also readily accommodates Husserlian *Lifeworld* themes. As such, how experience is temporal, intersubjective, embodied and spatial, were included in the phenomenological analysis (Ashworth & Ashworth, 2003; Berndtsson, Claesson, Friberg, & Öhlén, 2007). Crucially, this interpretive approach recognised the role of the researcher in co-constructing meaning from the experiences shared by participants. However, this is not without its

complications, and critical reflection of my own subjectivity was necessary throughout the study (Frost & Holt, 2014; Martin, Sokol, & Elfers, 2008; Willig, 2007)

I recognised the inability of qualitative research to control all the variables that influence the outcome of knowledge, which in turn permits a positivist standpoint to critique the value of its contribution. However, I argue that a continual comparison of qualitative methods against the dominant positivist paradigm serves to reaffirm an imbalance of power that biases positivism (Guba, 1990). Nonetheless, the issue of research validity whatever its paradigmatic assumptions, remained of the utmost importance. Validity constructs within quantitative methodologies seek to assure the objectification of the process via the adoption of hypotheses and replicability (Quinn, Fitch, & Youn, 2011). While postmodernists would challenge the potential for objectivity, the existence of this premise also presents a predicament for qualitative researchers (Chamberlain, 2000; Lamont & Swidler, 2014). Thus, an awareness of my personal influence as the qualitative researcher in the construction of knowledge was continuously present. The rest of this chapter explores the methodological challenges that arose and decisions I took as I applied phenomenological principles to the design and analysis of this study.

#### ***4.1.1 Study of the lived experience of prospective adopters***

This phenomenological research aimed to understand the experiences of people who had contemplated adoption but had not become an adoptive parent. This study entailed conducting semi-structured interviews with adults who identified themselves as prospective adopters to facilitate an understanding of their experiences and to make sense of their experiences against a landscape of historical, social and legal discursive constructions.

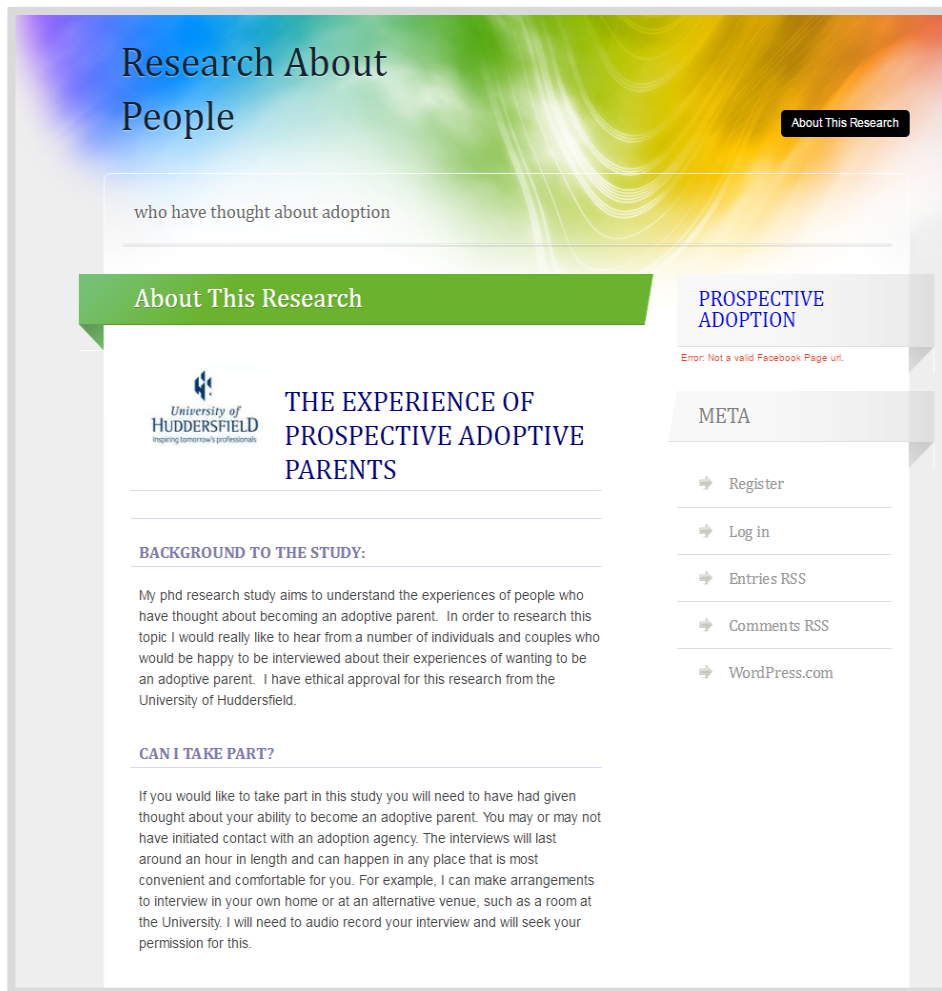
#### **4.1.2 Defining a sample**

As the literature review in Chapter three revealed, the perceptions of who can be an adoptive parent and what motivated or dissuaded them are embedded in legislation and social discourses. Therefore, one of the objectives of this doctoral study was to understand how prospective adopters' experiences assist our understanding of their social construction. Thus, an inductive research approach was vital, and I took care not to limit who could participate in the study. Therefore, the only limitation was the broad assertion that a participant was to have thought about adoption but had not become an adoptive parent. The challenge of identifying who might contemplate adopting a child had a phenomenological basis in Heidegger's (1953/2010) sense of being old enough. That led to the need to contemplate if it was essential to consider how long someone had contemplated adoption or what time has passed since they had acted upon their contemplations, as suggested by (Prochaska et al., 2005). I formed the view that any limitations I placed on the expected experience of my participants would immediately limit the scope of what I would eventually come to understand. Therefore, in this study the extent someone considered themselves to be a prospective adopter was self-determined. Importantly, there is support for this concept in previous research undertaken by Ward, (2006), and Wallis, (2011), which surveyed people and found that 82% of people who expressed an interest did not proceed with an assessment.

It was not a prerequisite for those participating in this current study to have contacted an adoption agency. Therefore I sought ethical approval for a wide-ranging public recruitment plan. This plan included the use of the internet, social media platforms, placing postcards in local neighbourhood shop windows and contacting adoption agencies. Also, permission for £200 of shopping vouchers was agreed to encourage what was perceived to be a potentially reluctant audience. When all data had been collected I assigned numbers to each participant, my supervisory panel selected a number at random, and the vouchers were sent to the designated participant. Recruitment postcards were placed in two inner-

city shops each for one month, but these recouped no responses. However, social media platforms mainly twitter, aided by an online recruitment webpage (Figure 4.1) proved successful with the call for participants being shared more than 500 times, meaning it was not necessary to contact adoption agencies to assist with recruitment. The recruitment drive led to the inclusion of a range of participants many who had never contacted an adoption agency, to one person who was an approved adopter waiting to be matched with a child. A copy of the participant information sheet is available at the end of this thesis (see appendix 3).

Figure 4.1 Recruitment webpage



An unexpected challenge arose when non-UK residents asked if they could be included in the study. This was an issue discussed with my

supervisory team, and I decided that the call for participants had not defined solely British participants and I conducted those interviews. I reflected this was one of the unintended consequences of using social media advertising as a worldwide audience saw the promotion of the study. However, I recognised some people might have ruled themselves out, as they did not consider they would be included in a study originating from a British university. Interestingly some participants domiciled in the UK had experienced living abroad, these countries included Holland, Spain, Japan, America and India; which suggests there is permeability as to who might identify as a British prospective adopter.

The recruitment procedure meant that once someone expressed an interest in participating in the study, they were provided with an information sheet, invitation letter (see appendix 2) and consent form (see appendix 4). Once 25 interviews were completed it was apparent that only 4 participants were people living outside of the UK. At that stage, a firm decision was taken to focus the doctorate on UK residents and therefore ensure its relevance for British society. Therefore, only the experiences of the 21 participants currently residing in the UK were included in the analysis reported in Chapter's six to eight. However, I acknowledge it is important for due regard to be given to those participants living outside of the UK. As such, their experiences can be included in a postdoctoral study that could focus on diverse cultural experiences of adoption whether domiciled or not, in Britain.

All participants were invited to be interviewed either as individuals or as a couple. The people who indicated that they wanted to participate as part of a couple had the option of being interviewed together or separately. Initially, I anticipated all the interviews would be convened face to face; however, some participants expressed a preference for interviews via the telephone or other video/audio mediums such as Skype. I reflected how some participants would value the control that telephone and video methods provided in their engagement with this study. Although I travelled several hundred miles while conducting interviews across the country, there were several occasions when a pragmatic

approach was agreed by a participant and me to use the electronic medium of their choice. On these occasions, factors that influenced the decision included how the time delay in my travelling to a certain part of the country conflicted with the timescale participants had to meet me. As depicted below in Table 4.1, interviews were conducted with 9 individuals, 8 of these were women and most revealed they were in a heterosexual relationship but their partners chose not to participate in the study. The one individual male participant was also in a heterosexual relationship, but his partner did not participate. In total, six couples were interviewed five couples were seen together, and couple James and Elizabeth were interviewed separately. Five couples were in heterosexual relationships, whereas as Carmen and Fran were in a same-sex relationship. Eleven people were interviewed in person, with a further 7 being interviewed on the telephone and 3 participants were interviewed via Skype.

Table 4.1. Research participants by mode of interview and gender.

Pseudonym	Gender	Interview	Individual/Couple
Ann	Female	Phone	Individual
Ramneet	Female	Phone	Individual
James	Male	Phone	Couple
Elizabeth	Female	Phone	Couple
Lynne	Female	Visit	Couple
Malcolm	Male	Visit	Couple
Charvi	Female	Visit	Individual
Sarah	Female	Visit	Couple
John	Male	Visit	Couple
Susan	Female	Skype	Couple
Colin	Male	Skype	Couple
Rachel	Female	Phone	Individual
Clara	Female	Visit	Individual
Hilary	Female	Phone	Individual
Kate	Female	Visit	Individual
Sandra	Female	Visit	Couple
William	Male	Visit	Couple

Peter	Male	Phone	Individual
Cassandra	Female	Skype	Individual
Fran	Female	Visit	Couple
Carmen	Female	Visit	Couple

Although some information that would identify socially defined categories (demographics) is known about those who participated in the study, this was not explicitly collated. What is known is derived mainly from the information shared by their narratives. Consequently, there is information I do not know about my participant group, and that includes their age, relationship status, social class, religion or sexuality. This 'not knowing' anymore about my participants than that shared in the course of answering my broad interview questions served to position them as the expert in their lives (Rober, 2005). Importantly, I do not assert my participants are a normative sample, the theoretical approach underpinning this study was focussed on how participants make sense of their experiences, as such their perceptions of themselves as a prospective adopter was held in the highest regard (Mortari, 2008). Arguably, to fail to do this constrains the parameters of their experiences at least, as they made sense of them, during a semi-structured research interview. In addition, I was mindful of the principles of epoché and the decision to not collate categorical data was a purposeful aspect of the research design to accord with a hermeneutic approach (Fagerberg & Norberg, 2009). That meant limiting my study to the data, which arose from the information participants shared during their semi-structured interview. Conversely, I will 'not know' in any measurable way, any benefits recouped in promoting the individual agency of the participant (Rober, 2005).

At the first progression meeting of my doctoral journey, the internal university assessors advised me to reconsider my decision not to collect categorical data. As I had already completed some interviews, they suggested I could return to those participants to ask them to provide categorical information retrospectively. That was sage advice and deliberating the implications of this matter facilitated further exploration of the intersect between hermeneutic phenomenological assumptions and

standardised research practice. After mature reflection, I chose not to follow the advice of my progression panel. Firstly, I did not consider it within the ethical parameters of my research to return to participants who had completed their interview to incur further information from them. I acknowledged the arguments that positivist research design of collecting categorical data can influence information given in survey results (Dillman, 1991) but that the effect is not always apparent (Green, Murphy, Snyder, & Shelita, 2000). Thus, to collect categorical information after the interviews would arguably have maintained the integrity of the original data obtained. However, my engagement with the participants who had already engaged had fully concluded at that time. To be helpful to my philosophical dilemma the progression panel also suggested that I could collate but not use categorical data. After due consideration, I formed the view that there remained an ethical issue about collating data that I did not intend to use. In addition, the epoche' problem remained as a critical feature of my methodology; therefore, I could not disregard information about a person once it was made known to me, thereby potentially influencing my analysis (Rober, 2005).

#### ***4.1.3 Semi-structured interviews***

The qualitative phenomenological nature of the research question required the curation of rich descriptive narratives and research interviews help develop a rapport with individuals or couples and create a safe space where participants could talk about sensitive issues. I chose semi-structured interview as an appropriate method which with to secure consistency across the participant group but also flexible enough to accommodate individual experience (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012; Lamont & Swidler, 2014; Padgett, 2009). Furthermore, the use of open-ended questions and prompts encouraged participants to share their experiences and discussions about contemplating adoption. The structure of the interview schedule outlined below in Table 4.2 was used to guide participants to share their personal experiences of contemplating adoption and how that experience had been shared with others. Although concise,



the short interview schedule permitted participants to expand on their experiences and thereby somewhat limit the intrusion of my preconceived assumptions.

Table 4.2 Interview schedule

Interview Schedule (wording may change)	
1.	Would you please tell me a little about yourself?
2.	When did you first think about becoming an adoptive parent?
3.	Could you please tell me more about your experiences of contemplating or progressing towards adoptive parenthood?
4.	Have your experiences influenced what you think adoptive parenthood means for you and how others perceive it?
5.	What do you think about your experience of the process of becoming an adoptive parent?

As I began to undertake interviews, I reflected that my desire to stay true to the interview schedule inhibited the some of the discourses shared. However, as my confidence grew, my ability to engage with the story of each participant and to modify prompts about aspects of their experiences improved. In addition, there were also occasions when participants shared such detailed descriptions that the need to prompt was less apparent. This reflective process of the role and decision making of the phenomenological researcher assists understanding of the intersubjective experience of undertaking research that aims to examine the experiences of others (Cornejo, 2008; White, 2003; Willig, 2007). This thesis does not analyse my contribution to the interviews and the participation of my explicit intersubjectivity, but this issue could form part of a reflective paper as a means of sharing my postdoctoral learning.

It was important I acknowledged the potential effects of different research design elements. In their study, Irvine et al. (2012) used content analysis to detail the limitations of telephone interviews and the

subsequent change in the nature of the dialogue. However, I argue it is equally important to reflect on the benefits to research that electronic modes of communication can bring. In my study, telephone interviews permitted the inclusion of participants whose geographical location could have excluded them from the study. Perhaps, more importantly, it provided an extra layer of anonymity and facilitated choice to participants about how much of whom they are was shared with the interviewer (Rober, 2005). This personal use of agency was most visible to me when one participant used only the audio feature during a Skype call during what was an emotionally driven account of her experience. However, there was a stage when she switched on the web camera to show me an object that she had previously described to me. That act contained the symbolic resonance of her experience as she revealed a previously hidden aesthetic view of herself (Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, 2007). The richness of this interaction suggests that content analysis can only provide a partial understanding of the dialogic engagement that occurs during qualitative audio research interviews. Thus, I look forward to postdoc analysis investigating a dialogic perception of the research interview, arguing that it must include the participation of the researcher and participant (Russell & Kelly, 2002).

Although not part of the analysis presented in later chapters, it is essential to acknowledge the rhetorical influence of myself as the researcher within the interview transcripts (Cooper & Burnett, 2006). Notably, Cooper and Burnett (2006) suggest the inclusion of researcher dialogue could compete with the focus on participant discourses; to this end, I tried to limit my conversation during interviews. However, at times this approach felt alien, particularly during telephone interviews when in the absence of visual cues more considerable care had to be employed to determine the level of animation required to communicate with the participant (Irvine et al., 2012). I suggest that to minimise the dialogical relationship between researcher and participants serves to limit an understanding of the dynamic research processes essential to the knowledge produced. Furthermore, I argue that an exploration of researcher positioning is always dialogically related to the theoretical

paradigms and those who participate in the research (Gulerce, 2014). Intrinsic to this concept is the notion that knowledge, the language we use, and the positioning of who we are, is always reflected in our own genealogy (Foucault, 1989). Thus, I recognised I have contributed to the design, application and analysis of the knowledge emerging from this multifaceted exploration of the construction and experience of prospective adopters. In doing so, I co-constructed an opportunity to transcend traditionally perceived limitations of each epistemology allowing a more complex polygonal reflective ontology to emerge. More directly, I recognised and embraced the reality that whatever research lens we choose to use and make our primary focus, this does not discount the interrelatedness of other theoretical constructs of the world.

#### ***4.1.4 Transcription***

All the semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed using features from the Jefferson (2004) transcription system. The symbols I used and their meanings are depicted below in Table 4.3. This method was familiar to me from previous analysis undertaken as part of my undergraduate and postgraduate psychology degrees. Although using the Jefferson system extends the time it takes to transcribe, my experience was that it also served to deepen my engagement with the spoken word. That is of crucial importance if the transcript is to be an accurate reflection of what was said. It was also essential to recognise that any judgement of an emphasis of a word or syllable in comparison to surrounding words is subjective. Although a positivist position would comment on subjectivity as a limitation, I only partially accept that argument as I also recognise the value in the intersubjective construction of meaning (Scotland, 2012). During transcription, I found there were times when I heard something for the first time. Thus, although I was listening during the interviews, at times participants shared information that I did not hear or had not remembered. Also, I note any absence in the recall may have been affected by the time lapse between interview and

transcription. This delay was planned in accordance with the ethical commitments embedded in the research design detailed below.

Table 4.3. Features of Jefferson transcription system (2004).

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
(.)	A brief but noticeable pause.
(8secs)	A number inside brackets denotes a timed pause
(...)	A pause of untimed length.
( )	Other aspects of communication, including where the words were too unclear to transcribe.
Italics	Words have been replaced to protect anonymity.
Underlined	Indicates emphasis on a syllable or word.
I	Interviewer/Researcher

In compliance with the ethical requirements of the University of Huddersfield's SREP participants were permitted to have a one month period after their interview to withdraw from the study. To ensure participants felt they could withdraw without additional concern of the time, I may have invested in their contribution; I advised them I would not transcribe their interviews until that time had lapsed. That also meant I chose not to make detailed field notes to reflect on the contribution at the time of the interview. Although, this decision could be viewed as at odds with the assumed methodology of qualitative research; I recognised how I was impacted by the interviews and aspects of each resonated with me, but a decision had to be made in relation to what actions or inaction of the researcher adds to the complexity of epoché (Heidegger, 1953/2010). I recognised this created some distance between the interviews and my post-interview engagement with them. This was a novel experience to me as my previous research had involved compiling field notes. However, I soon found that I was content with the decision not to do so and this is

anchored to how I felt authentic in making sense of my being-in-the-world as a phenomenological researcher. That said I was relieved when I found I re-engaged and re-lived the interviews again during the transcription process.

Essentially, the vibrancy of re-experiencing the emotions of laughter, sadness and the cognitive thoughts about their experiences did not appear to dull by the passing of time. This is important and led me to reflect that what was crucial in my role as a researcher was how I made sense of the length of time between interview and transcription. Therefore, I could have constructed it as detrimental and focused on what may have been lost. Notably, I did not form that view. The decision was a pragmatic way to protect the participants, but also to safeguard my own investment in their experience. If I had proceeded to invest following the interview and they had wanted to withdraw, I would have to question how much knowledge I would have had to bracket. As it was, no participant withdrew from the study. However, I transcribed the four interviews of the participants who were not domiciled in the UK, and these were subject to data analysis, however, as their experiences were not connected to the British adoption processes, they did not resonate in the same way and were not used in the final analysis described below.

#### ***4.1.5 Ethical considerations***

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Huddersfield's School Research and Ethics Panel (SREP), and a copy of the confirmation email is provided (see appendix 1). This process encouraged me to reflect more deeply on the impact of what it would mean for those who were to participate in the study. Understandably, there were varying ways in which participants shared their experience of loss. I reflected that the enormity of loss did not always equate to the expression of emotion that manifested. For example, one participant cried while describing their loss of not adopting and for others, there was a resonating silence with no words needed to depict the finality of the impending outcome. Although,

ethical approval was solely for my undertaking this research study as a doctoral student; I was aware and grateful for the skills and knowledge I have as an experienced social worker when interviewing people and supporting their capacity to share sensitive experiences.

All participants were required to give written consent (see appendix 4). During face-to-face interviews, consent forms were signed by each person and countersigned by myself. For interviews that took place by electronic means, I processed consent forms electronically and additionally recorded verbal consent at the start of each interview. Each participant was permitted a four-week period in which they could consider withdrawing from the study. Part of requesting informed consent advised potential participants that interviews would be audio recorded and then transcribed. I formed the view that participants would be aided in their contemplation of withdrawal if they did not have to include thoughts about the potential time I had invested in their contribution. As such, I advised each participant that I would not transcribe his or her interview until the four-week period had lapsed. I sent each participant an email reminder during this period to reaffirm they had the right to withdraw and no one withdrew his or her consent (see appendix 5).

Participant anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms and by changing place names. Participants were given a choice to either choose a pseudonym and where they did not, I chose one that related to their gender and was ethnically comparable to their own name. This process of anonymity became of increasing importance for some participants who offered a detailed geographical genealogy of their lives and those who had unusual or publicly traceable professions. Another aspect of maintaining anonymity that had not been anticipated arose through the elevated level of participant responses via social media. It soon became apparent that some of the people who expressed an interest in participating could be traced online, via indicators such as their names, email addresses, or social media network platforms. Therefore, a conscious decision was taken not to (mis)use this information and to rely solely on what participants shared during their interview. In relation to issues of

confidentiality, on two occasions a participant referred other participants to me. Except for my being copied into an introductory email sent from one participant to another, there was no disclosure or sharing of any information between the participants and me about each other.

#### **4.1.6 Data analysis**

This research adopted hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of 21 participants domiciled in the UK. Although this section will present the formal stages of analysis, in truth, aspects of analysis began during the interview and again when transcribing the audio recordings. At times, the process of analysis was upsetting, particularly, as aspects of the participants' experiences resonate with my own. Thus, I found it helpful to pace the analysis at a level, which allowed me to concentrate on the participants' experience, supporting my ability to 'bracket' aspects of my own subjectivity (Groenewald, 2004). This experience meant I had to make time to reflect on aspects of my personal and professional experiences in relation to parenthood, adoption and social work. Markedly, these aspects of myself are not divorced from the analysis as intersubjective sense-making is constant (Ringel, 2009).

The hermeneutic phenomenological analysis was guided by van Manen's (1990, p.93) analytic approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology facilitates examination of the lived experience of contemplating an uncertain future. However, it also highlights the methodological benefits and limitations of the current study. Most phenomenological research focuses on a retrospective view of an experience to understand an experience that has been lived. It simplifies experience into what has been lived (retrospective), to what is going to be lived (prospective). Notably, my study disrupts this binary as the findings demonstrate that we are simultaneously be(com)ing. The phenomenological method of examination supports a search for themes and meanings using approaches, which engage with the data holistically, selectively and in detail. Prior to the thematic analysis of each transcribed interview, I again

listened to the audio recording of the participant's interview. This enabled me to centre on their experience and served to bring their words, back to life. Thus, as I was reading and re-reading the transcripts, their voice, its intonation, and my perspective of our shared experience of the interview was again re-lived.

The meanings, which emerged during this cyclical process, were initially descriptive before developing into interpretive sense-making of the experiences. As broader themes emerged these were compiled onto a separate piece of paper, and this procedure concluded when no further themes emerged. This analytic process was repeated for each interview before clustering the themes that had emerged across the whole participant group. Finally, three non-hierarchical superordinate themes emerged, that collectively made sense of the individual and shared experiences. The analysis and discussion of the three themes of traversing dichotomies, negotiating social-cultural contours and making sense of be(com)ing self, are discussed in Chapter's six to eight.

#### **4.2 National adoption week campaign study**

The analysis of the NAW campaigns will be discussed in detail in Chapter five. However, it is important to situate the scope of its importance in the design and execution of this doctoral study. Two research demands motivated the need to investigate the social construction of prospective adoptive parents in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. Firstly, there was the implicit methodological understanding that experience does not occur in isolation of social factors. Secondly, as detailed in Chapter three, previous studies regarding prospective adopters had drawn participants from a populous who had already contacted an adoption agency or had become an adoptive parent. In 2013, at the time when this NAW study was undertaken, the annual campaign had grown from strength to strength over a fifteen-year period reinforced by social policies that supported adoption as an outcome for children. Although NAW is a prominent means of communication between adoption agencies



and the British public, it has rarely been researched (Wallis, 2006; Ward, 2011). This scarcity of knowledge extends to what is yet to be understood about prospective adoptive parents, particularly those who do not proceed beyond an initial enquiry, or indeed, who have ever made contact with an adoption agency (Lunken, 1995; Sunmonu, 2000; Wallis, 2006; Ward, 2011).

From a social constructionist perspective, this raised the query of how NAW publicity campaigns use interpretative repertoires to construct prospective adoptive parenthood (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This approach allowed an interrogation of both the co-construction and application of knowledge which is vital to both research and social work practice (Parton, 2000). To date, there has been no examination of the discourses within the NAW campaigns, which I argue negates consideration of the impact of resultant repertoires. This, in turn, prevents the identification of the subject positions available to prospective adopters (Horton-Salway, 2011; Ovenden, 2012) and limits our understanding of how the NAW campaign construct those who could consider adoption as a route to parenthood.

#### ***4.2.1 Methodological approach to NAW study***

Critical social psychology accommodates the use of a variety of social constructionist epistemologies, each of which supports a relativist view of the world (Richardson & Slife, 2011). Importantly, the emergence of discursive psychological approaches has developed to permit analysis of language (Edwards, 2005; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). The relativist nature of social constructionism facilitates our ability to understand the world we live in by recognising our use of language is relative to our time and place in the world (Richardson & Slife, 2011). Importantly, social constructionism allows us to examine how language is used to construct our social reality (Hudak, 2013). More specifically, constructionist paradigms have been employed to reflect on the nature of social work ethics (Parton, 2003) and relational practice (Folgheraiter, 2007). Thus, I

argue they are suitable to examine the language used to construct prospective adopters and the implications this could have on adoptive practices.

The broad spectrum of discursive psychology can be used to interrogate both interviews transcripts and other textual data, such as newspaper articles (Budds, Locke, & Burr, 2013; Horton-Salway, 2011). One flexible approach previously used as a method to interrogate newspaper articles is thematic analysis (Budds, Locke & Burr, 2013). Usefully, thematic analysis is readily applicable to textual material and facilitating the emergence of discursive patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six-stage process of implementing thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) facilitates the deconstruction of discourse to identify the language used to construct prospective adopters.

#### **4.2.2 Method**

The NEXIS database was used to retrieve UK newspaper articles during the National adoption week Campaigns of 2012 and 2013. These two years were chosen as being timely for the participants who would be recruited to participate in the main study at the start of 2014. Using the data from these two years ensured they provided sufficient data for analysis. For both one week annual campaigns, the search term 'National adoption week' was used. In 2012, the search identified 95 articles in 93 newspapers and 4 web-based publications; the high similarity filter reduced this to 82 articles. In the first week of November 2013, there were 123 articles, in 121 newspapers, 6 news items, 5 web-based publications and 1 newsletter; when the high similarity filter was applied this reduced to 102 articles. Thus, the final data corpus consisted of 184 articles most of which originated from regional publications. The only national newspaper included in the corpus was The Sun, 2012 (8) and 2013 (2). Finally, broadsheet newspapers were only represented in 2012 via their respective websites, guardian.co.uk (2) telegraph.co.uk (2).

As described above, this research adopted a social constructionist stance, which assumed we make sense of others and ourselves through our social interactions. In this instance, the research question that focused the analysis was: How do NAW newspaper articles construct prospective adoptive parenthood? A thematic analysis was completed using a six-stage cyclical method to identify the language used in relation to prospective adoptive parenthood (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This qualitative method involved the repeated reading of each line of text, during which prominent discourses were highlighted. Once each annual dataset was analysed they were considered together allowing the inductive emergence of rhetorical patterns. The clustering of these patterns led to three superordinate themes, 'deconstructing myths', 'becoming family', 'converging people and policy'; the findings of this analysis are presented and discussed in Chapter five.

### **4.3 Chapter summary**

This chapter provided the theoretical blueprint of the design of my research and subsequent knowledge produced by this thesis. In tracing the application of theory throughout the study, I have evidenced the complexity of how decisions were negotiated. I explained how an absence of prior decisions, such as a research focus only on those domiciled in the UK, meant that some data was not used in the final analysis. However, in capturing this data and in recognition of non-British citizens living in Britain meant that cultural comparisons could be achieved via postdoctoral analysis. This chapter has demonstrated how the positioning of myself as a phenomenological researcher and social worker are central to the study. Therefore, aspects of my professional and personal 'self' have been present throughout the co-construction of the knowledge produced by this thesis.

## **Preface to findings chapters**

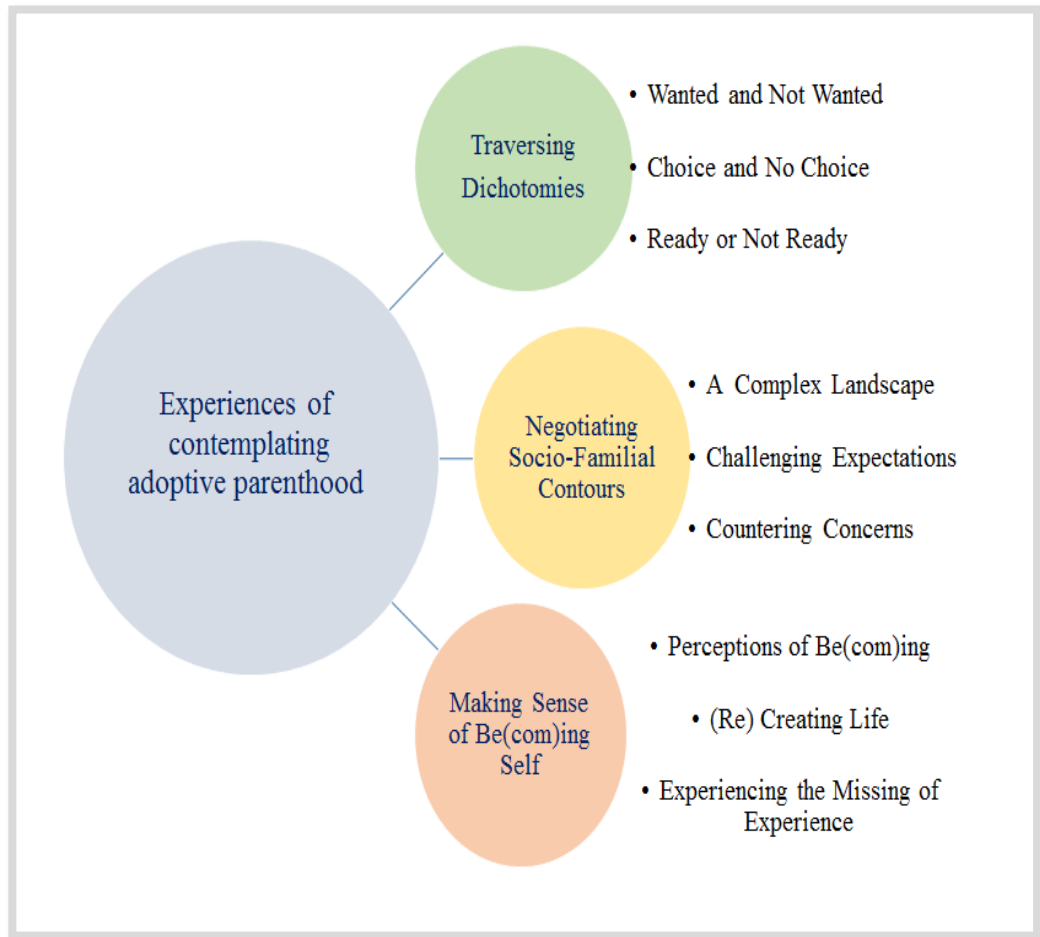
The historical relationship between social policy and the construction of adoptive parenthood was interrogated in Chapter two. That chapter highlighted the socio-political prominence given to adoption as an outcome for children who are 'Looked After' and the subsequent implications for what it currently means to be a prospective adoptive parent. Chapter two's examination of these issues demonstrates the importance of understanding how prospective adopters make sense of multiple expectations and the implications this could have on their recruitment. Building on this critique, Chapter three examined research literature to examine how the construction of adoptive parenthood interrelates with social policy. More specifically, how over time the British government has promoted adoption as a desirable outcome for children looked after by the state. Not only has this resulted in a continuing demand for both quantity and to some degree, diversity of adoptive parents; it has also seen changes in the law defining who can adopt. Furthermore, the social policies influence the availability and categorisation of children waiting for adoption, which in turn help define the qualities that prospective adopters should have.

Chapter three also discussed the gendered expectation that women will want to give birth to a child, to the extent that, if that is not medically possible, IVF is viewed as the next best option. The dominance of biology as a preferred route to parenthood can lead to expectations that only when an IVF route had been fully considered that adoption is determined to be a choice. This bias towards a genetic relationship and a deterministic belief in biology is a presumption throughout much of the literature. This dominance draws focus to the factors that affect how we become a parent and the perceptions of relationships between parents and their children. As explained in Chapter three, to counter pervasive categorisations and socially constructed assumptions, participants in my research were not explicitly asked to provide self-identifying information such as age, marital

status, sexuality, economic status etc. Thus, these aspects of experience are situated only when specifically related to the experiences my participants shared.

The following four chapters present and discuss the findings emerging from this doctoral study. Chapter five presents the findings from study one, a thematic analysis of newspaper discourses during National adoption week Campaigns during 2012 and 2013. The analysis of NAW campaigns provided facilitates an understanding of the government rhetoric that constructed the prospective adopters prior to the recruitment of participants to my main study. The findings of the main phenomenological study are reported in the further three findings chapters, each of which is dedicated to one of three themes emerging from the analysis of the interview data from 21 prospective adopters living in the UK. Three superordinate and non-hierarchical themes emerged (see Figure 4.2); which reflect the participants' experience of living in contemplation of adoptive parenthood; the intersubjective socio-cultural influences that affect their experiences; and the way in which participants' experiences interrelate with an emergent self. Chapter six provides a detailed exploration of the superordinate theme entitled 'Traversing dichotomies', this is presented as the first phenomenological study findings chapter as a means of positioning the participants' intersubjective experience of contemplating adoptive parenthood. The discussion of the findings expands in Chapter seven where I examine participants' intersubjective relationships with others as experienced within cultural and social structures. Finally, Chapter eight focused on how participants experience change as they subjectively adapt to their past, present and future contemplations of adoptive parenthood.

Figure 4.2 Emerging themes and sub-themes from the phenomenological analysis.

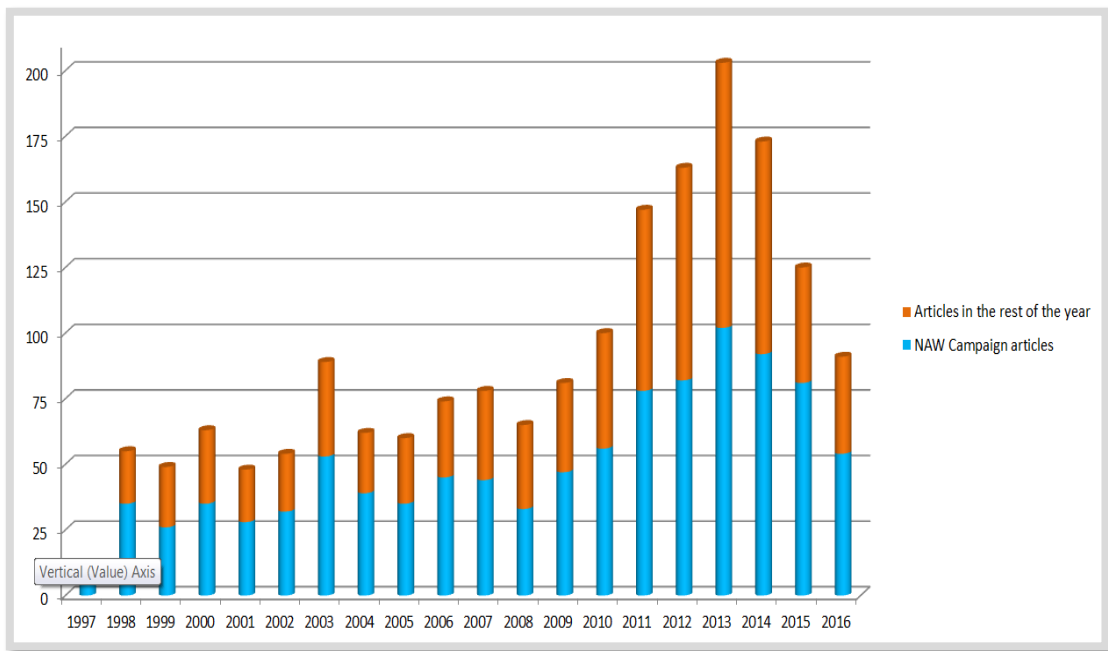


## **Chapter Five - National adoption week 2012-2013 campaign analysis**

*"Pick up any newspaper, and many of the stories will concern people who are described, evaluated and understood not in terms of any unique features of their biography but through their category membership: 'model reveals star's secret life', wife found murdered'." (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.116)*

Thus far this thesis has evidenced and interrogated the genealogical knowledge pertaining to prospective adoptive parenthood, with a focus on legislation and policy across the last century. Chapter two introduced and examined the rebirth of adoption at the turn of this century as a prominent social policy under Blair's Labour government. Extending the genealogical landscape Chapter three then discussed the subsequent changes in legislation and developing research knowledge that underpinned the political drive to recruit prospective adopters. A prominent component in the recruitment of prospective adopters is the annual NAW campaign, which launched in 1997. These annual campaigns seek to encourage people to come forward and identify themselves as prospective adopters. One week every autumn, the campaign sees a proliferation of newspaper articles in the UK aiming to raise awareness of adoption. As depicted in Figure 5.1, the numbers of articles during NAW week rose from just 8 in 1997 to 102 in 2013. The numbers have since continued to decline with only 54 articles published in 2016. Similarly, articles that referred to NAW throughout the rest of the year followed a similar distribution pattern, with 4 additional articles in 1997, 101 in 2013, again dropping in 2016 to only 37.

Figure 5.1 Number of National adoption week articles 1997-2016



Over the last 20 years, Britain has seen a considerable number of children adopted, and this would not have been possible without a successful recruitment drive for prospective adopters (Rushton, 2003). Indeed, at the start of this doctoral study OFSTED (2013) figures show an 18% annual increase in the number of families approved to adopt, these figures were also supported by a 34% increase in the approval rate of applications. Therefore, to understand the social discourses prevalent to prospective adopters at that time, I captured and analysed the rhetoric from the 2012 and 2013 NAW campaigns. The resulting analysis of the NAW newspaper articles provides a background repertoire to the experiences of prospective adopters who participated in the main study. Notably, when the NAW study was undertaken the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) a national charity that spearheaded research, policy and practice for three decades remained in existence. However, the BAAF charity went into liquidation in the summer of 2015, and British adoption practices are now steered by CoramBAAF.

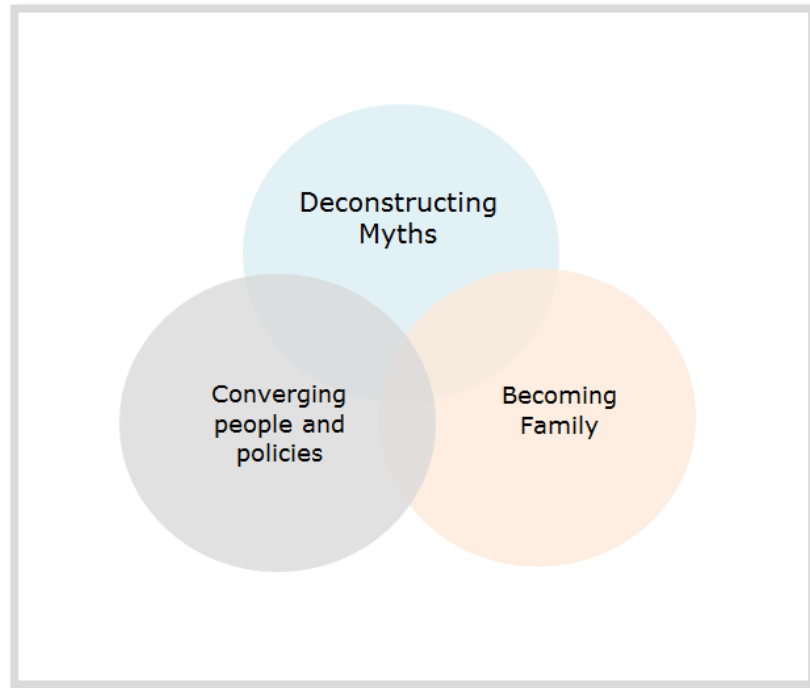
At the time of this NAW study, BAAF had used the annual campaign for 15 years as a means of encouraging members of the public to identify themselves as prospective adoptive parents. As Figure 3.1 demonstrates,



the use of NAW has continued to decline since its peak in 2013. The thematic analysis of NAW newspaper discourses saw adoption emerge as a complex phenomenon, which encompassed the needs of children, adults, families, adoption agencies and the state. The importance of protecting children remains an implicit discourse around which the process of prospective adopter approval is required. However, this rhetoric conflicts with others, which aim to make it easier for people to adopt a child in order to meet the needs of a national shortage of adoptive parents. Through the application of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), several second-order themes were identified, these included: everyone/someone, myths/reality; challenges/barriers; motivations/rewards; public/private; social responsibility/individual need. These themes reflect the breadth of language utilised in contemporary recruitment campaigns, which attempt to bridge the complex expanse that depicts the journey to adoption.

Further analysis of NAW campaign discourses highlights three overarching repertoires, which construct prospective adoptive parents. The first theme, 'deconstructing myths' interrogates the motivations and mythologies, which the campaign suggests prevent the public from coming forward as prospective adopters. The second theme termed 'becoming family' examined the pronatalist and gendered bias in the construction of women and men who may seek adoption as a route to parenthood. The final theme 'converging people and policy' analysed the role of prospective adopters in the determination of public policies that simultaneously impinge on and support families. Collectively, these themes highlight the permeability of the construction of what is a prospective adoptive parent.

Figure 5.2 Themes emerging from analysis of NAW campaigns 2012 and 2013.



### 5.1 Deconstructing myths

A dominant discourse throughout the data corpus was the assertion that myths about the adoption selection process prevent people from approaching adoption agencies. The Oxford English dictionary (2014), define myths as a 'belief which is commonly held and yet untrue'. As a prelude to the NAW of 2013, BAAF commissioned a YouGov survey in Wales, releasing its results to coincide with their 2013 campaign. BAAF report the YouGov survey suggests the public hold myths that mean you can be too old to adopt, that smoking, poor health or low income can prevent you from adopting. The public as purveyors of myths was also present in the 2012 corpus. In response, BAAF was keen to assert that the public was wrong, as there were 'no blanket bans'.

*"There are no blanket bans on adoption," said Neil Burden, the council's lead member for children's services. (Cornish Guardian, November 9, 2012).*

In part, the concept of 'no blanket bans' derives from the extensions made in the Adoption and Children's Act 2002, which as explained in Chapter two, permit unmarried adults and same-sex couples to adopt. However, as Chapter three reports, Northern Ireland Health Minister Mr Edwin Poots, challenged these legislative changes. Thus, although his appeal was dismissed in December 2013, the corpus of newspaper articles under review was published at a time when there was continuing political dissent about that legislative change in Northern Ireland. In November 2013, Mr Poots' views were quoted on the BBC news website.

*"When it comes to adoption I've just come from an MLU, a Midwifery Lead Unit in Lagan Valley today and all of the people that were giving birth in that unit were women, and all of those women would not have been impregnated by another woman. The natural order - whether one believes in God or whether one believes in evolution - is for a man and a woman to have a child and therefore that has made my views on adoption very clear and on raising children very clear, that it should be a man and a woman that raises a child. Now people can criticise me for that, and they can challenge me for it, and they can say it's backward. The truth is that still today in this modern era it is only a man and a woman that can produce a child, and therefore I think it's in the best order for a man and a woman to raise a child." (Edwin Poots, Irish Health Minister, BBC News, 12 November 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-24918026>)*

In Poots' comments above, we see the creationist and eugenic underpinnings of pronatalist paradigms that support his view of how being-in-the-world should be determined. Although his legal challenge was not successful, it is a reminder that despite legislative mandates belief systems prevail within all our social attitudes (Saucier, 2000). The relationship between temporal legislative mandates that often reflect and influence changing social attitudes as they intersect with enduring beliefs is extremely complex. As demonstrated in Chapter two, the combined impact of legislation and policies can have a devastating effect on people as they define the social contours within which we live our lives. As such, understanding the function of child adoption and surrounding discourses within that complex landscape is worthy of future exploration. However,

Saucier (2000) cautions that psychology's current ability to measure social attitudes is more advanced than our ability to define them. Thus, caution is required as we interrogate the NAW campaigns and contemplate not only their practical implications but also the potential for meaningful change.

### **5.1.1 Myth – Age**

When considering the age of prospective adopters, Chapter two has already shown that current legislation defines the minimum age of adoptive parents as 21 years of age. The previous studies that examined who is likely to respond to NAW campaigns reflect that most people who contacted an agency were aged between 30 and 40 years (Wallis, 2006).

*"It is interesting to see what myths exist about adoption; for example, some people believe: anyone over 40 is ruled out of adoption." (Pat Armstrong, Head of Fostering and Adoption Services for the Western Trust: Derry Journal, November 7, 2012).*

The above statement from Pat Armstrong published during the NAW 2012 campaign, arguably serves to reaffirm the 'no blanket bans' discourse. The language positions the public as responsible for incorrectly believing that age would prevent a person from being considered by adoption agencies. However, the following year, the NAW campaign used YouGov data to show that almost a quarter of the people they surveyed thought age could prevent you from adopting.

*"New statistics from the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), released to coincide with National adoption week, show that there are a number of widely-held misconceptions surrounding the adoption process. For example, the study shows one in four Welsh adults (24%) believe that being over the age of 40 would prevent them from being able to adopt a child. In fact, there is no upper age limit for prospective adopters. (South Wales Echo, November 5, 2013)*

Interestingly, ALB statistics reflect that over half of the adopters approved during 2014-2015 were aged over 40 years old. Indeed, as depicted in Table 5.1 below, most approved adopters were aged between 30 and 50 years of age. Unfortunately, the limited availability of nationally collated data reporting the age of adopters prevents any understanding of how the campaigns may have increased the numbers of adopters over 40 years of age.

Table 5.1 Number of adopters approved by age during 2014-2015

Age	Local Authority	Voluntary Adoption Agency	Total
< 20 years old	20	<5	20
20 – 29 years old	340	70	410
30 – 39 years old	3,010	570	3,580
40 – 49 years old	3,770	720	4,490
50 – 59 years old	600	110	710
> 60 years old	40	10	50
Unknown	200	0	200
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7,970</b>	<b>1,490</b>	<b>9,460</b>

Importantly, the 30-40-year age group is also common in many studies of adults who have become adoptive parents (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2014; Jennings et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2011; Welsh et al., 2008). It is common for many prospective adopters to have experienced infertility before pursuing adoption and 41% of Wallis's (2006) respondents said incidents of sterility were a factor for them. Their experiences support pronatalist expectations of the age of fertility, particularly for women, are also a likely factor in the assumption of the older mother (Dow, 2016; Locke & Budds, 2013). Although some extracts report there is no upper age limit, on occasion, there was a reference to the limits of the adoptive parent-child age gap.

*"You consider yourself an 'older' parent There is no upper age limit. Some agencies might prefer that there is not more than a 45-year gap between you and the child, but the guidelines are flexible. Legally you must be over 21 to adopt." (Liverpool Echo, November 7, 2013).*

On several occasions, the data corpus referred to age, many of these substantiated that legally a person must be over 21 years of age. We see from Table 5.1 that approval to become an adopter can occur before the age of 21 years. However, the above extract reflects that there may be some premise to a 'myth' held by the public that you might be considered too old to become an adoptive parent. It denotes the fact that individual adoption agencies can hold a preference for the age of their adoptive parents when compared to the age of the child they might adopt. As most children are adopted under 5 years of age, this does add weight to the views held by some that there is a 40-year age limit. Importantly, any upper age restriction is not because of legislation and arguably is influenced by pronatalist expectations of the temporality of female reproductive capacity. These conflicting discourses limit the capacity of the public to determine their suitability as prospective adopters, which in turn, adds weight to the power of adoption agencies to assess a person's suitability to commence the approval process. The above extract did not happen in isolation.

*"You have to be 21 to adopt, and there is no upper age limit, but generally we say there shouldn't be more than a 45-year age gap between the adoptive parent and the child. However, we take each situation on a case-by-case basis."  
(Chester Chronicle, November 8, 2012).*

Arguably, the challenge for the public is how to make sense of what factors might be important, 'on a case by case basis'. Particularly, as there is no information provided to assist them in determining the likely success of their application. Indeed, in the statement above, there is confusion as to whether the age restriction is personal to the individual applicant, or specific to an adoption agency. I argue that these conflicting messages could serve to perpetuate the belief that people over 40 years of age are unlikely to be seen as suitable. It is of concern that the reason why some adoption agencies form a view that limits the upper age of adopters is unreported. Of greater disquiet is the implicit acceptance that

individual adoption agencies have the power to impose their own upper age limit on adopters, despite this not being stipulated in legislation. Furthermore, the numbers of approved adoptive parents over 40 years of age does not support the positioning of those agencies.

### **5.1.2 Myth – Health and economic status**

Other perceived myths that the campaigns sought to address was about the categorisation of people who were potential adoptive parents, such as, someone who smokes or who is obese. As evident in the extracts below, these issues straddled both the 2012 and 2013 NAW campaigns.

*“It is interesting to see what myths exist about adoption; for example, some people believe: you cannot adopt if you smoke, obesity excludes you from adoption (Pat Armstrong, Head of Fostering and Adoption Services for the Western Trust: Derry Journal, November 7, 2012).*

In addition, nearly half of those surveyed (44%) by YouGov think being unemployed or overweight would discredit them from giving a child a permanent family home. Furthermore, 40% of Welsh people believe being a smoker would discredit them from adopting. “In reality, this is not the case, and there are no such restrictions placed on those interested in adopting.” (South Wales Echo, November 5, 2013). In the above extract, Pat Armstrong asserts, that the myths that exist about adoption are interesting, which suggests those within the world of child adoption, lack understanding of the perceptions of adoption held by some members of the public. However, previous research detailed in Chapter three reflects that the health and well-being of adoptive parents is a factor for adoption agencies (Lindsay & Hill, 2002; Taylor, Paphiti-Demetriou & Hill, 2011). This NAW campaign corpus included only two references to smoking, one as stated above and a second as a question in the BAAF survey (YouGov, 2013). Thus, in general, smoking was not an issue raised in the campaign, although there were several articles relating to concerns about being unemployed and overweight. Notably, the above statement stresses there are no such restrictions, but equally other articles explain that while

there are no automatic exclusions, issues of health, finance and employment status will be examined.

*"A prospective adopter's health, financial circumstances and employment status will always be explored in an adoption assessment, but health conditions, low income or being unemployed will not automatically exclude a person from being approved." (The Star (Sheffield), November 9, 2012).*

As previously demonstrated, the aim of NAW is to encourage people to contact an adoption agency and put themselves forward to undertake an assessment process. We see from Chapter three that it can take years for prospective adopters to make the initial contact with an agency (Wallis, 2006) and that 82% of enquirers' do not complete an application for assessment (Ward, 2011). Thus, the more people who make contact, the greater number of prospective adopters will become approved. However, it is arguably better to have prospective adopters contact agencies without waiting for years and have a greater number of those who make contact be deemed suitable for adoption. At this time, the power of the determination of suitability remains weighted with the adoption agency and negates the public's ability to determine not only if they are suitable but also if the time is right for them. This further limits the potential for a broader understanding of what adoption could mean in our society, as legislators and adoption agencies dominate the conversation.

*"I'm not a high earner either, and I thought I'd be turned down, but when I investigated, I found out I definitely would be considered." (The Sun, November 7, 2012).*

The above statement reflects the confusion experienced by some members of the public, in the absence of information. What the above extract denotes is that despite his or her own reservations, the person would be considered by an adoption agency. However, it does not indicate what is viewed as low earnings and therefore avoids examination of the underlying issue of who would be judged a suitable adopter. As demonstrated in Chapter two, adoption has been a means of 'rescuing' children from the poor, who are unable to care for them, or who abuse their children (Keating, 2001). Therefore, the contemporary rhetoric in



the above extract implicitly supports the middle-class view of adoptive parents as superior to those from a working-class background (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Jurnik, 2007; Dembroski & Johnson, 1969). This was further evidenced as many of the articles in the corpus detailed the professions of successful adopters, which were predominantly professional or carer based. Examples include an anaesthetist (Manchester Evening News, November 6, 2013), and teacher (Leicester Mercury, November 10, 2012). These references continue to perpetuate the belief that, although the stated position is that socio-economic status is not a determinant of who is a suitable prospective adopter, one has to earn enough income to be an adoptive parent.

*"In reality, these myths can deprive children of a new start in life with a loving family." (Pat Armstrong, Head of Fostering and Adoption Services for the Western Trust: Derry Journal, November 7, 2012).*

Armstrong's conclusive statement reported above serves to situate anyone who does not apply to adopt as preventing a child with the opportunity of a loving family. However, he does not appear to share the responsibility of providing families for these children with the adoption agencies who have the power to legitimise who can be an adoptive parent. We have seen in the NAW discourses that the public are the purveyors of myths, and now we see that impact of these beliefs is that children are deprived of life in a new loving family. Thus, we see prospective adoptive families constructed as loving and their failure to come forward explained by an assumption that they believe in these myths. However, what is not included in the extract is also of interest. Absent from the corpus is information which enables a member of the public to self-determine whether their smoking habits, weight, ethnicity or marital status would contribute to a reason why they would not be approved as an adoptive parent.

As detailed in Chapter three, the issue of the ethnicity of adoptive parents and the children they adopt is of interest and has a complex history throughout adoption practices. At the time of data corpus used in

this study, it remained a requirement for a child's race and cultural origins to be considered in the decision of any placement. Although this was not intended to be a barrier to matching children with adoptive parents, the coalition government amended the law via the Children and Families Act 2014, to repeal the requirement to consider religious persuasion, racial origin when deciding adoption placements. When we consider what is missing from the corpus, there is an absence of examination of the issue of ethnicity. This absence implicitly serves to construct adoption as a practice undertaken by white people and does nothing to improve our longstanding failure to recruit more BAME adoptive parents (Kaniuk, 1991; Sunmonu, 2000).

This section has demonstrated the tension between the ranges of concerns individuals think could prevent them from becoming an adoptive parent and BAAF's assertion that there are no blanket bans. It highlights the confusion that exists for members of the public that may prevent them from approaching an adoption agency to determine their potential to become an adoptive family. The importance of what is discussed and what remains absent has been illustrated in relation to the implicit influence these discourses have on who could be a prospective adopter.

## **5.2 Becoming family**

In addition to the challenge of deconstructing myths, the data constructs complex repertoires about the motivations to becoming a family. Prospective adopters are depicted as having 'unfulfilled' lives, and they may be 'devastated' by the inability to have biological children (Wigan Today, November 6, 2013). As demonstrated in Chapter's two and three, the construction of prospective adopters as childless, has resonated throughout history. More specifically, the gendered positioning of prospective adoptive parents within the corpus reinforced it as an embodied female phenomenon. This was exemplified by one woman who described the realisation of her infertility as more upsetting, than being diagnosed with cancer.

*"I cried when I was diagnosed with cancer," said Emily. "I wasn't worried about me; I was sad because it meant I couldn't have my own children. I was so upset. For me, the next best thing was to see if I could adopt and that's what I did." (Derby Evening Telegraph, November 8, 2013).*

In the extract above Emily, describes her subjective and emotive reaction to infertility that she suffered because of cancer. Interestingly, she states that she was not worried about herself, but was sad because she could not have her own children, viewing parenthood as a vital component of being an adult (Bertilsson, Rosqvist & Lövgren, 2013). Thus, suggesting that the purpose of her corporeality is more important in the production of another embodied subjectivity than its own survival. Emily's statement supports pronatalist hierarchies of motherhood that assert biological routes to parenthood as preferred, but continue to promote motherhood by adoption, as the second choice for infertile women (Brown & Ferree, 2005; Laufer-Ukeles, 2014). Ultimately, the depth of her feelings is evident in how upset she felt in response to her infertility. There is sadness at the loss of biological motherhood, reaffirmed by a restatement of how upset she was. This emotive statement was not in isolation in the corpus, and the extract below describes a deep longing for motherhood.

*"But there was also a terrible, constant ache caused by the deep longing to be a mother." (The Star (Sheffield), November 9, 2012).*

The discursive construction of the adoptive family within the corpus explicitly situated the mother with the biological event of birth. This was amplified using embodied language that resonates with enduring pronatalist views of the role and expectation of women (Brown & Ferree, 2005; Hollingworth, 1916; Laufer-Ukeles, 2014). However, concepts of adoptive fatherhood (Baumann, 1999; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009) were less visible.

*"A mother will love an adopted child just as much as if she had given birth herself, and fathers will feel as though their lives are complete. But adoption is not just about fulfilling*

## Be(com)ing a Prospective Adoptive Parent

*people's lives; it is about giving children the love they deserve in a safe home." (Hull Daily Mail November 6, 2012).*

This gender difference is apparent in Ward's (2011) findings of who is more likely to contact an adoption agency in response to a NAW campaign. Ward (2011) found that women make 90% of initial enquiries, as such I argue that if the NAW campaign discourses were more specific to people from BAME backgrounds, they would be more likely to recognise their potential inclusion. What we also see evidenced in the above extract is the construction of the deserving child. Thus, prospective adopters are challenged to consider their social responsibility in responding or not to this 'deservingness' and their competence to offer a safe home (Hollway & Jefferson, 2005; Houck & Spegman, 1999).

In most instances, becoming an adoptive parent was predominantly framed in terms of white heterosexual coupledness.

*"Rachel and Tony had dreamed of being mum and dad to a blonde-haired, blue-eyed little girl, so when they first met Sophie, it was as if their prayers had been answered." (The Northern Echo, November 7, 2012).*

In the above extract the description of Sophie embodies her as a Caucasian child with blonde hair and blue eyes, this in turn implicitly positions the adopters as a white couple. Furthermore, using the adopters' first names in the extract ensures the reader identifies them as heterosexual. The sense of this couple's values is suggested by a reference to their 'prayers being answered'; while this may indicate a religious belief, it also suggests the fulfilment Rachel and Tony experience at becoming a family (Bertilsson, Rosqvist & Lövgren, 2013). Finally, this realisation was achieved at their first meeting, indicating the potential for immediately knowing that they belong together. Arguably, such statements resonate with the social expectation of the maternal instinct to become attached to their child (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, Ainsworth, & Bretherton, 1992) which are contested by others who recognise the transition to motherhood as complex (Baraitser, 2006; Ben-Ari, Shlomo, Sivan, & Dolizki, 2009; Ponciano, 2010).

Within the corpus, the process of becoming a family was often described as 'intense' and 'emotional' but ultimately 'rewarding'. There was an assertion that adoption provides both children and adults with a 'new meaning to life and love'.

*"The process of becoming an adoptive parent is intense. However, this shouldn't put anyone off considering it. It is the most emotional thing you will ever do, but ultimately it leads to the most rewarding type of parenting. Adoption gives children and their adoptive parents an entirely new meaning to life and love."(Derry Journal, November 4, 2013).*

The above extract is anchored to the pronatalist principle that becoming a parent is an integral part of being an adult (Bertilsdotter, Rosqvist & Lövgren, 2013). It advocates the importance of the decision to become an adoptive parent by remarking on the intensity of the process while asserting that this should not be a deterrent. The emotive language continues by stating that becoming an adoptive family is the 'most emotional' thing you will ever do. This situates the experience as above that of becoming a biological parent; this continues with the assertion that it is the 'most rewarding' type of parenting. Such statements are dismissive of the experiences of some adopters who found becoming an adoptive parent very difficult (Rushton & Monck, 2009). Admittedly, the NAW week campaigns are to serve the purpose of getting people to contact an adoption agency. However, considering the huge drop in interest after the initial call (Ward, 2011), there would be value in reviewing how we have a national conversation about adoption.

An othering of adoptive parenthood was also apparent, both in the implicit and explicit requirement for ways of thinking and behaving.

*"Anyone can adopt as long as they have the right mindset." (The Journal, November 10, 2012).*

The 'right mindset' is ambiguous, and leaves prospective adopters to determine what this means for them and for adoption agencies. It

suggests a certain cognitive attitude is required to become an adoptive parent. It does not suggest adoption as an inclusive and rewarding experience which contrasts with the above extract from the Derry Journal (4<sup>th</sup> November 2013) which extolled adoption as more rewarding than biological parenting.

*"Prospective adopters must understand that there is no certainty about adoption. Some come to us looking for the ideal, but many children will have complex needs, perhaps due to alcohol or drug-taking by their birth parents so you can't guarantee what will happen as they grow up. There is that level of uncertainty that can be difficult to accept."*  
(Manchester Evening News, November 6, 2012).

In the above article, prospective adoption is constructed around the needs of the child. The statement is clear that prospective adopters come looking for the ideal child, but the children who are waiting to be adopted have complex needs. The extract suggests adoption will not necessarily result in a happy family life and thereby implies biological parenthood is more reliable. Unlike other extracts above, this article does not position the prospective adopted child as 'deserving' but as 'damaged', often by their parents' substance misuse. The indication of a child's development is affected by their early experiences is apparent. As is, the premise that the care they receive in an adoptive placement may not prevent them from experiencing difficulties as they reach adolescence. Although research on adoptive parental stress during their children's adolescent years is sparse, some studies do suggest a higher rate of stress for adoptive parents (Sánchez-Sandoval & Palacios, 2012). Importantly, these messages contradict the notion that adoptive parenthood is ordinary and potentially available to anyone.

A further illustration of adoptive parenting as 'other' to biological parenting is in the use of adjectives such as 'selfless' and 'caring'. In the extract that follows, the appeal for selflessness is heightened by being set in sharp relief against the prospective adopter who is 'nervous' about accepting responsibility.

*"In Sheffield alone, 120 children are crying out for a forever home. Through no fault of their own, they are living out their lives in care, all the while hoping new parents will come to give them love - and a new start in life. Their plight is made even worse by the fact that many of them have brothers and sisters they rarely see. Their family has been scattered across different foster families. Nationwide, there is a dire shortage of people willing to adopt. And of the selfless and caring few who do want to, many are nervous about taking on too much responsibility. They imagine it will be easier to adopt a baby, rather than an older child, or a disabled child, or, worst of all, a complete, ready-made family all in one go. Consequently, these are the children who must wait and wait." (The Star (Sheffield), November 9, 2012).*

Interestingly, the description of innocent children waiting and hoping for a new start in life implies the potential for a re-birth of a new family. However, the childhood of children placed for adoption are marked by numerous losses of parents, friends, homes, siblings and so on. This fragmentation of the child's family, which adds to their 'plight' suggests a caring prospective adopter would want to reunite children who are 'scattered across different foster families'. At one level, these discourses merely reflect the reality that adopters need to be adaptable to meet the needs of children that are looked after by the state. However, at a discursive level, these messages contradict the notion that adoptive parenthood is ordinary and potentially available to anyone.

The theme of becoming a family is further complicated by the conflicting messages that families are both the best and at times the worst places for children to live. The deciding principle of who can provide a permanent family hinges on the decision about what is deemed to be in the best interests of the child (Sempek & Woody, 2010). However, the assumption of family permanence ignores the ambiguity of familial life experiences and sweeps over the implications of adoption failure (Beckett, Pinchen, & Mckeigue, 2013). The state positions itself as knowing best about when to deconstruct birth families and construct new adoptive families. This issue remains unchallenged and thus unexplored in the NAW newspaper campaigns. Consequently, there are no discourses to counter neoliberal marketing rhetoric, which currently underpin the recruitment



and subsequent assessment of prospective adopters (Harlow, Berg, Barry, & Chandler, 2012; Rogowski, 2012). This raises concerns about the equality of service provision for those children who are constructed as 'hard to place' (Kaniuk et al., 2004) and runs the risk of them being perceived as 'less marketable'.

### **5.3 Converging people and policy**

Adoption is a complex phenomenon comprising of the needs, requirements and expectations of individuals, families, organisations and the state. Multiple tensions exist within and between each of these factors, but ultimately the underpinning need, which is central to everyone, is, it seems, to avoid, where possible, a failed adoption.

*"Of the adoptions that take place nationally, between 10 and 20 percent fail to work out, according to Karen Theobald, adoption team manager for Northamptonshire County Council. Karen said, "The council takes great care to make sure a child has been placed with the right family, to avoid more disruption in that youngster's life." (Evening Telegraph, Northamptonshire, November 8, 2013).*

The resonance of the importance of the need to protect children remains implicit in the process of prospective adopter assessment. This includes the time an agency needs to complete a thorough assessment and for a prospective adopted family to have time to reflect on their decision. It positions the responsibility of getting the matching of prospective adopters and children onto the local authority, and as evidenced in Chapter three this also serves to add to the legitimacy of adoption (Pustilnik, 2002). The legitimacy and the positioning of Local Authorities maintaining the highest standards of assessment are present in the extracts below.

*"We are looking for people who are able to provide stability. There is nothing worse than adoption breakdown as the child takes 10 steps backwards. This is why the adoption process is thorough and can take up to six months so that background checks can be carried out - the children are our main priority." (Chester Chronicle, November 8, 2012).*

*"After months of assessments and visits, the family were able to adopt two-year-old Ellie, who had previously been fostered in a lively, busy household, much like the one she was being brought in to. The couple admitted it was a time-consuming process and, like anyone else thinking of adopting, there were some initial reservations. "The timing was slow, but it gave us time to reflect if we were making the right decision." (West Briton, November 7, 2013).*

As discussed in Chapter three, disruption rates are difficult to determine as figures range between 4 – 19% depending upon factors such as the age of a child at the time of placement (Selwyn, Wijedasa & Meakings, 2014). But equally, research indicates factors reveals that practices within and between adoption agencies can also impact on the suitability of adoptive placements (Farmer & Dance, 2015; Farmer, Dance, Beecham, Bonin, & Ouwejan, 2010). In addition, the extracts above suggest the length of time to complete an assessment and having a child placed is positive. However, such narratives conflict with others, which aim to make it easier and quicker for people to adopt. Indeed the 'foster to adopt' scheme limits the potential or arguably, need for matching (Farmer & Dance, 2015; Farmer et al., 2010; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012).

*"In July 2013, the Government introduced a new assessment process in a bid to reduce the time taken to assess prospective adopters, which was seen as a huge barrier towards people coming forward." (The Evening Standard (London), November 4, 2013).*

*"There is an acute national shortage of adopters, and the government is streamlining the process to make it easier for people to adopt. Under the new guidelines, the first stage of the process is expected to take two months. The second stage will take around four months." (Bradford Telegraph and Argus, November 4, 2013).*

In the above extracts, there is a validation of the government's decision to reduce assessment timescales is supported by the use of the adjective 'huge'. In addition to the assertion that a reduced timescale will encourage more prospective adopters to make enquiries, the statement also implies they are more likely to complete the process. Specific details of times are given which would enable prospective adopters to have a

clear sense of the timing of each stage of the process and potentially build this into their decision making.

A reflective extract from an adoptive parent suggests that the lengthy process can be intrusive and require a higher standard of parenting, but with appropriate support, this can be an enjoyable process.

*"My wife and I were fortunate enough to adopt our beautiful daughter just over a year ago at the end of a year-long process. The assessment and training we underwent with [the adoption agency] was, without doubt, robust and, to some extent, intrusive. And it seemed that a higher standard of parenting is expected of you than the average family - but given the start in life faced by many looked-after children, I think that is the least they deserve." (The Western Mail, November 9, 2012).*

Once again, the need for adoption agencies to satisfy assessment requirements also raises the issue of time and its importance to the careful planning required. There is an indication of the intrusiveness of the assessment process, which implies that some aspects of what is examined are very personal (Cousins, 2003; Hicks & 2000). However, the above extract extends beyond the actual process of statutory checks and assessment and reveals that the process is ultimately reliant upon the balancing of the needs of the children and adults involved. The adoptive parent's statement also indicates they felt held to a higher standard of parenting which reaffirms the 'othering' of adoptive parenthood. The statement made about his wife, affirms that this is a married heterosexual man, the absence of his ethnicity suggests he is white. Their adopted daughter is positively described as beautiful, which counters other negative descriptions of prospective adoptive children as challenging and hard to place (Kaniuk et al., 2004).

*"The adoption team, who were rated as outstanding by Ofsted in a recent inspection, take time to ensure that each child is match perfectly with their adoptive families, therefore, the breakdown of placements are very low." (Goole Courier, November 9, 2012).*

Also included in the corpus were discourses, which expect adoptive parents to have on-going needs, for which support will be available until a child reaches adulthood.

*"A long-term partnership which is being heralded as the "gold standard" in adoption support, providing services for adoptive families from the first enquiry about becoming an adopter right through to the adopted child reaching adulthood." (The Western Mail, November 9, 2012).*

In the extract above the continuing support beyond universal services adds to the 'othering' of adoptive parents. However, additionally, indicates that rather than assuming a return to private family life, that adoption families retain a public identity evident in their enduring relationship with the agency that placed their child. This simultaneously extends the scope of adoption agencies beyond recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters. Although less explicit the term 'Gold Standard' suggest there is competition or comparison between agencies to attract prospective adoptive families.

The corpus is predominantly mindful that the aim of converging people and policies is to create adoptive families. Although the discourses used within the campaigns are directed at prospective adopters, there are occasions when we are reminded of the voice and agency of prospective adoptive children.

*"We did worry that the kids might not love us in return. But very early on, two of the children said to us: "We've been thinking we'd like to start calling you mummy and daddy right now. Is that alright?" We had been accepted. Joy swept through us." (The Star (Sheffield), November 9, 2012).*

The above extract from an adoptive parent includes emotional discourses, which revealed their own need for love and acceptance. It indicates the limitation of legislation and policy which determine the legal basis that creates adoptive families (Pustilnik, 2002). In doing so, it highlights the capacity of adults and children to find their own sense of

belonging to one another that arguably has greater meaning. Finally, the extract above indicates the subjective agency of the children to have some choice in who they accept as their adoptive parents.

Successful adoption policies are evident in the creation of families within which both the needs of children and adults are met. However, what is striking amongst the rhetoric of the complex needs of adopted children is their resilience, to not only adapt to loss but to excel and bring joy.

*"She brings me absolute happiness. She has just blended in. It's so amazing to see her blossom after she first lost her birth family and then her foster family. Now she has in me her 'forever mummy' ' and she really has excelled." (Sunday Life, November 10, 2013).*

The above article is a reminder of the enormous task required of adopted children to 'blend into' their new families. The government foster to adopt scheme hopes to limit the number of moves that children experience, to reduce the sense of loss they have and the identities of belonging they have to recreate. It is a positive account of resilience that will likely encourage prospective adopters to feel hopeful of a positive and rewarding outcome.

Within the corpus, Wendy Keidan, Director of British Association of Adoption and Fostering in Cymru, challenged policymakers, adoption agencies and prospective adopters through situating adoption as a chosen route to parenthood.

*"Adoption needs to be repositioned as a positive life choice, as opposed to a last chance saloon, for those keen to start or complete a family." (The Western Mail, Wales, November 4, 2013).*

In the above extract, Keidan argues adoption is seen as a 'last chance saloon' for those who want to start or complete their family. This suggests a renegotiation of the prominent pronatalist position to creating a family by biological means. However, as we have seen the rhetoric within

the NAW corpus has been divergent and at times relied heavily on emotive pronatalist narratives. She also highlights the choice of adoption not only for those who are yet to be parents but those who want to complete a family suggesting the potential for a broader rhetoric on blended families.

The repositioning of adoption as a choice, suggests an enduring view of adoption being a decision reached because of a lack of choice of routes to parenthood. It extends adoption as a means, not only of achieving parenthood but also of complementing families. This extended inclusion of adoption, repositioned as a positive choice in the construction of British families, creates the potential for an amendment to discourses which 'other' adoption. However, this NAW study was limited by the absence of prospective adopter's experiences beyond the limits of NAW campaign rhetoric. Thus, the aim of the phenomenological study was to understand prospective adopters by examining how their experiences and analyse how they relate to the NAW campaign discourses used to construct them.

#### **5.4 Chapter summary**

This study examined some critical insights into the construction of discourses within British national adoption week campaigns. I argued that evaluating the discourses used to construct prospective adoptive parenthood can contribute to the understanding of prospective adopters and the function of popular rhetoric in the recruitment process. However, I note that a focus on the NAW campaigns limits inclusion of broader discourses from prospective adoptive parents', prospective adoptive relatives, birth families and children. The discourses from parental figures within the corpus were limited to those who had already adopted a child illuminating reflective experiences. This imbalance of retrospective voices contributing to the construction of prospective adoptive parents is also discussed in Chapter three. However, I recognise this is in part because attempts to recruit prospective adopters as participants have yielded poor response rates (Wallis, 2006; Ward, 2011). In addition, our understanding of prospective adopters is limited because of the dearth of research in this

area, and I have argued, further constrained by rhetoric that may not match experience.

Crucial to this debate is the predominant assertion of the existence of myths, which adoption agencies claim serve to prohibit potential adopters from coming forward. Research supports the claims that myths, which perpetuate adoptive parenting as second best to biological parenthood, prevent or delay people from making that choice (Demick, 2007). However, examination of the NAW corpus reflects that adoptive parenthood as a choice is positioned as a means of achieving parenthood after a biological route has failed. This was particularly evident in the embodied emotional discourses relating to the unmet need that characterises biological motherhood and were absent for fathers (Locke, 2010). These discourses resonate with the historical development of adoption being a route to motherhood for couples who are infertile (Cudmore, 2005; Fontenot, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2009). Our understanding of adoptive fatherhood is developing, although this is a positive development, much of this research is anchored to gendered and sexuality discourses (Brown et al., 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011; Hicks, 2005, 2006; Wood, 2015).

In considering the social construction of adoption, it is essential that the construction and subsequent dissemination of knowledge are reflective of its origins and current context. As such I argue that the construct of what is a good enough adoptive parent needs further exploration (Noy-Sharav, 2002). As my analysis shows, who is deemed a suitable prospective adopter can vary and the power of this decision lies buried among other powers held by the institution (adoption agency and social workers) (Foucault, 1989). This suggests a dissociation between legal and policy parameters of the characteristics that define the suitable adopter, dominant ideologies that continue to underpin professional practice and popular perceptions based on cultural myths, which are, unknowingly perpetuated (Foucault, 1989). However, I remain mindful of the limitations of my data sample and the constraints prevalent during the

NAW campaign, which may differ from other modes of socio-political rhetoric.

Within the corpus, Wendy Keidan, Director of British Association of Adoption and Fostering in Cymru, spoke of the need to reposition adoption as a positive life choice. I suggest that the social construction of language is vital if adoption agencies are to contribute to a repositioning of contemporary British adoption. The development and understanding of adoption are entwined with its historical time and place (Hicks, 2005; Walker, 2009). Some societies have an expectation that children will at times, be cared for away, from their biological parents (Rasmussen, 2009). These and other anthropological insights may assist in considering how best to achieve this complex cultural and political repositioning (Warren, 2005). Cousins (2003) remind us that adoption is an ever-changing phenomenon but that it is always about the lives of people. As such, a postmodern, pluralistic examination of the subjective experience of prospective adopters, amid political, legal and social constructions is essential if they are to contribute to this shift-change.

This chapter has used a social constructionist based analysis of the NAW newspaper campaigns, of 2012 and 2013 to explore the discursive construction of prospective adoptive parenthood. In doing so, it highlights some critical issues regarding the ambiguity of who might be a suitable prospective adoptive parent. I have challenged the assumption that the British public inappropriately perpetuates myths, which prevent them from making further progress to adopt. These myths are part of the existing repertoires emerging from ideologies from which the construction and idealisation of certain types of family are built. The NAW campaign discourses reflect that the information available to the public limits their agency to the extent of only 'opting in' for an assessment. In addition, the analysis reflects the necessity to view adoption in its relative context and its changing function in contemporary Britain. Adoption is a prominent issue within the UK, but the children it affects are a small percentage of children for whom the state has parental responsibility (Jones, 2003). This alongside the queries of the permeability of permanence (Beckett,



Pinchen, & Mckeigue, 2013; Jones, 2003) provides interesting opportunities for future research. The complexity of this debate is compounded by established cultural views of family, amid the dominance of neoliberal political and organisational rhetoric. Notably, the voices of children, their birth and prospective adoptive relatives are largely absent. I assert that if contemporary adoption is to be successfully repositioned that all voices need to be heard and their experiences understood.

## Chapter Six - Traversing Dichotomies

*"One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself – or that the world is at the heart of our flesh. In any case, once a body-world relationship is recognised, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside." (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 136)*

The discussion that unfolds across the next three chapters demonstrates how participants' experience of prospective adoptive parenthood is both complex and enduring. Using phenomenological analysis enables us to explore their contemplative experience amid their simultaneously, changing and continuing sense of self. The theme 'traversing dichotomies' illuminates how the binary concepts of want, choice, and readiness to adopt, intertwine (Figure 6.1). Examining participants' readiness to apply for assessment provides insight into their perceived expectations of adopters and of those who assess them. Additionally, readiness interrelates with what it means for participants to want to, or not want to, adopt a child, which reveals multifaceted negotiations. Furthermore, in their exploration of routes to parenthood, participants identified what routes to parenthood they wanted to, or could pursue. Although, all those who participated wanted the experience of parenting a child, some preferred adoption as their route to parenthood. Such positioning, particularly for heterosexual adults, is contrary to dominant pronatalist discourses that construct biological routes to parenthood as more desirable than adoption. This is evident when participants negotiate socially imposed dichotomies of choice, as they make sense of their own and, in some cases their partner's conflicting, desires.

Figure 6.1 Theme one: Traversing dichotomies



## 6.1 Wanted and Not Wanted

Unsurprisingly, all participants wanted the parental experience of sharing their lives with a child. However, this was subject to much contemplation and not always anchored to a desire to substitute having a biologically related child. Across the participant group, several routes to parenthood were explored which also included contemplating never having the parental experience they desired. Their experiences offer insights into the complex thoughts and emotions of those who desire to parent a biological child or to adopt or both. Thus, some participants' desire for a biological child may or may not influence their desire or reasons for adopting. These insights extend knowledge from previous studies that have explored routes to parenthood after the arrival of a child be that through birth or adoption (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2013). Notably, some participants only wanted to become a parent via adoption. Although some who situated their view of themselves in the world in relation to their sexuality, others did not. The experience of participants whose sexuality is not presented as a factor in their desire to prioritise a route to parenthood by adoption challenges pronatalist expectations, and adds to the knowledge produced in other studies such as Goldberg et al. (2009), discussed in Chapter three.

### **6.1.1 Wanting/not wanting a biologically related child**

Contrary to the stereotypical supposition discussed in Chapter five, that women yearn for the embodied experience of pregnancy, several participants shared that they did not want to be pregnant. Some of the women in this study report they did not want or need to have the embodied experience of pregnancy and preferred adoption as a route to motherhood. Admittedly, the number of women who made these assertions is few. However, the intricacies of their experiences are important, if we are to develop a comprehensive view of who could be an adoptive parent. Their shared experiences contest the implicit homogeneity of previous research from Goldberg et al., (2009), which suggests heterosexual women are less expansive on their potential routes to motherhood than lesbian women are.

In the extract below we begin to explore some of Ann's experiences. Ann was interviewed by telephone as a sole participant she is engaged to Iain and shares how she wants to achieve motherhood but has never wanted to experience pregnancy.

Ann: "I never wanted, I don't want to be pregnant (small laugh) and I don't want to give birth so I guess I always ruled out being a parent, which is a shame because I did want to have a large family and be a parent I just kind of always hoped I could skip past all that stuff and just be handed a child really." (Lines: 95-99).

Examining Ann's experience as a heterosexual woman, who wants to become a mother without experiencing pregnancy, transcends pronatalist assertions. Sadly, there is a paucity of research on this topic, although some studies have explored the experiences of lesbian women who become adoptive parents (Goldberg et al., 2009). This issue highlights the complexity of women's bodies and the negotiations they have to navigate which constrain their corporeality amid changing social expectations (Doyle, 2011). In her post-structuralist examination of maternal subjectivity, (Hollway, 2001) highlights the constraints of

dominant discourses of motherhood which fail to capture other subjective maternal experiences. As we see below, for Ann an experience of motherhood that is acceptable to her is one achieved via adoption. However, her capacity to share and explore this desire with others is constrained by her expectation of their dominant pronatalist discourses (Brown & Ferree, 2005; Hollway, 2010). In the following extract, Ann expresses concern that if she told people she did not want to be pregnant, they would think something was wrong with her.

Ann: "It just makes it seem like a more (.) acceptable choice, that I'm, that I want to make. I always felt like, (.) people would say to me well, why don't you want to have your own baby, what's wrong with you, you know, surely you know everyone should have that motherly instinct and should want to carry a baby and it's just, for lots of reasons, it's just never really appealed to me." (Lines: 65-69).

Wanting to become a mother via adoption is more acceptable to Ann, than experiencing a biological route. However, although she has always felt this to be the case, her standpoint has led others to question why she does not want to have her own baby. With an absence of social repertoires to draw on, it is arguably more difficult for heterosexual women to talk about wanting to become a mother without experiencing pregnancy. This is evident as Ann, states there are many reasons why she finds adoption more acceptable, but she does not explain what they are. She returns to the explanation that for her being an adoptive mother is more appealing. Indeed, critical exploration of the maternal instinct remains the province of feminist writers, which reflects how this complex aspect of womanhood is 'other' to the generalised simplicity of pronatalism (Hollway, 2010; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2015; Parry, 2005). In describing the challenges she experienced, Ann was positioned as an objectified self in the perceptions of others via the use of the term 'you' (Meissner, 2008). Thus, in relaying this experience, she was viewing herself as others saw her rather than recounting the experiencing from her subjective self. This further demonstrates that Ann is accepting of her view of herself as a

future mother; she is not asking why 'I' do not want to be pregnant. She knows and understands herself, but does not share that knowledge with others in her life.

Ann's experience challenges evolutionary assumptions of motherhood that pervades Western society (Falk, 2004; Lesnik-Oberstein, 2015; Meins et al., 2003; Shields & Shields, 1983). In doing so, it brings into question the expectation that prospective adopters must exhaust biological routes to parenthood before they adopt a child. Challenging the evolutionary expectations of motherhood, highlight the complex relationship between pregnancy and maternal instinct. The evolutionary concept of maternal instinct underpins pronatalist views of women and motherhood (Araneda, Santelices, & Farkas, 2010; Martucci, 2012). This concept becomes increasingly problematic when we consider the implications for the social worker's assessment of prospective adopters. For prospective adopters, and in particular, heterosexual prospective adopters, a lack of an evolutionary desire to procreate could present a challenge to an assessment of their desire to parent.

Notably, Ann was not alone in her experiences, another participant who was given the pseudonym Charvi also had a long-term preference to adopt rather than give birth to a child. Charvi participated in an individual face-to-face interview at her home. To provide some context to her position, Charvi explained that she was born in Britain to a family of Indian origin. She explains that during childhood family holidays in India, she saw many abandoned children leading her to want to give a home to a child in need. In her interview, she situates these experiences as a contributory factor in her not wanting to have a biological child and preferring to adopt as a means of becoming a mother.

Charvi: "Because I've just never seen the point of having my own children, um, I've never (.) really wanted to, I don't know why or maybe it stemmed from (.) when I was younger and seeing all those children but, (.) I've never wanted my own children (Lines: 1650-1653)

Unlike Ann, Charvi draws on earlier experiences that may have influenced her not viewing herself as someone who would become a biological mother. However, although she recognises the importance of her childhood visits to India, Charvi reaffirms that she has never wanted her own children, suggesting this is a view that transcends those experiences.

One participating lesbian couple, Fran and Carmen were interviewed together at home where they spoke about their views of contemplating becoming parents via the arrival of either a biological or adopted child. Although Carmen had always wanted to be a mother, she had never wanted to experience a pregnancy. She reveals how she had perceived herself as a prospective adopter from the age of fifteen years. Although she did not want to experience pregnancy, she was happy for Fran to do so.

Carmen: "As a gay person I knew that you know, naturally I could never have one and I, you know, it never, (.) but I do I didn't want to carry a baby, so I said well if I meet somebody who wants to have a child that would be great, if I meet someone with a child that would be great, if not I would definitely adopt."  
(Lines: 7666-7672).

Carmen: "and sometimes I wonder if I (.) had been heterosexual with a husband and kids I think I would still adopt." (Lines: 7781-7782)

It is important to note that Carmen provides multiple explanations of why she wants to become an adoptive mother. In part, Carmen positions her not wanting to have a biologically related child as entwined with her identity as a gay person. For her, being gay rules out pregnancy and in doing so, she explores the routes by which she could become a mother. However, Carmen notes that even if she had been heterosexual, she would still perceive herself to be someone who would adopt. Thus her contemplation of adoptive motherhood extends beyond socially constructed categories of sexuality (Goldberg, Moyer, Weber, & Shapiro, 2013; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007; Wood, 2015). These include wanting to have a female partner who already has a child or to meet someone who

will want to experience pregnancy. Carmen does not impose any hierarchy on how she might become a mother, as she expects any opportunity for motherhood to be 'great', as she comments below there are many unwanted children in the world.

Carmen: "It makes me really sad to know that there's so many (.) unwanted kids in the world and you know so (.) adoption has never been a foreign thing or a scary thing it's something people should do (laughs)... it shouldn't be a taboo, I mean it seems like it's less of a taboo now than it used to be." (Lines: 7784-7792).

In addition, Carmen reveals a further motivation for wanting to be an adoptive parent, which would provide an adopted family for children living outside of families. Like Ann and Charvi, Carmen asserts that adoption should not be feared or 'othered' by viewing it as foreign to a natural parental experience. Indeed, she goes further to assert that adults should want to adopt. In this section, we have begun to see the collation of individual experiences that begin to offer a view of the world where we construct adoption as socially acceptable be it as a preferred or equal route to parenthood.

### ***6.1.2 Pragmatic negotiations***

A practical approach to achieving parenthood is next explored by exploring some of the pragmatic decision-making processes undertaken by participants. When Carmen met Fran, they began to explore the options available to them as they contemplated shared parenthood.

Carmen: "When I met Fran and we, our relationship started getting serious, and there was definitely (.) we talked about the different options." (Lines: 7707-7709)

Fran: "But we both said, we want children but neither of us wants to actually carry a child, and I think we both in our heads we're thinking oh well maybe one day I'll meet someone who will carry a child or who literally have one already, that would be convenient (laughs)



um, but yeah, that didn't happen." (Lines: 7711-7716).

In the extract above, Carmen explains how her discussions with Fran about the potential for a child to be included in their lives coincided with their relationship becoming more serious. Thus, for them, there was a determination about the expected longevity of their relationship as a premise of whether they could become parents. Similar to Carmen, Fran explains she also did not want to experience pregnancy; she reflects that both she and Carmen had thought their route to motherhood might be achieved by meeting a gay woman who did want to become pregnant. Their experiences further disrupt perceptions that anchor pregnancy to pronatalist heterosexuality and reveal the complexity of women realising their agency to choose what they want (Legrand, 2007).

I reflect that this repertoire is not available to heterosexual women, leading people like Ann and Charvi to have different experiences of not using their potential fertility. Arguably, this 'othering' can occur even in studies which intend to focus and accentuate the value of gay and lesbian adults as adoptive parents. This is unsurprising when the actualisation of anyone becoming an adoptive parent is situated in a social and legal landscape. As such, it required a change in the law to permit gay and lesbian adults to want to be an adoptive parent, could be a social reality (Brown & Cocker, 2008; Cocker & Brown, 2010; Goldberg et al., 2009; Goldberg, Moyer, Weber & Shapiro, 2013; Hicks, 2000, 2005, 2006). Regardless of sexuality, the prominence of pronatalism remains a lens to explore why people want to adopt. As discussed in Chapter three, Goldberg et al., (2009) considered both heterosexual and homosexual couples in relation to their experiences of infertility leading to their being approved as adoptive parents. Although such research provides useful insights into the similarities and differences of prospective adopter experiences through an 'infertility' lens, the focus arguably constrains understanding of their experience. Thus, their findings conclude that all their heterosexual couples had always intended to try to conceive a child. Conversely, participants in this current study were not recruited within the

scope of 'infertility', which has arguably created space for other experiences to be shared.

Reaffirming that the language we adopt as researchers are crucial to the knowledge we produce and the subsequent concepts that can place boundaries on our examination of experience. This is true, both in relation to research but also to the application of that knowledge into social work practice. Therefore, we must always be critically aware that our role as researchers could have unintended consequences for prospective adopters experience and affect the constitution or not of the families they want (Schumm, 2012). The inductive methodological design in this study, allowed Fran and Carmen to explore various contemplations of how they wanted to become parents.

Fran: "If I'd come along and said I want to get pregnant and I want to get donor sperm and go down that route, you would have supported that."

Carmen: "Oh yeah."

Fran: "Wouldn't you?"

Carmen: "Yeah."

(Lines: 7756-7760).

Carmen and Fran's exploration of this issue reveals that within their relationship creating a biologically related child could involve a sperm donor. Their deliberations are similar to other women in same-sex relationships who explore various biological and adoptive routes (Jennings et al., 2014) underpinned by a pragmatic approach as they negotiate multiple routes to parenthood. During the interview, Fran shared her subjective and complex experience of sexuality and desire for motherhood. She explains how she had previously been part of a heterosexual couple and it had taken many years to 'come out' about her sexuality.

Fran: "Hmm, I think it was actually first in this relationship and it (.) with us it's right from the start it felt like the only route down the, a route we wanted to follow. But

(.) before that I don't think I'd ever really considered it, and (.) it took me ages to 'come out' and part of that I (.) wanted to have children at least I think, I mean , (.) yeah, (.) it wasn't just that but I was thinking, do I really want to be straight so that I can have a husband and have children (.) but then actually do I want to carry children, so I had complicated ideas about it anyway."(Lines: 7800-7807)

In the above extract, Fran explains that the concept of becoming a mother via adoption occurred in her relationship with Carmen. For Fran becoming an adoptive mother with Carmen seemed like the only route for them, but this presents as a model of clarity rather than limitation for her. Indeed, her experience of wanting to be a mother was constrained when she was in a heterosexual relationship. This is in terms of both her sexuality and positioning of her as a mother in relation to a prospective adoptive child. There is factualness, in the communication between the couple, which centres the decision making of what they want between them. This adds support to Goldberg et al. (2009), view of lesbian women having more choice in their contemplations of achieving motherhood. Although, I would argue that this has enabled societal repertoires as discussed in Chapter three, in which legislative changes are promoting the acceptance of prospective homosexual adopters that serve to contest pronatalist expectations.

Importantly, not all couples were able to succeed in mediating the difference in their preferred route to parenthood. Other heterosexual participants also spoke of a disparity with their partners, who were mostly but not always, men.

Ramneet: "As I familiarised myself with it more and more um I started speaking to my mum about it more and more, it was, it was okay I didn't have to be married so upon those, now I've come to terms that I wouldn't mind being a single parent and adopting." (Lines: 219-222)

Ramneet: "I spoke to my ex-partner about it, well we broke up quite recently, AND he was, his idea was always no, and that was a really big put off for me, [um] so it

was just that I want my own kids and would never adopt." (Lines: 303-308)

In her telephone interview, Ramneet explains that her passion for wanting to adopt a child over giving birth was an irreconcilable difference in her last relationship. This resulted in the ending of that relationship which reduced Ramneet achieving adoption as part of a parental couple and left her to contemplate becoming a single prospective adoptive parent. This raised the need for her to examine her mother's views as to whether their Indian family would accept Ramneet is becoming an unmarried single adoptive mother. Importantly, for Ramneet, her desire to want to become an adoptive mother was integral to the relationship she sought to achieve with an adult partner to the extent that she was 'put off' by a man who was opposed to adopting (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007). Furthermore, she was willing to challenge previously accepted norms within her extended family to become a single adoptive mother. Ramneet's capacity to address a catalogue of challenges to her desire for adoptive motherhood highlights how far we are from experiencing adoption as a socially acceptable, unmediated, choice.

This subsection has explored participants' experiences of wanting to adopt, and some of the pragmatic negotiations that have ensued within their relationships as the decisions they take for themselves are always in relation to others. It presents evidence of pronatalist discourses highlighting expectations of both heterosexual and lesbian women to contemplate having a biological child. The following section explores the experiences of prospective adopters who want to adopt a child to complete their perceived family.

### ***6.1.3 Wanting to adopt a child to complete a family***

Several participants viewed adoption as a means of creating the family they perceived themselves as parenting, despite already having a biological child. The next section in this chapter examines the experiences of James and Elizabeth who want to adopt a child to complete their shared

view of the family they always imagined themselves having. In their interview, they shared that their 11-year-old son Noah was born with complex special needs that required a high level of parenting. Both described the unwavering love they had for Noah whose needs were a result of the combination of his parents' genes. However, James explained they would not be able to cope with another child with high-level needs. Further enquiries with a genetic counsellor led Elizabeth and James to realise that it was likely that any biological child of theirs would have high-level needs. Their contemplations of adoption arose from wanting another child to complete their family; Elizabeth spoke of how she envisaged them as a family of four for James it was, in part, wanting the experience of parenting a neuro-typical child.

Elizabeth: "BUT, we still wanted more children so adoption is the obvious um, consideration then, so we thought we would look at that and um, we started the process and went through the training." (Lines: 336-339)

James: "WELL, for me it's never really gone away, I have always wanted (clears throat) another child, erm, possibly more than one more child." (Lines: 492-493)

James: "...to bring up a child that is neuro-typical, that er doesn't have autism, because although Noah is absolutely amazing, he's a wonderful child and we love him to bits, it is very challenging and I do feel like I've missed out a lot on the developmental stages that you would have with a neuro-typical child and I would love to have those experiences as well and get the sort of feedback from a neuro-typical child that (.) that (.) a neuro-typical child is able to give which an autistic child is not able to give [yeah], so I would quite like those experiences. (Lines: 502-509).

Elizabeth couched her experience in terms of 'we' thus including her husband James in the discussion. However, James recognised his own subjectivity of wanting to have another child, if not more than one more child. This absence of parental experience emerges for James in the form of deeply felt loss, which extends our understanding of loss for prospective adopters beyond those who experience infertility (Cudmore, 2005). As with other participants James' desire to experience what he perceives as

his potential parental self, is longstanding. His contemplations of a parental experience with a neuro-typical child highlight the fact that biological parenthood is not a homogenous experience (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011). Equally, his views reflect the potential value adopted children bring to the lives of those who parent them. However, Elizabeth's experience of the prospective adoption process that facilitated 'choice' of an adopted child was distressing.

Elizabeth: "It's quite distressing as well as you have these forms where you have to tick out, what kind of child would you accept and what you won't and I felt that so restrict, so horrible, like so would you adopt a child with this kind of disability or would you consider or not and I found that horrible, I felt like I was rejecting a child and I, I found that really hard. They don't want children particularly with autism and that because they don't interact and they're not likely to have the kind of relationship that, so that was quite upsetting [mm] to know that (.) you know, children like your child are less likely to be adopted." (Lines: 839-852).

Interestingly, Elizabeth expressed the feelings of rejection she experienced when she was asked by an adoption social worker to select the type of child she would like to adopt and the realisation that children like her own son would be unwanted (Lightburn, 1995; Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2005). This problematising of the experience of parenting a disabled child created internalised conflict with loving their son but recognising the limitations of this experience for them and him. As discussed in Chapter three, Kingston (2007) notes the distinct experience of mothering a child with a disability, in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century western society that remains unsupportive and leaves families feeling isolated and marginalised. Thus, although Elizabeth knows the value that Noah contributes to her life, she found herself rejecting a child with similar needs, and reflected that other prospective adopters were likely to reject a child with similar needs to her son. Elizabeth's experience exemplifies the discourses of disabled children being more difficult to adopt as discussed in Chapter five and the limited research available that explores who is likely to adopt a child with disabilities (Lightburn, 1995; Wind, Brooks & Barth, 2005).

Exploration of the theme 'wanting' and 'not wanting' has revealed the complexities of what prospective adopters desire and the intricacies of how that is socially positioned along the lines of gender, sexuality and fertility. In addition, the micro experiences of participants provide insight into how they negotiate what they want within their relationships and in conjunction with their own self. What participants want or do not want in relation to routes to parenthood are not always fixed and subject to change over time. Importantly is the perception of what choice they have and how they negotiate that choice. The following subtheme presents an examination of prospective adopters' experiences of traversing perceived or absence of choice.

## **6.2 Choice and No Choice**

Previous adoption literature situates the subject of choice primarily in relation to the routes to parenthood available to infertile couples. While anchored to a pronatalist view of the world, adoption is seen as a less attractive choice than biological routes to parenthood (van Balen, & Visser, 2005; Hoffenaar, van Balen, & Hermanns, 2010; van Balen, Verdurmen, & Ketting, 1997). This accepted truth influences the way in which knowledge and subsequent assessments of prospective adopters occur, serving, in part, to impose a pronatalist lens across their view of the world. It is, therefore, important to interrogate the pronatalist repertoires that affect how prospective adoptive parents are constructed and how this influences their experience. Although I am using the term parents, it is fair to say that the literature is more focused on motherhood and often the lens used to explore this issue has concentrated on infertility (Daly, 1988; Sandelowski, Harris & Holditch-Davis, 1989, Weinstein, 2013) lesbian women (Ryan & Whitlock, 2007) and gay men (Gianino, 2008). However, as already demonstrated in Chapters three and five, these dominant narratives should not diminish the impact that childlessness can have on men who wish to become fathers (Wheeler, 2013).

### **6.2.1 Negotiating choice**

As stated in Chapter three, adoption research frequently positions choosing adoption for social reasons as altruistic when compared to meeting a biological desire to become a parent (March & Miall, 2013; Miall, 1987). However, contemplation of personal choice cannot be examined without situating it within neoliberal discourses that serve to position the parental choices available to prospective adopters (Yarwood & Locke, 2016). Chapter five evidenced how discourses are utilised to gender motivations for choice, placing a focus on women's fertility and leaving men's view largely unexamined. Although the NAW campaign promoted an inclusive rhetoric to encourage would-be adopters to contact adoption agencies, the process of approval limits the propensity for choice. To understand prospective adoptive parents' experience of choice, this section examined participants shared experiences of choice in relation to negotiating biological and adoptive routes to motherhood. Interestingly, the combined issues of gendered expectations and altruistic choice, or lack of choice arose for several participants. Their experiences offer insights into the changeable and complex choices that some participants negotiated.

To illuminate the complexity of choice, I will first examine Rachel's exploration of her potential routes to parenthood. Rachel was a sole participant whom I interviewed by telephone. Rachel is aged 33years old, and works as a doctor in obstetrics and gynaecology; she explained that she understood that the time available for her to become pregnant was limited. She describes herself as being 'single' for the past few years, which has led her to contemplate routes to parenthood other than those within a heterosexual relationship.

Rachel: "So at the moment I'm thinking either about getting pregnant with some donor sperm which I think would be in some ways easier in terms of raising the child (.) but, then I'm also thinking about adoption as an alternative to that as a way into kind of parenthood. I think I suppose, (..) I don't know I think in a way adoption is a kind of better choice or a less selfish



choice umm because there are children who (.) need parenting and who don't have parents, and in a way, it does seem quite, (..) umm, (.) quite a selfish decision to bring another one into the world (.) but then the other thing that I'm sort of balancing is that I am a doctor and I am quite (.) busy." (Lines: 3489-3500)

Rachel identifies both the use of donor sperm and adoption as 'alternative' ways of achieving parenthood. During her interview, Rachel perceived a sperm donation as an easier way to raise a child. Although she does not elaborate, by the very nature of sperm donation, her route to motherhood would be without the presence of a father. However, the role of the father via sperm donation is not fixed; as the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, 2008 recognises the tension between the rights of single motherhood amid socio-political human rights of fathers and children. In her narrative, Rachel went on to examine her view of herself and her desire for motherhood within the broader context of biological routes versus adoption (Cowdery, 2005). Pronatalist discourses that perpetuate motherhood are evident in Rachel's narrative (Laufer-Ukeles, 2014); thus, she imagines her choices as a binary between the perceived selfishness of choosing an alternative biological route as opposed to the more altruistic choice of adoption.

Furthermore, Rachel negotiates how her current life as a 'busy, single, doctor', intertwine with the limited discourses available to her. In doing so, she experiences uncertainty compounded by the temporality of choices available to her, which could ultimately lead to an absence of choice. The following extract demonstrates Rachel's exploration of the implications of time and being a single woman may have on her choice of motherhood.

Rachel: "If I want to have a baby myself it will have to be in the next probably four years, um (.) and whereas I could start thinking about adoption after that four years, if I find that I haven't had a child then I have a little bit more time to play with especially if I, you know, especially if I end up adopting (.) a sort of (.) ah an older child I think that babies are usually given to couples, is my understanding so (.) um I suppose

I've got a bit more of a time option with adoption."  
(Lines: 3554-3559)

Notably, most of the participants did not reveal their age to me, and as I did not collect that data, I have no knowledge of how old they are. However, age is pertinent to Rachel as she uses this measure to contemplate the temporality of her anticipated fertility, thereby traversing the potentiality of her 'mother' and 'non-mother' subjectivity (Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Letherby, 1999). Evident in the above extract is that time also impacts on the mothering experience that Rachel anticipates might be available to her. She views adoption as a route that extends the timescale by which she can become a parent, but considers that single adoptive parents would be less likely to be able to adopt a baby. Implicit in her statements is the expectation that we create families when a heterosexual couple have, or acquire a baby. As a single woman, she views mothering a baby as potentially unavailable to her by either biology or adoption. Interestingly, although she does not position her future self as an older mother (Locke & Budds, 2013); she does consider becoming a mother to an older adopted child.

The changeable temporalities and positioning of 'self' are also evident in Clara's experience of contemplating becoming an adoptive parent both as a means of becoming a mother and for altruistic reasons. Like other participants, Clara had not wanted to experience pregnancy, but her then future husband did not want to adopt. After a period of infertility, Clara twice became pregnant and subsequently gave birth to two children. Motherhood has been a joyful experience for her although, her relationship with her husband ended. Clara has two sons aged 10 and 11 years and is again contemplating adoption. However, she is now negotiating the potential for her to become an adoptive mother with her sons, one of whom wants to adopt and the other who does not.

Clara: "because there are two different ways really aren't there. You have people who (.) think about adoption to have a family and people who think about adoption to (.) give a home to a child and I think I'm in that (.)

camp now. I would have been in that camp before".  
(Lines: 3927-3930).

For Clara, it is a matter of timing, believing that when her younger son is older, he may be more accepting of adoption. She explains how her perceptions of herself as a prospective mother have changed over time. Initially, when she may have adopted because of infertility, she perceived a different claiming of her adopted child, whereas now she was contemplating adopting an older child. Clara described this dichotomy as two different camps, perceiving herself as moving from one to the other (Coelho & Figueiredo, 2003; McNamee, 2010).

The personal choices of many participants can be examined through Rachel and Clara's experiences. They highlight the lack of hierarchy in mediating choice of biological and adoptive motherhood. Thus, adoption is not dichotomously opposed to a biological route to parenthood but an alternative, personally meaningful choice, albeit deliberated against a landscape of temporal and social constraints. In doing so, participants who navigate matters of prospective adoptive parenthood evidenced how they make meaning in a post-dichotomous self (Beech & Cairns, 2001). These perceptions are important if those assessing prospective adopters are to make sense of the views prospective adopters form based on their experiences. In the following subsection, I discuss experiences of adoption as a positive choice and include extracts from interviews with two couples who chose not to pursue IVF as a means of achieving parenthood. The discussion draws on several aspects of what is construed as a positive choice in adoption; these include a positive affirmation of prospective adopter and potential adopted child.

### **6.2.2 *Choosing/Not Choosing biological intervention***

Several participants shared, what was for many, an emotional experience of being unable to conceive or have a successful pregnancy. However, although, several participants would have preferred a biological child, most did not want to undergo in vitro fertilisation (IVF). One couple,

Sarah and John, made the decision to harvest eggs after Sarah was told that her cancer treatment would likely lead to infertility. Unfortunately, the eggs did not survive the freezing procedure. Thus, although they wanted a child of their own, this was no longer a choice they had available to them, which led to them to contemplate adoption. I interviewed them together at their home, the extract below focuses on John's shared experience. Notably, research that explores heterosexual male experiences of infertility is sparse (Daly, 1988; Goldberg et al., 2009) and does not illuminate individual experience.

John: "So we're probably not going to be able to have children of our own, which I, I am, disappointed about that I (..) I often have (..) you know I, I, again in my job I see, I see millions of kids (..) trundling about the place with their (..) sort of snotty noses and temperatures and things (..) all coming ended up coming into the department at four o'clock in the morning, with (..) but, um they are sometimes really affecting and (..) I sometimes see little kids that I imagine look like (..) our kids would look, especially little girls who look a bit like Sarah and, and I think how wonderful it would be to have, you know, our daughter." (Lines: 2198-2206).

However, in this study, John expressed his sense of loss in the imaginings of a daughter who would embody Sarah's physical characteristics. This illuminates the complexity of what it means for a couple to have a child whom shares a genetic resemblance beyond a veil for social acceptance of them presenting as a genetically related family but as a means of sharing the embodiment of the partner that you love (Howat-Rodrigues, Tokumaru, de Amorim, Garcia, & Izar, 2013; Mohanty et al., 2017). This shared experience adds depth to the NAW campaign's simplistic construction of what it means to be or not be a biological father. Peter's experience also adds to our understanding of the experience of some men when contemplating routes to fatherhood. Peter explained that he and Fiona (his wife of ten years), had pursued IVF and although this had thus far been unsuccessful it was something that they were likely to repeat. However, this was not something Peter necessarily wanted for

himself, but he had decided to allow Fiona the choice of what they would do.

Peter: "At the time, I actually (..) favoured adoption, we ended up doing IVF after that, one round, but I was kind of thinking "oh maybe adoption was actually a better option." (Lines: 6089-6091).

To make sense of his preferences and the complexity of his dichotomous existence, Peter described the sharing of this experience with his wife, Fiona. He explained that he had considered adoption as a possible route to parenthood for fifteen years, before meeting his wife he had abandoned hope of becoming a parent, as Fiona had not wanted children. However, two or three years ago, Fiona changed her mind and decided she did want to have a child. After a period of being unable to conceive, the couple opted for a course of IVF, which proved unsuccessful.

Peter: "Whereas *Fiona* (..) said she didn't want a child until maybe two or three years ago (...) and who knows what that meant really but it, but it was a different kind of journey for her to come to where we are now (.) I almost feel she's only just wanted a child, a baby. To only just have wanted something and then to have it taken away from you is different from (..) getting used to the idea of not having something over a period of ten years (small laugh)." (Lines: 6333-6340).

In the above extract, Peter describes the difference in the timing of their experiences of wanting and not wanting a child. Peter explained that for him, becoming a parent was more important than how it was achieved. However, Fiona could not reject the potential to have her own biological child and wanted to undergo another round of IVF; this decision left Peter feeling that he will never become the father that he desires. Thus his own needs are in conflict with his desire to provide his wife with the patience and time she needs to pursue an opportunity for biological motherhood (Birenbaum-Carmeli & Dirnfeld, 2008; Coelho Jr. & Figueiredo, 2003).

Peter's re-positioning of his own needs was influenced by the significant impact of Fiona's recent desire in wanting to become a biological mother. He uses time as a means of making sense of his subjective reasoning, positioning Fiona's experience of acute loss alongside his own that has spent ten years living with the sense that he would not become a father.

After they were advised that they could not have a biological child, participants Malcolm and Lynne report, they readily made a shared decision not to pursue IVF. However, when they approached an adoption service, they were encouraged to consider IVF treatment before pursuing adoption. This left them feeling that their own views were not given due regard which served to highlight the continued prominence adoption agencies give to biological routes of parenthood.

Malcolm: "They put a large push on IVF, they seem to think we should consider it more and talk it through more."

Lynne: "Yeah."

Malcolm: "Ah, what we think didn't seem acceptable."

Lynne: "Yeah, yeah, we just don't like the idea of playing with nature and (.) that was just like well you know really ought to have it, give it a go and stuff like that."

(Lines: 1118-1123)

Malcolm explains how he felt pushed to give further thought and discussion to the potential impact of pursuing or not, IVF. Lynne, also felt they were expected to exhaust biological routes to parenthood before they could be assessed as adoptive parents. These experiences highlight the continued prevalence of pronatalist views experienced by some prospective adopters that are less likely to arise in other studies that often recruit participants via adoption agencies. Importantly, this study highlights the continued dominance of pronatalist discourses and its impact on the value given to the subjective knowledge of prospective adopters in determining what the right route to parenthood is for themselves. However, not all people who want to adopt are childless, and

the next subsection explores the experiences of participants who want to adopt as a means of completing their family.

### ***6.2.3 Contrasting perceptions of a positive choice***

One couple who chose not to pursue IVF found several barriers in their way that limited their choice to become adoptive parents. Malcolm and Lynne's attempts to conceive a child had been unsuccessful and medical examinations revealed that they both contributed to their infertility. They accepted this lack of biological choice and both agreed that they did not want to pursue IVF and would rather adopt a child. However, their attempts to become adoptive parents have been fraught with challenges that they have thus far been unable to overcome. Their experiences highlight an unspoken reality for many who positively choose adoption but find that those with the power to approve do not deem them as a positive choice. This forces us to examine how we construct adoptive parenthood, and how social workers determine the characteristics of compensatory parenting for people who are not parents.

One of the challenges is to consider whether people who are infertile view adoption as a lesser choice and if this can be understood as a question against their commitment to the process (Bausch, 2006). Malcolm and Lynne were confused viewing themselves as the same as any other couple on the road where they lived but having to overcome barriers to parent a child that others did not have to meet. These included aspects of their careers, the health of their parents and their experience or rather lack of with young children. This raises multiple challenges for prospective adopters and adoption agencies including those adopters can be older than biological parents are and thereby have a greater risk of age-related health needs. This highlights a further challenge for social workers undertaking assessments, on how they determine the capabilities of adults as parents in the absence of them having a child (Cousins, 2003; Noysharav, 2002). Importantly, Cassandra's experience also highlights the

perceived temporality of prospective adopters being considered as 'good enough'.

Becoming an adoptive parent was a lifelong ambition for Cassandra, and she reached a time in her adult life when she felt she was ready to adopt. She experienced strong opposition from her sister who was against any action that could promote the separation of a child from their birth mother. This counter-narrative had a huge impact on Cassandra and forced her to reflect deeply on what choices adoption facilitated and limited for all of those involved. Still committed to adoption Cassandra successfully completed her assessment as a prospective adopter; she was shown a photograph of a boy they wanted her to consider for adoption. However, she then experienced ill health, and her approval lapsed. Unable to contact her original assessor, Cassandra approached another agency and was told she would have to begin the process again. Sadly, illness prevented her from completing this second assessment. The necessity of Cassandra having to begin the assessment from the beginning reflects the fragmentation of the structure of adoption agencies. With approval being limited to an agency panel rather than giving a licence to Cassandra to be able to pursue becoming an adoptive parent with another agency. It could be argued that only issues relating to the impact of Cassandra's ill health would need to be considered rather than her having to undertake a complete assessment. Unsurprisingly, these events had an enormous impact upon Cassandra, and these will be examined in Chapter eight, where I explore how participants construct or reconstitute their anticipated future selves.

Cassandra: "Once I started to work that's when I started to really think about it seriously, and I approached a Local Authority and (.) um (.) went through the process of being um assessed I remember there was a specific form, or um or was um, and , um you know, I had the home visits and chatting to the social worker, I was referred to the child finding team and (.) um (..) and I got ill actually and went into hospital for surgery and um it just felt like it was a really long time before I was fully recovered (.) and um, um, and by that point um, my approval had lapsed um, and so I so, this was



the second time, I went to a different agency (.) and um, went through the training but I didn't actually go through all after that because I got ill again." (Lines: 6458-6467).

Similarly, Sandra and William were also approved as adoptive parents but were unable to adopt the child they wanted. However, despite the experience of the loss of both potential biological and adoptive children, the experiences shared by Sandra and William demonstrate the creative choice that people can make when constructing parental relationships. Sandra and William shared a complex history of their route to parenthood, which began with the experience of two miscarriages. They had considered IVF but decided that it was not a route for them. At that time, they had become foster carers but decided they wanted to adopt and were approved to do so. A foster child named Samantha came into their home, and they decided she was a child they would choose to adopt. However, Samantha had her own reasons for not wanting to be adopted. So, formal adoption never took place, but they continue to live as if they have familial bonds.

This scenario raises the issue of what constitutes a family and how families comprise both of people we choose to spend our lives with as well as those with whom we are biologically related. This flexible way of constructing familyhood expands the routes by which belonging and choice can be experienced (Giralt & Bailey, 2010). In Western society, our relationships are traditionally defined and ratified by social and legal processes. Interestingly, Sandra, William and Samantha chose to compile their own informal contract which they shared with me. The extract below reflects Sandra's explanation of how they never adopted the girl they consider to be their daughter. It also serves as a reminder of the loss that adoption can mean for children whose siblings have been adopted.

Sandra: "So we, we talked about adoption we went and did the adoption course, we were approved to adopt and then (.) this young lady came into our life at age eleven (.), and she just felt right, so we decided that (.) but she

wasn't going to be adopted she came long term, so we, we decided then actually this young person fills (.) the gap in our life (.) and she felt like that as well, that she was happy (.) um (.) so we decided not to adopt we couldn't adopt Samantha because she was eleven years old, she was about 12 or 13 then, and we decided this (.) and she said actually her younger brother had been adopted (.) although she still saw him and still, and still close but it nearly killed her that when (.) this little baby was adopted (.), and so she said no she wouldn't be adopted (.) but she felt that she was our daughter we've always treated her like that and she treats us like we're her parents so (.) that is really why (.) we didn't adopt, we would have done but she doesn't want that". (Lines: 5028-5049).

William explained that as Samantha's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday approached she became anxious about her sense of belonging and expected their commitment to her as a foster child could end. To allay these fears and to evidence their commitment to belong to her, Sandra and William drew up the contract below, which was signed by the three of them.

"This is to certify that Samantha full name date of birth, will be staying with Sandra and William surname until her 26<sup>th</sup> birthday and then this contract will be up for renewal. This is a special kind of contract as it is bound by love, please sign and return if you agree to this contract."

The above discourse assists our understanding of personal and contractual constructions of our relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002) and includes the 'contextual cues' we use that create images of one another as parent and child. William, Sandra, and Samantha cemented their relationship with a written contract that reflected a collective understanding that they share a familiar bond with each other. The fact that this should be mutually agreed is crucial to the meaning that our interpersonal relationships have. Thus, the meaning is not limited to our subjective actions but is intrinsic to the view of the world that we share in relation to others (Langdridge, 2007).

So far, this chapter has examined the complex navigations that prospective adopters, who participated in the study, have undertaken in

contemplation of becoming an adoptive parent. Because there were no restrictions on what constituted a prospective adopter this study has included participants who have yet to contact an adoption agency. It is against the backdrop of these deliberations that I next examine the sub-theme – readiness, which is intrinsic to any assessment of prospective adopters.

### **6.3 Ready or Not Ready**

This chapter's final subtheme explores the issues contemplated by participants as they consider if they are ready to become an adoptive parent. In a study exploring emotional readiness to adopt, (Prochaska et al., 2005), applied the Transtheoretical model (TTM) or 'stages of change' model, which defines three main steps to becoming an adoptive parent. TTM is a model used to understand the change in health behaviours such as the cessation of smoking; although there is variation in the empirical support, it receives (Robinson, 2012). Importantly, the analysis of the prospective adopters presents multiple challenges implicit to any linear stages of change model, firstly in that their processes of contemplation are cyclical and diverse. Therefore, although Prochaska et al. (2005) model (see Table. 3.1) includes personal insights from participants suggests in their self-re-evaluation; the model is limited to an assumption of moving from one stage of self to another. Although for some participants, this may be accurate, it is not a universal experience, which presents a challenge to simplistic dichotomies of readiness. In doing so, the evidence in this section expands our understanding of the intricacies of (pre) contemplation, for those thinking about adopting a child.

Conceptualising readiness can include many issues such as practicalities, financial status, home preparedness, the stability of prospective adopter's relationship and their decisions regarding having other children. In Chapter five, I examined how practical themes of readiness underpinned some NAW discourses, which encouraged people to identify as prospective adopters. However, differentiating between 'pre-contemplative' and 'contemplative' could impose another dichotomy on

prospective adopters that does not reflect the complexity of their deliberations.

Notably, reflective examination of a linear staged model of contemplation led me to restructure this chapter. An original draft firstly presented the 'wanting/not wanted' dichotomy and followed by the 'choice/no choice' subtheme, leading to a focus on the topic of readiness. However, upon reflection, I realised that in doing so I was also coercing participant experiences into a linear construct. Therefore, I re-examined the influence of linear staged discourses on my own analysis. This reflective process led me to alter the structure of the chapter, thus situating a critique of readiness, which facilitates a more critical discussion of this issue (Finlay, 2002; Finlay, 2006).

This chapter has already provided examples of where couples were negotiating their readiness to adopt, and we have seen that for some such as Ann and Charvi, that this is an on-going negotiation with their partners, whereas others such as Rachel and Ramneet must contemplate their capacity to become single adoptive parents. For Elizabeth, James and Clara this related to when the timing was right for their children to have an adopted child included in their family. Those who participated in this study whether single or coupled shared experiences of negotiating their readiness to adopt. This was not always a straightforward process. Susan and Colin have been in a relationship for ten years, during their joint interview there was some disagreement about if they had been or were currently ready to adopt a child. This vacillation occurred despite them both explaining that they wanted to share their lives with a child. In addition, they explained how they had previously tried to conceive a child. Sadly, they experienced several miscarriages, but these events imply that they had at one time, considered themselves ready to become biological parents.

This delay in approaching an adoption agency suggests that they experienced a difference in the state of readiness to become a biological as opposed to an adoptive parent. Previous research on people choosing

adoption because of infertility explored concerns about the propensity of an adoptive couple conceiving a child post-adoption (Weinstein, 2013). The underpinning view of this concern assumes that if a couple could have a successful pregnancy, the adopted child could be rejected. As previously discussed in Chapter three, such views situate parenting an adopted child as less desirable than a biologically related one.

In this section, the experiences of three couples, Colin, and Sue; Sarah and John; Malcolm and Lynne are used to expand on the issues traversed by those who participated in this study. After experiencing multiple miscarriages, Colin and Sue had for many years, considered both fostering and adoption as a means of achieving parenthood. Although Colin thought they were ready to begin the approval process, Sue thought they had other tasks to complete first, such as her becoming established in her new job, which would enable them to buy their own home. Colin felt he would know, or at least be able to guide Sue into deciding when she is ready.

Colin: "Yeah or I will push Sue into it and point out when it's ready when she's ready."

Sue: "Yeah." (Laughing)

Colin: "Or when she thinks she's not ready and not completely ready that she actually is because things take a little bit longer than you expect them to because things take a little bit longer than you expect them to. The process on TV seemed to happen very quick, but that's a fix I'm sure."

Sue: "No, I think they've made efforts to make it deliberately quick now so that people don't get put off, so that people, you know, are encouraged."

(Lines: 3148-3158).

Notably changeable environmental factors that were beyond their own circumstances such as for Sue and Colin finding new employment and buying a house were integral to their contemplation. However, Sue was encouraged by political rhetoric that the government was focused on

ensuring that adoption processes were completed more quickly. This view of the speed of adoption was also reflected in discourses portrayed in television programmes aired at that time. Interestingly, the government were using the speed of adoption to encourage prospective adopters to apply. However, as we see from the above extract, it also has the potential to allow prospective adopters to delay applying, believing they do not need to allow space for the previous 'longer' waiting time.

Conversely, Sarah and John agreed they should take time for themselves before they would apply to become adoptive parents. They had also previously wanted to conceive a baby, but Sarah was diagnosed with cancer, which led to them harvest and freeze her eggs. Sadly, that process was not successful, and the eggs were deemed unusable.

John: "I think Sarah's right what we do need is a bit of a breather from the chaos for a year or two and then I think we'll probably be able to be ready for it, the next stage, and start to (.) look into becoming parents be a bit more you know actually doing it rather than thinking about it, it's where we are at the moment."  
(Lines: 2488-2491).

This outcome ended their capacity to have a biological child, and therefore their thoughts turned to adoption. However, they had since experienced several demanding years in which they were establishing careers, accessing higher education and managing health issues. Therefore, they describe wanting to pause before commencing plans for adoption. In support of Prochaska et al.'s, (2005) model John does differentiate between thinking about (contemplation) and acting upon their desire to become adoptive parents.

However, although Malcolm and Lynne both agreed they were ready to adopt a child, the adoption agencies they approached did not share their view. The couple explained that although they pursued adoption with two different agencies, both of which refused to assess them. The couple

report, the agencies made this decision because Malcolm's father was extremely ill and that Lynne was completing a higher degree.

Lynne: "My mum passed away five years ago, and yeah there is ALWAYS something, and you look at all of our friends (.) 'cos most of our friends have now got one or two children and um, (.) there's always change in their lives, you know there's not one of them (.) you know, who went through a pregnancy that didn't have some (.) traumatic thing happen...."

Malcolm: "The, the main thing that I felt came out was that the agencies were looking at every possible reason to stop us progressing."

Lynne: "Yeah, they wanted perfection..... So just the whole process was a bit (.) bad, (.) (laughs) we don't want you unless (.) you meet this, it was quite disappointing that we weren't (..)anything other than middle-class white really."

Malcolm: "Yes, that seemed to come through."

Lynne: "Yeah, I think if we'd been (.) you know (.) black or Asian, or, you know, it would have tipped the scales."

(Lines: 1074-1117).

As a couple, Lynne and Malcolm found this reasoning difficult to reconcile, particularly when they compared their lives with those of their friends who were simultaneously managing parenthood and life events. Ultimately, Lynne and Malcolm felt agencies were actively trying to prevent them from adopting. Their experience challenges the implicit assumption in Prochaska's et al. (2005) model that individuals have agency in progressing through the stages of becoming an adoptive parent. Furthermore, it raises questions about the level of readiness prospective adopters are required to demonstrate before they can be assessed. Thus, doubts are raised about whether prospective adopters' view of their own readiness holds sufficient weight when balanced with that of an adoption agency. The impact of life events on becoming an adoptive parent is a topic that needs further exploration, particularly considering the call for

older adoptive parents who may be willing to adopt older children and sibling groups.

Furthermore, Malcolm and Lynne also felt the adoption agencies wanted them to give more time to contemplating IVF as a route to parenthood. In this regard, they were clear on their position to not pursue medical intervention but felt their views on this issue were discounted. The assumption that supports a pronatalist view of parenthood becomes evident when Malcolm reveals that he is required to undertake voluntary work with young children to evidence his ability to become an adoptive parent. People who can conceive a child are not required to demonstrate previous experience of working with children, prior to becoming parents. Pronatalism supports the view that biological routes to parenting help prepare adults most notably women, via the experience of pregnancy, for parenthood (Loss, 2010; van Bussel, Spitz, & Demyttenaere, 2010). Although, they felt frustrated with the adoption agencies' stance and despite being doubtful of their potential future options, Malcolm was fulfilling one of the agency's requirements by volunteering with children. However, they shared that other events beyond their control had arisen as although Malcolm's father had now died, his mother was now ill and he was facing redundancy. Ultimately, although they felt adoption was a choice they wanted to pursue, their experience was that they were not the preferred choice of adoption agencies.

Many participants sought to be assessed within a parliamentary climate that was concerned with prospective adopters being turned away by 'unwelcoming' local authorities. In 2012, the post-legislative scrutiny select committee on adoption reported:

*"We received further evidence of local authorities turning prospective adopters away "without really looking at what their abilities and capabilities are." We were told that a lot of people are "lost to domestic adoption" at that point because the response of their local authority is unwelcoming; some go on to pursue adoption of children from overseas instead. This is of particular concern because these adopters could have provided homes to children currently in care in*



*England.” (Sourced from online parliamentary records, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldselect/ldadopt/127/12709.htm>).*

Furthermore, it remains a contemporary issue that potential adopters can be rejected by one adoption agency but be found to be acceptable to another. However, this appears to be an accepted fact rather than a need to explore discrimination within approval procedures. Furthermore, NAW discourses discussed in Chapter five, suggest there is the potential for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and MAME communities whom may not feel encouraged to contemplate adoption. However, discrimination is complex and in the extract above Malcolm and Lynne revealed their experience not only made them feel they did not meet the expectation of ‘perfection’; but they perceived themselves as less desirable because there were too many white middle-class couples looking to adopt. Thus query that if they had been of another race and culture, they would have been supported to achieve a successful assessment. Indeed, their experience of constraint was not isolated as James provides evidence of tension with the views of social workers in adoption.

The multiple extracts below James summarised the complexities, power dynamics and assumptions that perpetuated his experience of undertaking a four-day training course designed, in part, to help attendees to determine their readiness to adopt.

James: “as I say it was a few years ago, but the key memories I’ve got of it are er, about four days of training we had, er, awareness raising, um, that was led by a couple of social workers, um, so those days were QUITE taxing in that, I didn’t particularly enjoy the training it was er, quite basic it just felt like it was for the lowest common denominator.” (Lines: 341-348)

Importantly, James describes a lack of sense-making during the four days pre-adoption training that he had. In that space, James comes with the experience of parenting a child with complex needs. Thus he found the knowledge shared was too basic to be of value to him. This raises questions about the process of ‘training’ in pre-adoption experiences and

that, which could be re-positioned as engagement, and learning that co-produces knowledge with would be adopters. The sample in this study alone reflects the wide diversity of knowledge, and experience that adults contemplating adoption have. Thus, it would seem sensible for engagement to reflect and draw on the richness that prospective adopters can bring to the process and development of understanding. Sadly, James found the social workers leading the training days to be inflexible in their assertions of the correct ways to parent.

James: "There was stuff that was really obvious in there um, I think the social workers were, it's quite interesting really because the social workers were very (...) what's the word, kind of HOLIER THAN THOU, about what they were saying about how you can parent and how you can't parent and how you shouldn't do this and shouldn't do that [um] and they were talking as if, it was an absolute right, this is how you do it rather than their opinion of how you do it. And they were talking ABOUT, er ethics as if, the ethics um, were set and would never change and yet that's clearly bizarre because professional ethics in any profession change over time and so there didn't seem to be any awareness of what they were saying, ten years earlier they wouldn't be saying, and in ten years' time they won't be saying because things will have moved on. So, I got a bit frustrated by that lack of awareness and bigger picture thinking." (Lines: 349-360).

In the extract above, James describes the frustration he felt; with the passivity forced upon him, by the social workers' power as they act as agents of the state. His account illuminates that readiness to adopt is not a concept determined only by those who wish to adopt, but by social workers charged with the responsibility to approve adoptive parents. Importantly, James' experience highlights how some prospective adopters are encouraged to uphold a collective view of what is perceived to be 'good' adoptive parenting. However, James expressed frustration at what he felt was stagnant professional ethics, which he considered did not reflect evolved views of parenting. Thus, readiness extends beyond that of the individual to the readiness of society to accept adoptive families as

normative, which in turn disrupts constructions such as a reliance on genetic resemblance.

By drawing on his experience of preparatory training for adoption, James raises a lens on the construction of readiness not being a permanent state. His experience challenges whether, readiness is, at least in part, constructed by assessors as readiness to accept social workers purported truths of parenting. For those making the decisions about placement determining the readiness of adoptive parents and child to become a family is both critical and subjective. As evidenced in Chapter three, adoption agencies and social workers manage this uncertainty using decision-making processes. In turn, we support these processes by comparing pre-determined characteristics of potential adopters and adoptees. James' experiences highlight there is potential to share the uncertainty alongside the power and responsibility of the decision making. Indeed, James recognised some value in the knowledge shared by the social workers.

James: "Some of the stuff was useful and interesting. Obviously, some of the stuff was emotionally difficult because you learn about er, you know children that have, um er, who have had all sorts of problems in their lives because that's TYPICALLY, um. You know the opportunities to adopt are typically with children that have a really, really bad start in life and have been taken away from their real parents [yeah]. NOW, that doesn't happen unless your, the state of parenting has got to be incredibly bad before the state takes children away, so clearly, the children are typically damaged, children. We learnt a about that, and what that means for the child and how that affects them and their behaviour and how that will affect you when you're parenting them. SO, you know it wasn't all BAD, there was some good stuff in there, but I just, I found it overall a quite difficult process." (Lines: 344-377).

For James, the positive aspect of the day was learning about the children who are likely to be adopted and the level of poor parenting they might have received. His narrative reveals that he saw this learning opportunity as helpful and something that could assist him in reflecting on

how he may feel when parenting an adopted child. However, I reflect that the views imposed on the parent-child dynamics are anchored to something viewed as 'other' to an idealised relationship (Cornejo, 2008). Arguably, the same process would 'other', parenting a child with disabilities (Collins et al., 2014; Goodley & Lawthom, 2011a; Wates, 2002). James and Elizabeth reflected on their experiences of parenting their son Noah who has complex needs as they contemplated adoption. In the extract below Elizabeth reflects on her experience of having to select the characteristics of a prospective adopted child.

Elizabeth: "It seemed like rather than the adoption process trying to fit our family and the way that we saw it fit our family, it was more it fit the system, rather than it fitting how we wanted it, how we felt it could fit, and it's quite distressing as well as you have these forms where you have to tick out, what kind of child would you accept and what you won't and I felt that so restrict, so horrible, like so would you adopt a child with this kind of disability or would you consider or not and I found that horrible, I felt like I was rejecting a child [right] and I, I found that really hard we actually said that we wouldn't consider a child with serious disability simply because it would be hard to have two (.) children with high needs but we would consider a child with a disability (.), but it was, what made it difficult for us as well, was that there was criteria in that list that also matched our child and they said how children with like our child's disabilities often get left (.) because nobody wants them (.) they don't want children particularly with autism and that because they don't interact, and they're not likely to have the kind of relationship that, so that was quite upsetting to know that (.) you know, children like your child are less likely to be adopted (.), so a lot of personal stuff going on as well." (Lines: 833-853).

Similar to her husband's experience, Elizabeth felt the tension between her personal needs and those of her family within the public structure of adoption. Their readiness to meet the needs of a child with complex needs is apparent in the relationship they share with their son Noah. However, the process of selection inherent within adoption processes encourages prospective adopters to contemplate if they are willing to adopt a child with a high level of need. Elizabeth acknowledged

that they would find it difficult to parent two children with high-level needs. However, what remains subjective is how we determine what is 'high-level need' and whether this can be understood simply by ticking a box that outlines a category. Thus, who we are and how we experience the world and each other is much more than the social categories that we occupy.

Elizabeth's experiences lead us to draw on the readiness of prospective adopters to identify and limit their expectations of their future parental self. The act of choosing or rejecting the characteristics or needs of a child you would adopt arguably serves as 'othering' adoptive parenting from biological parenting. Societal discourses serve to raise caution about the genetic modification of an embryo more commonly referred to as 'designer babies' (Pang & Ho, 2016). This issue also highlights a hierarchy of what children are deemed adoptable and draws forth a need to discuss how adoptive processes could do more to support the equal rights of children with disabilities. Elizabeth is a mother of a son with complex disabilities whom she loves. As such, she recognises that she and her husband James could not parent two children with complex needs, predominantly because of the needs of their son Noah. However, reflection on her experience requires further thought on how pre-adoptive checklists could mirror arguments of prenatal testing and the rights of those with disabilities (Purdy, 2001).

#### **6.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has examined how prospective adoptive parents experience the dichotomous subthemes that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of their interviews. The depth of analysis reflects that the dichotomies of 'ready/not ready', 'wanting/not wanted' and 'choice/no choice' are not experienced in isolation. Indeed, they not only co-exist with one another but also intersect with other socially constructed dichotomies such as gender, sexuality and time. This finding demonstrates the complexity of the experience negotiated by the prospective adopter and the subsequent challenges to those who aim to

recruit and assess them. Dominant throughout the chapter was evidence of pronatalist assumptions that continue to constrain when someone could be a suitable adoptive parent.

An ever-present challenge to prospective adopters and those who assess them is the linear staged model of change (Prochaska et al., 2005), which constrains modes of contemplation into time-limited activities. This contrasts with the rich experiences shared by participants in this study, which reflect the cyclical complexity of contemplations that can and do change over time. Maintaining a time-limited staged model of change could mean reducing engagement with prospective adopters or inhibiting them from approaching an agency. Thus, communication not only of the timescales that it takes to complete an assessment but those of perceived readiness is important. This study demonstrates that people position themselves as prospective adopters for many years and that their state of readiness to adopt is subject to change over time.

One of the novel findings in this study is the contribution to adoption literature that explores heterosexual women preferring adoption above pregnancy as a route to parenthood. This concept could raise challenges for prospective adopters and assessors as they try to make sense of anti pronatalist routes to parenthood. Although lesbian women have been found to have views that are more expansive in chosen routes to parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2009), I argue that this is because heterosexual women must navigate more closely the biological versus socially-good dichotomy. This limits the capacity of heterosexual women to make sense of what it means to be a fertile heterosexual woman who does not want to experience pregnancy. There was a range of negotiations that women had to undertake. Some women described partners who were willing to contemplate adoption and others did not. Women who were not in a relationship or who were in the same-sex relationship found themselves contemplating the virtues of donor sperm versus the altruistic positioning of adoption.

The uptake or not of IVF was an issue raised by several participants. For those who had chosen it as a route to parenthood, it had been unsuccessful. It is likely that if it had been successful, they would not be positioning themselves as a prospective adopter. Some participants chose not to entertain IVF as an option. Peter provided extraordinary insight into his experiences of supporting his wife's desire to undertake IVF while he was doubtful of its outcome and yearning to become a father by adoption. Other participants felt that their decision not to pursue IVF was frowned upon by adoption agencies. This raised the issue of the timeliness of decisions and the assumption that an infertile couple would make a quick decision to try IVF, but making an equally quick decision to pursue adoption was perceived to be negative.

The contribution of male participants in exploring their desires and choices enriches our understanding of their view of themselves as prospective adoptive fathers. The richness of their shared experiences demonstrates that becoming an adoptive father is more meaningful to them than NAW discourses suggest. Although women make 90% of calls to adoption agencies, it is important for the campaign to reflect inclusive male rhetoric in their articles. The dominant portrayal of infertility as centred on a woman's body isolates men from that experience. Unlike several women participants, no man suggested that he did not want to experience pregnancy. However, we should not assume that this outlook does not exist and that there could be men who would also choose adoption as a preferred route to parenthood. Equally, there is more to be understood about how this phenomenon relates to all women but in particular heterosexual women.

The prospective adopters who took part in this research describe several issues that limited their ability to become parents. For some, it was a medically related issue caused by infertility or illness. However, others felt they were prevented from proceeding by the adoption agencies. Most remained optimistic that adoption was in their futures and they were actively exploring this concept with their family and friends. This exploration of social and cultural issues is explored in the next chapter.

Finally, some participants either anticipated or in some cases accepted that they would not become adoptive parents, how they make sense of this future is the focus of Chapter eight.

The current chapter has discussed how these experiences impact on those who would be adopters. However, it is recognised that these subthemes resonate throughout the phenomenological findings. For example, the next chapter examines the socio-cultural contours navigated by participants, which although through a different thematic lens, includes how they experience the readiness of their wider family to adopt. Collectively, these subthemes are important if we are to comprehend the complex needs and abilities of prospective adopters as they negotiate their potential to become an adoptive parent. Therefore, the chapter concludes by identifying how the deeper understanding gained from this research can support the recruitment of prospective adopters.



## Chapter Seven - Negotiating Socio-Familial Contours

*"But the characteristic of encountering 'others', is after all orientated towards one's own Dasein. Does not it too start with the distinction and isolation of the 'I', so that a transition from this isolated subject to others must then be sought?" (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p. 118)*

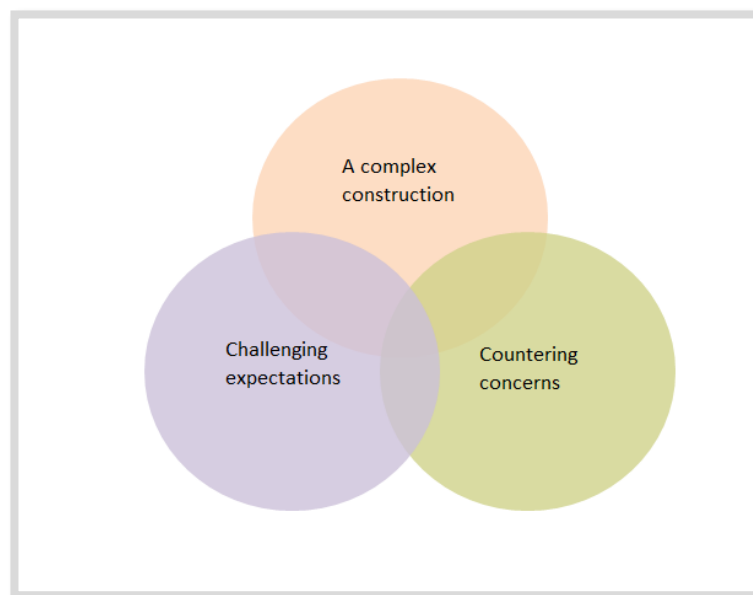
Any phenomenological exploration of prospective adopters needs to examine their ontological experience of being-in-the-world. Although it is accepted that our experience of being-in-the-world cannot be fragmented, Heidegger (1953/2010, p.63) usefully differentiates 'being' from the 'structure of being'. Chapter six explored aspects of participants' 'being' and related this to their agentic experience of want, choice and readiness. Although our sense of being is always in relation to other, it does enable, for example, an examination of prospective adopters' experience of 'being ready'. The lived experience of prospective adoptive parents entwines in their relationships with others, amid multiple sociocultural influences. Thus, an examination of how others structure what it might mean for participants' to be an adoptive parent provides insight into how prospective adopters relate this back to their view of self. It is important to understand how prospective adopters make sense of their experiences with the people close to them, and how this might influence their decision-making processes. Situating the experiences of participants within the landscape of their social relationships facilitates an examination of the social norms within which expectations of achieving parenthood reside. Furthermore, casting such a socio-familial lens on their contemplative experiences provides insight into their engagement with the socio-familial discourses that serve to construct them as people who would (not) or could (not) adopt.

This chapter explores how participants experience being a prospective adoptive family as they interact with friends, family and others within contemporary British society. This approach assists in obtaining a greater breadth of understanding of prospective adopters contemplating adoptive familyhood within their wider familial and social relationships. It

also adds depth to our awareness of what they experience in the relational spaces where these issues intertwine. This emerging knowledge facilitates an exploration of prospective adopters as they coexist within dynamic societal structures and expectations of family. This highlights the potential to consider the prospective adopter experience as a means of reducing the 'otherness' of adoption in our society and meaningfully transform what adoptive familyhood means in our society.

From the analysis, three sub-themes emerged which assist in the exploration of prevalent social and cultural issues that are depicted in Figure 7.1. The first subtheme, a complex construction, establishes the breadth and depth of the interpersonal and social structures that simultaneously enable and constrain what constitutes a prospective adoptive family. It achieves this by exploring the participant's experiences of the social constructs of adopted children and the subsequent positioning of them as potential adopters. An examination of how prospective adopters experience social expectations of parental coupledness and how they negotiate these within their own extended families are explored in the second subtheme. Finally, the third sub-theme considers how participants countered both present and potential future concerns that they identified for themselves, their family or future adopted children.

Figure 7.1 Theme two: Social and cultural contours



## 7.1 A Complex Construction

The role and function of using a socio-familial lens contributed to my modes of enquiry, the subject focus and therefore the complexity of experience (Pain & Bailey, 2004). It permits exploration of complex topics, which readily manifest themselves in this thesis, as the very use of social categories serves to construct an inherent understanding of truth. The study was designed without collating categorical data to minimise the extent to which I as a researcher contributed to the ontological constructions of my participants. This methodology may be viewed by some paradigms as limiting the capacity of this thesis to apply meaning to participants' experiences. However, I argue that categorically informed analysis of these issues could also be seen to situate other truths, and thereby construct meaning, which is reliant on preconceptions (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012). One example of this extends beyond pronatalism and considers its relationship to the anthropological view that parental investment is greater for a genetically related child (Gibson, 2009). This examination can progress further when we situate that issue within a broader societal landscape and consider the role that adoption plays in the formation and construction of a nation (Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012; Willing, Fronek, & Cuthbert, 2012). Several participants referred to the social good of adopting a child.

Carmen: "a very natural process, a very, um (..) real process um and also to just thinking of that there are so many unwanted children in the world, or in the city where you live or the country where you live you know, why procreate when you can just take care of a child who's already (..) there and needs love and care." (Lines: 7304-7311).

Colin: "We've done a lot of travelling as well, so we've seen lots of (..) orphans, Cambodian children, and, and (clears throat) and people that are in that situation where they're fostering um, a, orphan children and so that's always (..) influenced maybe and the idea of adopting or helping out or (..) taking part in that, (..) in that sort of charity." (Lines: 2776-2783).

The permeability of space is evident in the above extracts, where both Carmen and Colin transfer knowledge of 'unwanted' or 'orphan' children in the world to their domestic situation. Carmen recognises that children in the world, country and city where you live need adoptive parents. Against this backdrop, she questions the social morality of procreating while unwanted children are already in the world. To make sense of the role of a single adopter in the mass of the world's unwanted children, Carmen centres on the subjectivity of a child who needs love and care. For Colin, the role of adopting or fostering is viewed as an act of charity or in other words a means of him participating in the world. His experience in Cambodia of witnessing orphaned children extends to people who are fostering children, and these have influenced him now wishing to foster or adopt a child in the UK. The next subsection will further explore the complex construction of what it means to contemplate adopting a child in the UK.

### ***7.1.1 Contemplating the adoption of a 'damaged' child***

For a generation, many of the children freed for adoption have been subject to or likely to be subject to abuse or neglect. Certainly, all children waiting for adoption will have experienced separation from their birth parent and have had an interim parental figure, most commonly a foster carer. In the textual analysis of the National adoption week campaigns discussed in Chapter five, I demonstrated how the adopted child was constructed as a child in need of love; while simultaneously prospective adopters were positioned as moral rescuers, whose actions would prevent a child from 'languishing' in care. In this study, several participants queried whether they had the personal resources to be able to meet the needs of an adopted child who would require extra care. Thus, the perceived ontological structures, or aspects of self, required of an adoptive parent were deemed to extend beyond that expected of a birth parent. This led many participants to reflect and re-evaluate the implications of them becoming adoptive parents.

In Chapter six, I presented James' complex considerations of what adopting a child would mean for him and his family. These included providing his son Noah with an enduring, supportive sibling relationship and himself with the experience of parenting a neuro-typical child. However, the introductory adoption training session he attended led him to reconsider the negative impact that adoption could have on his family.

James: "we became very clear, that if we took on an adopted child that there would be a heck of a lot of work involved in the opening years because the child is so likely to be damaged by their past, that they would really need one of us to basically stop what we were doing either work or studies and concentrate on that child and integrating them into the family and spending time with them and, and trying to get that emotional bond and trying to help them um (.), you know to become comfortable, and so that kind of investment and time was going to be quite difficult to do at the time that we were looking at it and so I think we thought that we would take a bit of a rain-check, consider it more, and maybe wait for a later period in our lives when it er, seemed more right to do it and, and more right for the child we'd be able to give that investment and time." (Lines: 439-450).

As discussed in Chapter six, James and his wife Elizabeth currently have a son Noah who has complex special needs; they want to adopt a child to complete their family and provide a sibling for Noah. However, contrary to his perceptions of an adopted child who would be an asset to his family, the information James received led him to perceive an adopted child as someone who was likely to be very damaged by their experiences. This rhetoric of the 'damaged child' is evident in adoption training programmes, which seek to improve confidence in prospective adopter's ability to parent 'damaged children' (Selwyn et al., 2009). Regrettably, the concept of a damaged child is normative, and therefore there is a lack of critique of the adoption literature. Indeed, the concept can be extended to the idealised perceptions of an adoptive family (Archer & Gordon, 2004).

James formed the view that to adopt a 'damaged child' would require either him or his wife to stop work or study to create the space and time to gain an emotional bond with the child. This led James and his wife to postpone any plans they had to become adopters of an unknown future time when they would have time to invest in an adopted child. The contemplation of time and investment in the formation of bonds in any new relationship seems common sense. The dominant theory of parent-child or more specifically, mother-child relationships is Bowlby's (1969/1982) attachment theory that purports the importance of stability and nurturance within a child's formative relationship during their first year of life. When this early relationship is disrupted as for many 'looked after children', they can be clinically viewed as having an attachment disorder which in turn validates the assumption of compensatory or therapeutic parenting (Phillips, 2007; Ponciano, 2010).

Hilary: "I mean when we went to the information evening you know, it, it was emphasised that you would need therapeutic parenting (.) so (.) it's a very, very difficult, uh, to attract I think in the past they've tried to you know, sugar coat everything and you wouldn't have found out what the problems are until you know (.) till it's not too late then at least you know." (Lines: 4029-4033).

Hilary's engagement with an adoption agency also found an emphasis on the need for adopted children to have therapeutic parenting. This led her to perceive that the needs of children waiting to be adopted made it difficult for adoption agencies to attract adoptive parents. She further situates this perspective by reasoning that in the past adoption agencies had 'sugar coated' the needs of the children, which led to adoptive parents having to manage unforeseen difficulties. Hilary's views raise the issue of trust between the prospective adoptive parent and the adoption agency to provide a clear understanding of the needs of the adopted child (Barbee, Christensen, Antle, Wandersman, & Cahn, 2011; Clifton & Neil, 2013). This focus on the internalised needs of the child is supported by developmental theories that suggest a child is significantly influenced by the parenting that they receive (Sachs-Ericsson, Medley,

Kendall-Tackett, & Taylor, 2011). Thus, in turn, any future positive development post-adoption is viewed as reliant upon the parenting capacity of the adoptive parent. These ontological assumptions are reinforced by biological, cognitive and social paradigms; which collectively purport a conflicting view of a child as a passive recipient of the care they receive and a powerful agent whose needs require high quality, if not, specialist parenting.

However, there is a scarcity of empirical data on the nature and quality of relationships between adoptive parents and their children. To assist our understanding van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, (2008) conducted a meta-analysis comparing children from biological foster and adopted families. They found children adopted before their first birthdays were as securely attached as non-adopted children were. However, children adopted after their first birthday were according to the meta-analysis less likely to have a secure attachment. Interestingly, this significant difference reversed when self-reports and interviews were added to the meta-analysis. Thus the age of a child on placement was then not a factor in their degree of security. Importantly, for prospective adopters, none of the studies in the meta-analysis included the impact of the investment of time, understanding and skill that an adoptive parent would require to nurture a secure attachment with their adopted child. This is important, particularly if prospective adopters are advised to wait until they have time in their lives when they can stop work or study, to concentrate fully on their adopted child. This suggests constraints to not only when, but who will be deemed a suitable adoptive carer. The challenge is, therefore, how we understand the complexity of the adoptive relationship while also creating successful opportunities for these to develop. It demands further exploration of what we mean by compensatory parenting and is that solely in the protected time an adoptive parent can afford a child.

The presence of the needs of a prospective adoptive child was present not only in the immediate year's post placement but also in any challenges they may face during their child's adolescence. There is a risk

of the child and the relationship they share with their parents always being othered to pronatalism and instead viewed through an adoption lens. These views add weight to pronatalist ideas and the view of nurture over nature, which is also problematised by theories of attachment. In particular, the idealised age by which a child will have formed what Ainsworth (1969) described as a secure attachment. This concept of the age of a child at adoption being indicative of their having had experienced some trauma impacted on Hilary's contemplation of adoptive parenthood.

Hilary: "(..) but by the time the child is adopted, they've had so many (.) very, traumatic experiences that (..) you know, it is (..) um an uphill (.) battle and even if (.) even if you know, the the child (.) recovers to, to a point where um (.) they can lead a, they can have a happy childhood (.) they, there still could be problems later with the emergence of their teenage years."  
(Lines: 4049-4053).

Hilary viewed herself as a prospective adoptive mother as someone who could become engaged in an uphill battle with an adopted child. She was concerned that even when initial challenges were overcome and a happy childhood experienced, adolescence could see the re-emergence of problems. Her anxiety about this potential future highlights a view that nature outweighs nurture and that the influence of adoptive parenting is limited. Hilary's concerns are not isolated, and the construction of the adopted child as damaged and traumatised extends beyond those directly contemplating adoption. Several participants' spoke of how their partners, family and friends might imagine their prospective adopted child. Some participants had knowledge of children who had been adopted by friends, and this gave them a source of comfort that it could be achieved. However, there were concerns about how their own family members might respond to the addition of an adopted child. Fran and Carmen provided an observation of a child adopted by some friends of theirs and the reaction of Fran's family to the perceived behaviour of the adopted child.

Fran: "I can't remember her words, but she said something like 'oh you can tell, you can tell *Alice's* adopted, (.)



you can tell that there's some sort of (.) some sort of tearaway inside her or you know something like that, I think she used the word tearaway, (.) but as if it was sort of hidden somehow, so that we can tell she's adopted (..) and (..) I was really insulted (.) for *Alice's* sake, I was like she's three, she's sat with a room full of adults, she's been absolute sweetheart, um she was really excited to see the baby, and she was, she was quite, she's quite a big girl for three, she's quite physical and so she was she."

Carmen: "hugging."

Fran: "yeah she wasn't rough with him, but, well she was rough with him, but in a normal three-year-old."

(Lines: 7595-7605).

Their experience highlights how a lens of adoption can be used to interpret the behaviour of a child and potentially skew what is viewed as normal. This is important for those contemplating adoption to realise an adopted child cannot gain access to education support unless the fact they are adopted is disclosed to the school. This creates a quandary of how to achieve a 'normal' familial experience and how to allocate support to an adopted family in a way that does not counter perceived normality. The experience described below by Fran highlights the complexity of how the behaviour of a three-year-old child is understood and shared.

Although several messages are explicit in the narrative, there are implicit assumptions about the three-year-old and fear in her behaviour being indicative of tearaway tendencies. Words like tearaway are more prevalent in describing adolescent behaviours, but they are in keeping with commonly held fears about adopted children being challenging in their adolescence. Not spoken are the contemplations that Fran could have about her family responding to her future adopted child through the same lens, in expectation of poor behaviour misconstrued with an adoption lens on the world.

### **7.1.2 *Conflicting normalities***

All participants discussed the complexity of what is 'normal'. For Hilary, the potential of adopting a baby held the possibility of creating an opportunity for a more normalised parental experience. However, she concluded that even in that scenario, adoptive parenthood is very different from birth parenthood. For Hilary, there was no way to 'win', or in other words, for her adoptive parenthood was never going to be a replacement for achieving motherhood by giving birth to a child of her own.

Hilary: "so, you know, you can't really win (laughs) um maybe if you managed to adopt a baby it would be, it would be better, (.) um but (.) you know, is it, again it looks like a very, very different experience of parenting from the normal kind." (Lines: 3973-3975).

I reflect that this is an important message; that understanding how adoption cannot replace the experience of having a child born to you may serve to improve expectations and the viability of some adoptive families. However, for several participants adoption was a positive alternative to parenthood, if not a preferred way of becoming a parent. The participants made sense of adoption being a 'normal' route to parenthood, drawing on meanings for themselves, the children and society. Of note was Lynne's experience of the role of adoptive parents as functioning to normalise the behaviour of a 'damaged' child.

Lynne: "Yeah, and you get the, you know, you adopt children it's much more, (.) it's not like a, but at the end of the day one of the things you that aims to do is to enable them to be normal" (Lines: 1217-1219).

Lynne's rhetoric echoes other participants' who view adoptive parenthood as a means of normalising the way in which adopted children experience their selves and the world (McKay & Ross, 2010). The above extract suggests that a challenge for prospective adopters is to contemplate how to provide an adopted child with a normalised experience

while living in a familial environment that is othered by dominant pronatalist assumptions. Kay who had contemplated her own resilience in becoming a single adoptive mother also highlighted the concept of the traumatised child.

Kay: "But the things that stopped me in the past are actually I've got a good life, and I really enjoy going out and doing all the things I do (...) and I suppose the other thing was thinking, thinking about those things about actually 'Can I, do it? Am I alright?' You know would I be able to manage it, because it's not like having a normal child it's bringing a traumatised child in your house, and you need to know I suppose that you're resilient enough and robust enough to be able to manage that; and three I think (...) I think I probably thought I wouldn't do it on my own I think your I would have imagined that I would be doing it with someone else and I just thought actually what's the point of waiting around for someone else who might not even appear and actually I could do this on my own, most of the people I know are single parents so (...) actually (...) it wouldn't be unusual for a child that came into my life to be the only person that's part of a single family really." (Lines: 4285-4300).

Unlike, those who may position childlessness as a traumatic way of being in the world, Kay explained that she enjoyed her child-free life and this had previously delayed her from pursuing adoption. In addition, she questioned whether she would be able to parent a traumatised child on her own. This reflection draws further insight into the prospective adopter has to have better than good enough parenting skills to meet the needs of a traumatised adopted child (Noy-sharav, 2002). Additionally, it illuminates the expectation that parenthood is a two-person pursuit, that children require the care of two parents. However, scoping her social group, she recognised there were many single parents among them; leading her to visualise how her prospective adopted child would not experience being part of a single parent family as unusual. What remains unspoken in her narrative is the potential 'trauma' that other children in single-parent families have experienced through the absence or loss of a parent.

The ONS (2015) data collection for its families and households survey does not distinguish children living in foster or adoptive families. The most common family type is a couple without dependent children living with them, although these figures will include couples whose children have left home. There are 4.7 million married/civil partnership couples living with dependent children. However, the number of lone parents living with dependent children continues to rise and represent 25% of all families with dependent children. 90% of lone parents are women.

All participants referred to their experience of being in the world as situated. Colin and Susan drew on their multicultural experience of being in the world, of living in Japan and speaking Japanese. They also have numerous friends of British, Japanese and dual heritage. This led them to contemplate their seeming normality in the world they inhabit, should they adopt a child of Japanese origin.

Susan: "And probably because I've had my own identity crisis so I am kind of aware that you know it can be quite disruptive to um, to to hit that sort of stuff and that could be a concern (...) But then, on the other hand, I think as, as parents, I think we would be able to handle most.

Colin: "We know what it's like to be different".

Susan: "Situations".

Colin: "In the world".

Susan: "Yes, and a, it could be quite interesting, I wonder how many, how many adoptive parents are, tend to be different nowadays? (...) In one way or another, (.) probably quite a lot".

Colin: "A lot, a lot of people, they look similar as well don't they; it's just some sort of genetic resemblance of the tendency for resemblance.....You don't want to have a child that's got ginger hair."

Colin & Susan: (laughing)

Susan: "No I think I saw that somewhere." (laughing)

Colin: "Yeah."

- Susan: "Yeah, I think we did, we saw that on one of these
- Colin: "Probably, being which is."
- Susan: "Has your child got ginger hair, no I have definitely seen that question somewhere or was asked."
- Colin: They just do that because they don't want people to be asking the questions that you know, we have friends who are (.) from all walks of life. We don't ask the question; they're not answering questions like why have you got Chinese friends (laughs) so, you know we're not going to worry about people asking why you have a Japanese child".
- Susan: "yeah, we have quite a lot of friends who are (.) Japanese and English, couple mix, so their children are all mixed Japanese and English. Quite interesting, some of them look very English, some of them look very Japanese, (laughs) so its yeah from that perspective if we had a child that was not, that didn't look like us or adopted a child that was different, then they would certainly fit in with that crowd".  
(Lines: 3240-3270)

Although they understood the impact of difference on a child's emerging identity of being in the world, their, discussion drew on the concept of adoption mimicking birth and the child has a physical resemblance to their adoptive parents. As they explore these views within their interview, there is evidence of laughter and the use of humour as they talk about the potential of adopting a child with ginger hair. The reference they make to a child with ginger hair reflects how identity is biologically and culturally experienced and in Britain how discriminatory discourses influence perceptions of identity (Willing & Fronek, 2014). Thus, Colin and Susan's conversation draws on evidence of othering and of querying biological heritage within families. Interestingly, they also raised the fact that what is viewed as normal is unquestioned, which highlights diversity in how normality is perceived by prospective adopters.

## **7.2 Challenging expectations**

In varying degrees, all participants negotiated challenges of what is socially constructed as normal as they contemplate adoptive parenthood. Some of the socio-cultural factors they navigated were inherent to their own sense of being in the world, and both single and coupled participants were challenged by expectations of familyhood were scaffold onto marriage. Challenges presented themselves in both implicit and explicit ways, with implicit social factors being more generally accepted without question. For those participants that were coupled, marriage before children was often a preferred or realised choice.

### ***7.2.1. Expectations of parental coupledness***

For heterosexual couples, there is a social expectation that parenthood will be achieved by biological means. Thus, there is an assumption that prospective adoptive married couples are likely to have suffered trauma at the experience of infertility (Kirk, 1964). There are different discourses that permit exit routes from pronatalist pathways for prospective adopters that include adoption as an altruistic choice for the greater social good. However, the participants in this study rarely positioned themselves on this dualistic spectrum as their contemplations included both individual and social factors. For Rachel, these issues manifested themselves as she contemplated single adoptive motherhood, envisaging the possibility that time was against her ability to have a biological child within a heterosexual relationship.

Rachel: "Well I think my (.) my parents would prefer me not to be a single parent. I don't think they would mind if I was an adoptive parent or had a baby of myself, they'd just want there to be someone else in the relationship so (.) I mostly, don't really talk to them about it very much (laughs)". (Lines: 3570-3573).

To make sense of her deliberations, Rachel drew on her what she perceived her parents would want for her. Although she thought they

would accept her becoming a parent by either giving birth or adoption, Rachel thought they would want that event to take place within a relationship. However, she had not explored this with them in any detail suggesting reluctance. This is different from the participants in Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik's (2007) study whose participating single adoptive mothers were empowered by their choice to adopt. Interestingly, Rachel's experience raises a tension between assertions that adoption is a political tool to curb single birth motherhood (Kim, 2015) and the acceptance of single women as adoptive parents.

Charvi: "We also want to get married first because I think it's, it's easier for married couples in this country to (.) adopt, um, because it shows that there's commitment and things like that, so, I definitely would want to anyway so, so yeah." (Lines: 1638-1641).

Charvi's experience perpetuates the view that marriage is likely to be indicative of relationship security and as such, a more reliable basis for adoption. However, those participants who were coupled were not united in all their views which raises potential challenges for those conducting assessments and who need to form a view of the prospective adopters' relationship.

Ramneet who always wanted to adopt a child also discussed challenging familial expectations of achieving motherhood within a marriage. Her desire to become an adoptive mother contributed to the end of her last relationship, as her partner only wanted to have biological children.

Ramneet: "Even if it was my own child or an adopted child there wouldn't be any difference for me because I would love him or her the same, and seeing and working with children and seeing how neglected they were, has made me think I could offer so much more and as a single person as well too um to kind of give back and to have some self-satisfaction too, rather than just having my own children." (Lines: 227-233).

Ramneet did not expect to experience any difference in her parental feelings towards an adopted child. She uses her experiences of working with children to imagine what she as a single mother, could offer a child. This contemplation of herself as a mother related to her experience of neglected children. Ramneet's expectations of herself as a mother is of someone who had much to offer that would in return give her a sense of self-satisfaction. Phenomenology allows us to explore intersubjective relationships that we share with each other, and to reflect on how they help us to make sense of our being in the world (Gentile, 2010). In this extract, Ramneet's experience allows us to understand how thinking of herself as a prospective mother is also situated as 'giving back' to the world which is self-satisfying. Despite, her views of adoption as an act of social good which returned a personal sense of good, Ramneet also experienced expectations that had been held by her family for generations which challenged the concept of single parenthood (Cornejo, 2008).

Ramneet: "I guess the other thing that would ever put a stop on it was that I come from a generational family where you have to be married in order to have kids [um] so if I was to adopt without the marriage that was going to have issues, so, as I familiarised myself with it more and more um I started speaking to my mum about it more and more. It was, it was okay I didn't have to be married so upon those, now I've come to terms that I wouldn't mind being a single parent and adopting. It's more; it's more and more about I'm not getting married, and I won't get married, so that's where. I'm going to do it the opposite way around, but I've given it a lot of thought in terms of my mum and my, and myself will moving away from London, so that um she can start familiarising herself with areas so that if I do have an adopted child she can help look after it too." (Lines: 238-244).

To negotiate these traditional contours Ramneet became reliant on her mother, not only to find a means of accepting her becoming a single adoptive mother but also in the future care of an adopted child. Thus, although Ramneet did not envisage adopting as part of a couple, she did see her mother's assistance as crucial in her parenting a child. However, more than this, her experience reflects the longevity of motherhood and



the dependence that can exist for even an adult child to seek advice and support from a parent. Ramneet's narrative details how her conversations with her mother grew alongside her own increasing understanding of becoming a single adoptive parent. However, it also reveals a tension in going the opposite way around to the social pronatalist assumptions that dictate routes to parenthood should be within heterosexual marriages. In addition, the challenges of single parenthood are prevalent when Ramneet suggests her mother would move with her as they began to establish a new life that would encapsulate an adopted child. This leads us into exploring the next subsection of this theme, which examines the expectations of family members.

Ann's description of her fiancé Iain as a 'traditional' man, from a 'traditional family set-up' who upholds 'traditional values' further complicates this paradox. Unsurprisingly, she describes a pendulum of experiences as they try to make sense of an inherent difference in their anticipated route to parenthood.

Ann: "I feel like we're on this pendulum sometimes, sort of swinging back and forth, with, do we want to have them? Do we not? And I think we do want to have children but, I think, we were always unsure if we wanted to adopt or if we wanted to have our own. I think the more we thought about it, adoption seemed to become more natural, normal way that we felt if that makes sense rather than having a baby" (Lines: 9-14).

The influence of Ann's intersubjective exploration is apparent in her use of the term 'we', throughout the extract above (Heidegger, 1953/2010). Thus, despite their reportedly different individual outlooks, as a couple, their contemplations of parenthood intertwine. Heidegger (1953/2010, p. 119) explores the intricacy of our always being with others, even when we are alone, and distinguishes that aspect of being-in-the-world from 'being with one another' For Ann, her contemplations of adoptive parenthood are fully entwined in her being with Iain, as a

potential parental couple. Interestingly, the temporality of their joint decision-making is reflected in how they are 'sometimes' ambivalent about the route they would take to become parents. This suggests that there are times when they ambivalence extends to whether they shared a desire to become adoptive parents. Ann's reflections of the shared explorations with Iain change from 'thought' to an embodied sense of what they 'felt', as she began to position adoption as a 'more natural and normal' route to parenthood than pregnancy. As Ann's narrative continues, detail of her experience of an intra-subjective tension emerges, which she responds to and makes sense of by discussing it with her fiancé Iain from which they achieve a shared understanding.

### ***7.2.2. Expectations of extended family members***

The inclusion of a child and their relationships with other members of their family was something discussed by several participants. For some, this was in relation to their own birth children, and for others, it was in comparison to other children already born into their extended family. This contemplation extended to include relationships an adopted child would share with aunts and grandparents as well as cousins. The remarks below are from James and Elizabeth, a married couple who were interviewed individually by telephone.

James: "I think Elizabeth had more conversations with (.) parents and and my mum erm, I came to it in a bit of a different way, if I think I'll have a chat with my wife about it and if I think it's the right thing for us to do for me that's enough rather than maybe talking with family. I don't have particularly close er family, er they are quite physically distant and in some cases emotionally a bit distant as well, SO well, I think for Elizabeth there was a lot more conversation with her mum and dad and with my mum and dad about it, and I think you know there was (.) um, I think one or two of them were not keen on the idea, they weren't so sure, but for me that's pretty irrelevant as I'd already decided with Elizabeth that we wanted to do it, but I think, er perhaps Elizabeth found that a bit

hard because she maybe felt that she needed the agreement of others." (Lines: 455-466)

Elizabeth: "My parents were happy for us, they, they were, they were great, we will support you, but James' mum was a bit more hesitant I think she felt that (.) we'd be taking on too much because life with Noah is challenging and Noah was diagnosed with autism and epilepsy at 2, he's got learning difficulties and you know, and to be honest we even wondered whether we'd even be considered for adoption because of (.) the nature of Noah's disabilities; and when they actually (.) that that when they did that was a surprise to us, it was a concern, but yeah James' mum was concerned about how a child would cope with Noah, how Noah would cope with a child, she, she, she, had, she had concerns about that. Um whereas my mum and dad didn't seem to (.) they just felt that no, no, great, this is great, you'll manage, we'll all manage." (Lines: 605-615).

Interestingly, James' experience of physical and emotional distance from his biological family reflects the limitations of bio-familial relationships, and his views serve to counter assertions of the supremacy of biological parenthood. In his interview, James explained that he did not feel the need for anyone other than himself and his wife to make the decision about whether to adopt. Conversely, Elizabeth had sought wider agreement from their parents. James' views on him and Elizabeth being their family decision makers assert the prominence of their nucleus family. However, Elizabeth's scope to include her parents reflects a wider sense of who should be included. In the extract above, Elizabeth explains how she and James contemplated whether an adoption agency would accept them as adopters (Cousins, 2003; Hicks, 2000). This concern primarily related to the needs of their son Noah. However, despite this, they still felt surprised when James' mum expressed concern about Noah's reaction to another child. The view expressed by James' mother became further isolated when Elizabeth's parents were supportive and evidenced by the shift from 'you'll manage' to a shared 'we'll all manage' stance thus including themselves as part of the solution.

The extended family perceptions of what needs could be managed and what needs might be left unmet are interesting. The differing subjective views shared above highlight the complexities of how social workers could perceive and attribute capabilities when assessing if prospective adopters are able to adopt a child. Furthermore, it also highlights a paucity of knowledge about the impact of adoption upon extended family members and the construction of adoptive kinship. Within the research literature the term adoptive kinship is used to describe a relationship between the adoptive parents, the adopted child and their birth parents, often referred to as the adoption triangle (Jones & Hackett, 2012). However, there is a dearth of literature in relation to the extended adoptive family. References made to extended families are mostly limited to those related to the children by birth (Hinterlong & Ryan, 2008; Pitcher, 2009). This is an area that requires further exploration as Pitcher (2009) concludes that the parents of adopters are both symbolically and practically important to the approval and acceptance of the adoptive family within contemporary British culture.

Clara is a divorced mother with two children aged 10 and 11 years old, for her adoption is very much a decision that they would share as a family. Although she was in a relationship, she and her partner were not living together, and she considered he would find it stressful to go through the adoption process. When she spoke to her children about the potential of them adopting a child, they had different reactions with her older child supporting the decision and her younger child threatening to leave home.

Clara: "We were watching a documentary about that, and he said, (.) he said you know when you talk about adoption I think we should actually do that as soon as possible. Because you know, we should either be a family an adoptive family or a family who fosters. But then my youngest child said oh no I'd move out (laughs) So I would just get my stuff and, and move out because I would be really cross if they touched my things, so he's not ready, obviously. So, I thought, we need, we need just a little while (small laugh)." (Lines: 3790-3808)

Clara is clear that although she had always wanted to adopt it would only be feasible if the three of them were in full agreement. The views of her partner were not prevalent thus for Clara, family and the integration of an adoptive child in their lives was not solely about her as an adoptive parent but equally to her children as adoptive siblings. The commitment from all involved would be important for the success of the adoptive placement. In addition, this highlights the implications for practice when assessing a prospective adoptive family so that the views of everyone are included in order to mitigate the risk of future placement disruption.

In the absence of research into the experiences of adoptive siblings and grandparents and other relatives, there is little to guide those assessing the potential for a family to adopt on how to judge their readiness. Prochaska et al. (2005) six month staged model is specific to parents and does not include children or other relatives. Indeed, the above discourses reflect the greater complexity of these family-based contemplations that occur. One of the stages in Prochaska's model (2005) viewed as a progressive step towards becoming an adoptive parent is sharing the information with others. However, the model does not accommodate the complexity of what that sharing may give rise to and the impact this could have on the prospective adopter. The emotional impact of having a close relative not support your decision to adopt can be upsetting as described below in Cassandra's experience of telling her sister that she intended to adopt.

Cassandra: "It, it hit me like a brick. A ton of bricks (.) umm, (.) and as I say it was the first time that anyone was negative about (..) my plans to adopt a child er. Umm, (.) prior to that everyone had been really positive, or interested or supportive or whatever you want to call it I'm not quite sure what word I would use to describe it (.) Um, (.) and my sister's response re, really made me stop really made me think about what I was doing (..) why I was doing it (..) and how (..) how I would integrate that child into my (.) wider family. Um, (.) 'Cos I think it would have been difficult (..) umm, I'm not quite sure how (.) how my sister might have (.) might have been, been able to

relate to an adopted child, I don't know." (Lines: 6932-6947).

Cassandra had wanted to be an adoptive mother since she was in her late twenties and she completed an assessment and gained approval to have a child placed with her. She explains that she told everyone about it as it was such a big event in her life. All but one person, her eldest sister was happy for her and Cassandra reflects that the topic of adoption raised painful memories for her sister. Importantly, Cassandra notes that it was her sister's dissenting view that made her stop and reflect on her decision to adopt. That raises the importance of hearing views, which are different from our own in an examination of the potential, limitations and challenges when assessing if someone could be considered as an adoptive parent (Hohwy, 2007; Zannettino, 2008). Also, it adds weight to the need for an inclusive approach when deciding on who can be an adoptive parent. More importantly, it reflects the complexity of deliberations that prospective adopters experience and offers an explanation of the time taken before they decide to proceed with the adoption. This counters government rhetoric that urges speed in the adoption process when every participant revealed several reasons for extensive contemplation and the time taken to respond simultaneously to the needs of their daily lives.

Rachel had shared her thoughts of adopting with her sister, but not her parents or friends. Notably, she anticipated some resistance from her parents whom she thought would not want to perceive her as a single parent. Rachel is contemplating becoming an adoptive mother if she is unable to find a male partner with whom she would have a biological child, while she (expectedly) remains fertile.

Rachel: "Well I think my (.) my parents would prefer me not to be a single parent. I don't think they would mind if I was an adoptive parent or had a baby of myself, they'd just want there to be someone else in the relationship so (.) I mostly, don't really talk to them about it very much (laughs). Um (laughs) my sister, eh, works with children who've been excluded from

school and who have kind of various behavioural problems (.) and I think she (.) has been very supportive and would be supportive (.) I think she does subscribe a little but to the attachment theory and sort of thinks that if (...) you know, that if a child doesn't have close attachments at birth then (.) they could be more difficult to parent, later on, I think, I mean she's said that really, but I (.) but she hasn't said don't do it, she's just said, it's going to be a challenge which (.) I knew really so, that was kind (laughs) (Lines: 3570-3583)

In the above extract, Rachel shares her motivations for not sharing her contemplations of be(com)ing a prospective adoptive parent. She explains her motivations for creating space to talk with her sister, who works with children who exhibit behaviour that can lead them to be excluded from school. This reported conversation highlights their exploration of perceiving Rachel as a prospective adoptive parent of a child who might have difficulty forming a secure attachment with Rachel. However, as her sister has not advised her against adopting Rachel expects her to be supportive of a future decision to adopt a child. The positioning of adoptive children having difficulty was discussed in Chapter three. Importantly, comments from adopted children reveal it is the absence of security that leaves them feeling concerned about their present and the future. However, their dreams are of a reconstituted self that draws together both their birth and adopted experiences. This issue highlights the need to extend public discourses (Vashchenko et al., 2012) that can broaden expectations of prospective adopters, their families and those adopted.

### **7.3 Countering concerns**

Participants found several ways to counter concerns that they or others had about becoming adoptive parents. Often these drew on them imagining what the experience of being an adoptive parent would mean for them. Others welcomed contact with those who had already adopted, to allow them and members of their family to peruse what the experience of being an adoptive parent could mean for them. Many participants chose to delay discussing their desire to adopt so to avoid having to counter any

potential concerns. All participants who spoke about the impact of adoption on children situated the needs of their biological children and any potential adopted children above their own.

### **7.3.1. Considering the needs of children**

Countering complex concerns about whether they could adopt a child alongside the needs of their son Noah, Elizabeth and James sought the views of others. Elizabeth spoke to both of their parents and received different views about their potential to become adoptive parents, considering the elevated level of parental care their son Noah required. James noted that unlike his wife he felt no need to need to seek the views or blessing of his parents. Therefore, for them, there was a difference in whose views needed to be courted and what value they had in any decision made by them as a parental couple. It is important to recognise that different views can coexist and that prospective adopters and assessors need to understand any influence this might have on their self-efficacy to become adoptive parents (Bandura, 1997).

Elizabeth     “Yeah, um, my, my parents were happy for us, they, they were, they were great, we will support you, but James’ mum was a bit more hesitant I think she felt that (.) we’d be taking on too much because life with Noah and to be honest we even wondered whether we’d even be considered for adoption because of (.) the nature of Noah’s disabilities and when they actually (.) that that when they did that was a surprise to us, it was a concern but yeah James’s mum was concerned about how a child would cope with Noah, how Noah would cope with a child, she, she she had, she had concerns about that. Um whereas my mum and dad didn’t seem to (.) they just felt that no, no, great this is great, you’ll manage, we’ll all manage”. (Lines: 605-615).

James:       “SO well, I think for Elizabeth there was a lot more conversation with her mum and dad and with my mum and dad about it, and I think you know there was (.) um, I think one or two of them were not keen on the idea, they weren’t so sure, but for me that’s pretty irrelevant as I’d already decided with Elizabeth



that we wanted to do it, but I think, er perhaps Elizabeth found that a bit hard because she maybe felt that she needed the agreement of others". (Lines: 460-466).

Although James did not view his parents' views as relevant, his own reflections provided detail of the concerns he had in relation to how an adopted child would experience being in the world with Noah and vice versa. This reflects the meaningful and detailed analysis that prospective adopters undertake as they contemplate their potential to adopt.

James: "The other challenge that I've not really talked about is the dynamic with Noah and I think that would be incredibly difficult, certainly it would be incredibly difficult with a baby as Noah is full on and um, doesn't really understand (.) er about danger it could be quite a difficult, challenging period, well it would be with a baby, equally, bringing a child in, an adopted child, that relationship with Noah and how that would work just, everything you know an inability for Noah to share, even to let us open our Christmas presents, he's got to open them for us. Can you imagine another child and the dynamic, then tension and the difficulties, so (.) I think either way whether it be an adopted child or having our own baby, I think we personally think, life would be quite difficult simply because of, of having Noah?" (Lines: 536-546).

In the extract above, James navigates the complexity of his son's needs and contemplates the impact these may have on another child. However, he sees potential in the temporality of what might be a challenging period of adjustment of a child joining their family. Reflecting on his experiences raises the potential for prospective adoptive children and how they may be ready to live in a family where another child, their adoptive sibling may have high-level needs. At first sight, this runs contrary to the protective provision of adoption creating a blanket of safety around a 'damaged child' to one that disrupts hegemonic descriptors and encourages insight into the complex constructions inherent in all family experiences.

The impact on her own children was also a factor for Clara who reflected that her children were at different stages of acceptance of them becoming an adoptive family. Watching a television programme gave them the opportunity to explore desires and concerns. This activity serves to highlight the importance of adoption being represented in the media to assist exploration of the concept.

Clara: "We were watching a documentary about that, and he said, (.) he said you know when you talk about adoption I think we should actually do that as soon as possible because you know we should either be a family an adoptive family or a family who fosters. But then my youngest child said oh no I'd move out (laughs). So, I would just get my stuff and, and move out because I would be really cross if they touched my things. So, he's not ready, obviously." (Lines: 3796-3808).

The extract above reflects the opportunity presented by television programmes that can initiate discussion about adoption within families. In addition, it demonstrates that when given the opportunity, children can express views for and against becoming an adoptive family. Being attuned to her children, Clara believes her youngest child is not ready to become an adoptive sibling. Her youngest child expresses a need to protect their personal belongings whereas her older child saw the benefits of what they had to offer a child in need of an adoptive family. This further supports the view that prospective parents can interrogate the complexities of choice for themselves and an adopted child. Their contemplations of 'self' becoming an adoptive parent does not occur in isolation but while negotiating complex contours of familial life and social expectations.

Through interviews with couple Sandra and William, they provided two examples of when their considerations of the needs of children prevented them from initiating adoption procedures. Early in their marriage, they chose not to pursue IVF and felt they would adopt. In the meantime, they became foster carers and thought they would prefer to identify an adoptive child through getting to know a child first rather than

expecting to connect with a child they did not know. However, the first child they wanted to adopt was a young girl (Samantha) whom they liked instantly.

Sandra: "so we, we talked about adoption we went and did the adoption course, we were approved to adopt and then (.) this young lady came into our life at age eleven (.), and she just felt right, so we decided that (.), but she wasn't going to be adopted she came long term, so we, we decided then actually this young person fills (.) the gap in our life (.) and she felt like that as well, that she was happy (.) um (.) so we decided not to adopt we couldn't adopt Samantha because she was eleven years old, she was about 12 or 13 then, and we decided this (.) and she said actually her younger brother had been adopted (.) although she still saw him and still, and still close but it nearly killed her that when (.) this little baby was adopted (.), and so she said no she wouldn't be adopted (.) but she felt that she was our daughter we've always treated her like that and she treats us like we're her parents so (.) that is really why (.) we didn't adopt, we would have done but she doesn't want that". (Lines: 5402-5423).

As a couple, Sandra and William agreed Samantha was the child for them, and they felt ready to adopt her. However, Samantha voiced concerns and asked them not to adopt her. This experience highlights the relationships that adopted children can both gain and lose which highlights the value of including their views about if they want to be adopted. Thus, contemplating the needs of prospective adoptive children needs to include what that means for how they make sense of all their relationships. Another inspiring aspect of Sandra and Williams experience was the enduring parental relationship they have experienced with Samantha and the sense of their being her 'parents in the world' albeit not formalised through biology or adoption.

Several participants referred to knowing others who were adopted, had a family member who was adopted or had become adoptive parents. This provided them with examples of others experiencing adoption in the world and permitted them with an opportunity to use their experiences to

contemplate what adoption might mean for themselves. Charvi spoke about how her fiancé was concerned that he could not love an adopted child as much as a biological child and she described how they visited Andrew's friends who had adopted two children. Charvi and Andrew had been referees for their friends when they had gone through the approval process. Charvi was excited to see the formation of this new family.

Charvi: "They can't have children, they've been trying for at least five years to have children and (.) they couldn't, so they decided to adopt, and they asked Andrew and I to be references, um, so we were, we were quite close to the process, so it was really exciting for me, because I got to see what it was about and what was involved and all the different things involved and they suddenly got a phone call (.) um, telling them that there's two, two children that need a home and they only wanted one (laughs) (.) but (.) the children came as a pair because it was a brother (.) and sister um, and the little boy three years old and the little girl eighteen months and so (.) they said let's just do this. a few days later they invited us (.) over, um, but just, they didn't invite anyone else, just us, because we were so close to the process and I think they know, because they know I want to adopt and um, (.) and that um, it was just lovely, it was (.) it was so nice seeing them play and they called um my friend *Anna*, they called her mummy and you know *Martin* they called him daddy and it was, (..) even they'd only been there for a few days, it was lovely and I loved playing with them, it was really nice (.) and (.) they were just so happy, ..... they're really happy with their new mum and dad". and it was just lovely, it was lovely to see it, just you know (..) and I think Andrew their actually Andrew's (.) friends, Andrew's childhood friends Um, (.) seeing that, I think it's made him (.) um, more sort of pro adoption as well, because he it's like (.) you know that like, they're like a little family, they are a family and you don't have to have a biological child to have a family, to love a child." (Lines: 1823-1851).

The above extract reveals Charvi's experience of her friends who had become adoptive parents. Her close relationships with her friends led her to act as a referee during their approval process. This excited Charvi as it gave her insight into what was practically involved in becoming an

adoptive parent. Interestingly, the assessment and approval process was focused on her friends becoming the parents of an individual child. However, Charvi's narrative explains how the contemplations of what it might mean for a person in becoming an adoptive parent can change in a phone call. Their friends had thought of adopting a single child and then adjusted their expectations and adopted two siblings. But, it also indicates that the outcome for the siblings could have been different if the adopting couple had felt unable to see themselves as starting their adoptive family with two children (Martin, Kelly, & Towner-Thyrum, 2008). Charvi's experience of visiting her friends and their adopted children is of them as a family, and she reflects on how her own fiancé Andrew is now more positive about the potential for adoption to create families.

Similarly, Carmen and Fran's experience with their friends who are adoptive parents extends our understanding of what can be considered the creation of adoptive families.

Fran: "Um and like Carmen says because (.) we've watched our friends go through the process and we're very, we've spent a lot of time with them, so we've heard about the whole of the process goes and then just honestly from the first day their little girl was just such a perfect (.) match for them and them for her and they just (.) it was, it was just like they had been together forever."

Carmen: "It was much within their circle of friends, so she's integrated not only to (.) is like that, it's really interesting because you know you create family and family comes in many different forms and shapes, and you have this family unit, but then we are also in a way, because we're really close friends we are sort of part of the growing up of the child and we see them at least, at least once a month and and you know, so it, it was nice too, and I think, I think seeing them with *Alice* and vice versa, this is like Oh my God That's, you know, we want (.) something like that."

(Lines: 7835-7855)

Charvi, Carmen's and Fran's experiences highlight the importance of the visibility of adoptive families for those contemplating adoption. Sharing in the experiences of others is an important aspect of learning what it means to become an adoptive parent. Viewing siblings as a 'pair' somewhat counters the normative view of most people first becoming a parent to a single child. Importantly, they all experienced an acceptance of adoption as a valued route to parenthood that was not impinged by an idealised view of biological motherhood (Parry, 2005). Indeed, it is in the everyday experience of sharing in the life of an adoptive family that reinforces that this is a positive route to becoming a family. Their experiences reinforce that relationships are formed within intersubjective interactions. Thus, the legal and social structures that define our relationships cannot solely specify how we experience them.

### ***7.3.2. Concerns about being an adoptive parent in the world***

All participants countered their own concerns by drawing on examples from their experience of being in the world to counter these. Sarah had concerns that her diagnosis of bipolar disorder would be viewed as negative in the assessment process. However, her husband John reasoned that the psychiatrist who concluded that she had the capacity to proceed with IVF treatment satisfied the test of her capacity to parent with bipolar.

John: "When we were assessed for the IVF treatment (...) one of the things that they wanted to establish before we went ahead and had any sort of treatment was that they had to consider the welfare of any children that may come into the world as a result of their (.) efforts (.) and so they had to establish they had to satisfy themselves that Sarah was um (.) essentially stable enough and well enough to go through the process and having a child and the welfare of the child that resulted because it would be, (.) be satisfactorily coped with and so in a way I, I, I, since that that question was asked letters went back and forwards between psychiatrists and other people."

- Sarah: "No, but it's a bit."
- John: "and the outcome was that um (.) that, Sarah's condition was stable and managed and so that I imagine the same level of test probably apply."
- Sarah: "Well it's much more vigorous, rigorous isn't it?"
- John: "I think the testing that you're, that you're talking about is what I'm saying is that your mental health status was (.) good enough then (.) better now".

(Lines: 2266-2282).

The above extract depicts a discussion between John and Sarah as to what socially constructed tests of capacity would be valid for Sarah to be approved as an adoptive parent. Although, John concludes the 'test' of Sarah's capacity in relation to her mental health was met through the assessment of a psychiatrist; Sarah was concerned that a more rigorous test might apply in the adoption process. Their discussions highlight the multiple ways in which social structures such as the health service and social services might intervene into private life and make determinations as to a person's suitability to parent. Equally, it evidences that a view formed as to one's suitability to become a birth parent may not transfer to approval as an adoptive parent. As detailed in Chapter five, prospective adopters are provided with little information upon which to make a determination about their suitability (Hicks, 2000; Oosterman et al., 2007). Thus, they are reliant on how they can make sense of their own knowledge and experiences.

James did not distinguish between a biological or adopted child and felt concern when advised an adopted child would not become part of his private family life.

- James: "I guess when I started thinking about it, I just er, perhaps naively thought that you go through the process and then um, you know from my perspective they, they would be my son or daughter [yeah] and I wouldn't, the whole blood thing (.) you know, isn't really an issue for me. So, I didn't, I just thought

they would be part of the family, and that's it. But then when you find out that's NOT fully the case and you've got this continued investment of er, time and energy and making sure everything is going okay and that you've always got, I can't get shadow, something kind of looming over you that [hmm], um, their still the real parents and you know will they want to change their mind and take back the child after you've already become really emotionally attached to them and how horrendous would that be, both for the child and for the adopted parents. So, it sort of brings a little uncertainty and a little bit of risk into the equation that I maybe didn't think was there at the start of the process." (Lines: 419-431).

As described above, James' concerns led him to contemplate the risk of becoming attached to an adopted child who may return to live with their birth parents. He experienced some uncertainty as to what this permeable perception of adoption could mean to him. The weight of his concern is indicative of him feeling the 'real' parents could return to reclaim their child would be a shadow looming over him. His experiences indicate the fear of what is determined as 'real' and therefore reliable for adopters and the adopted child. These assertions also rely on a pronatalist view and expectation that children will want to return to their biological parents and that biology is a preferred choice. This serves to undermine the strength of adopted parents but also positions both as competitive for a child's affections and thus situates the child in the middle of the potential conflict.

Colin and Susan, who had hoped to be able to have their own children in addition to adopting, took a different approach. However, their attempts at IVF were unsuccessful. Susan explains that her previous thoughts had been to learn how to parent her own child, so she then had the skills to parent an adopted child. However, her views on this had since altered, and her work experience with children had increased her confidence.

Colin: "It doesn't influence adopting (..) um (..) with, obviously influence the way you behave with them,



and you know the way you deal with them (..) and towards them (..) and, you are, can't step in that way well even if they don't have contact (...)."

Susan: "Hmm, hmm okay hmm that's fine with me."

Colin: "Yeah."

Susan: "Yeah, I think it would be a different, a different sort of situation, a different sort of parenting. It would be the way that I would view it; I think you're right, so the way that you would."

Colin: "It might feel like you're just fostering in a way then, (.) even though you've got legal rights.....That would be great because that's more than I got from my dad".

(Lines: 3303-3323).

Susan and Colin now see themselves as being able to adopt an older child or siblings. However, contemplating adopting an older child, led them to consider the potential for that child to have a continuing relationship with their birth family. They made sense of this by readjusting the expectations they might have for what adoption would mean in that situation. They referred to it as a type of fostering but with the legal permanence of adoption. As they negotiate this in the interview, Colin reveals that any contact between their adopted child and their birth family would be positive and uses his own childhood experiences to remind us that non-adopted children also have losses in their relationships.

#### **7.4 Chapter summary**

This chapter has examined how prospective adoptive parents experience the social-familial factors that contribute to the construction of adoption in 21st Century Britain that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of their interviews. It examined how socially understood concepts of what it means to be an adoptive parent are intrinsic to the construction of the adopted child. Such an exploration led to the examination of the perceptions of normality of the adopted child and prospective adoptive

parent and the family they wish to create. The chapter raised issues of socially constructed dualistic motivations of prospective adopters being driven by biology or social morality (Stanford, 2009). Furthermore, it demonstrates that this binary construct is too simplistic a model and those individual motivations are complex and can change over time.

For those participants exploring adoption as a potential replacement for having a biological child the construction of the adopted child as damaged made them cautious about proceeding. Many had queries about the attachment they could expect to share with an adopted child, and the dominance of attachment theory remains present both in the expectations of children and parents in adoptive relationships. There was the perception for some of an ever-present but an invisible link between the child and their birth family, which was limited to only a negative gaze (Hill & Edwards, 2009; Suwalsky et al., 2012). Although the continued presence of birth relatives and the state raised concerns for some participants, others were open to exploring how they could adapt to a different meaning of adoption. This raised issues about the flexibility and extension of what could be and should be viewed as 'normal' when constructing the adoptive family.

Many participants had both implicit and explicit experiences of societal norms in becoming a family and often whatever their sexuality this was supported by expectations of marriage before parenthood. However, single parenthood families constitute 25 percent of families living with children in the UK. This is important as many participants felt that normality for them, be that (single) adoptive parenthood or adopting a child with a different ethnic heritage from themselves was acceptable if compared to the social norms that they experience with their friends and family.

Although some participants viewed the decision to adopt as being theirs to make, all participants engaged in discussion with family or friends. However, many participants had not shared their contemplations with their own parents. When participants received negative responses

from their relatives, this was often difficult to experience, even if they shared the same concerns expressed by their family. However, others countered these concerns and questioned whether a judgement was influenced by knowledge of a child's adopted status. For participants who were already parents, they were clear that the needs of their birth children were paramount in any decisions they made about becoming an adoptive parent.

The majority of prospective adopters who participated in this study felt they would become adoptive parents and others thought more time was needed before proceeding with an application. However, a few did not expect to achieve this potential aspect of their self and described several issues that limited their ability to become parents. The following and final findings chapter explored how participants experienced their sense of self during this contemplative process. It examines how they construct their potential future adoptive parental selves, and how they mediate time waiting and being in a world in which they may never become an adoptive parent.

## Chapter Eight - Making sense of be(com)ing self

*"Only authentic temporality that is at the same time finite makes something like fate, that is, authentic historicity, possible." (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p.385)*

Thus far, this thesis has used evidence of participants' experiences to reflect multiple barriers during their contemplations of adoption. In this chapter, I considered how experiencing that incongruity of self, influences their sense of being and becoming. Previous research regarding prospective adopters has considered those who have made some contact with an adoption agency. In part, this is because of ease in having a database of contacts that can be used for recruitment processes. But a Prochaska et al., (2005), model of change would suggest it is equally a signifier of intent if you have acted on your contemplations. However, such paradigms require the purported objectivity of another's view of what is 'action'. For the participants in this study, their experiences of whom they have discussed adoption or the steps they have taken vary. Some participants had not contacted an adoption agency where others had undertaken the process of assessment. However, they each identified themselves as a prospective adopter and chose to participate in this study. What I have learned during this research, is that the contemplation of being an adoptive parent can leave some people with the subjective experience of being a prospective adopter. Importantly, this sense of 'self' remains with them whether they are likely to become an adoptive parent.

Positivist structures lead us to use binary and linear frameworks to make sense of how we develop. Thus, it is easy to think about the experience of prospective adopters as transitioning from a state of childlessness as part of a process of be(com)ing a parent. Indeed, as previously discussed, the dominant discourses within adoption research are often anchored to adults who are 'overcoming' infertility. However, the experiences of the participants in this study, even those who have

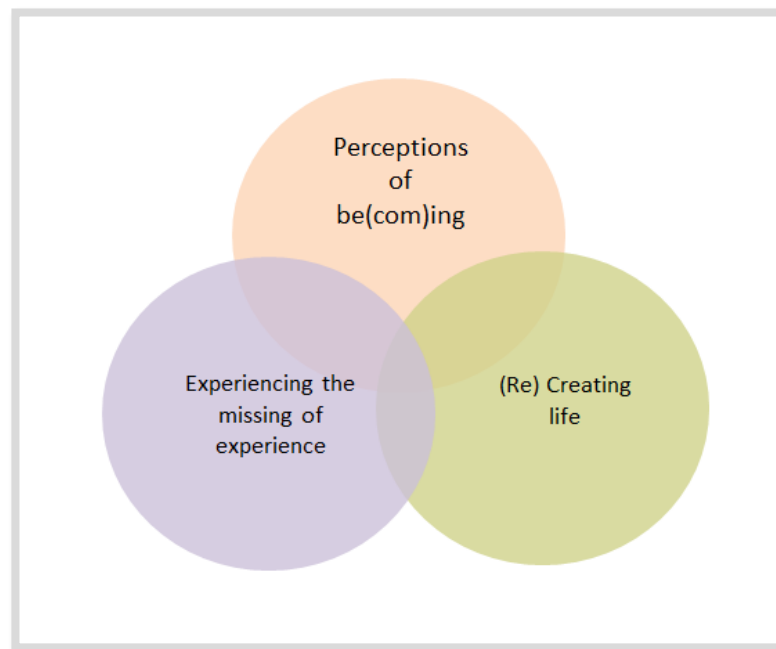
experienced infertility, do not support the premise of a linear transformation to becoming an adoptive parent. Indeed, all my participants shared their experience of not yet be(com)ing an adoptive parent and for some this experience will continue throughout their lives. Consequently, this chapter explores how our experiences contribute to who we become, recognising that we become who we are, even when others may categorise us as not being. Thus, being a prospective adopter is for those who participated in this study anchored to one's experience of contemplating adoption. This is contrary to previous research, which has relied on adoption records listing prospective adopters after they contacted an adoption agency.

A phenomenological examination of prospective adopter's experiences requires us to avoid imposing binary views of what it means to become an adoptive parent. In an exploration of Dasein's pre-ontological being, Heidegger (1953/2010) encouraged us to think differently about time so that we do not view it as a means by which we understand or differentiate various aspects of our being. For example, although, a sense of loss is present for some participants, their experiences are more complex and extend our understanding of how they perceive themselves not yet be(com)ing an adoptive parent. Thus, one of the most important findings emerging from this research is that, whether participants expect to adopt a child or not, their experience of be(com)ing a prospective adoptive parent becomes integral to their sense of self. Being a prospective adoptive parent becomes an aspect of who they are, of how they experience their self and their life, regardless of if they will ever adopt a child. As such, the richness of this additional aspect of self cannot be judged on a binary of success or loss of traditional, transitional stages of what it means to be(come) an adoptive parent.

How prospective adopters who participated in this study, perceive themselves to be, while simultaneously not having the experience of adopting a child is examined through the life they (re)create. This chapter explores the tensions arise between the self-perceptions that participants hold and shared within their interviews, against the social norms that co-

construct and validate who is perceived to be a prospective adopter. Their stories encourage us to look more deeply at the complexity of their experiences and what it means to their sense of 'self' having contemplated adoption. That does not mean that loss, anxiety, happiness, hope, anger, joy and frustration, are not experienced by participants (Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Hillman, & Henderson, 2003). Participants expressed a range of emotion although at times feelings were implied (and I intersubjectively experienced them), they remained largely unspoken. This chapter creates space to observe, experience and emotionally hold those experiences (Burman, 2006). The understanding gained is anchored to the embodied experience described by participants. More keenly than other chapters, I am aware of the reflective use of my 'self', and the experience and emotions, thoughts and feelings that were and are engendered within me (Bengtsson, 2012; Finlay, 2005). An extension of this intersubjective experience will be the thoughts and emotions experienced by you the reader as you traverse this chapter.

Figure 8.1 Theme three: Making sense of be(com)ing self



### **8.1 Intrasubjective perceptions of a private self**

Another implication of the dominance of pronatalism is that it creates a need for those contemplating adoption as a route to parenthood to situate or 'out' themselves publicly. To explore the '*queering*' of normalised routes to parenthood Park (2006, p.216) assists the exploration of our experiences of privacy. This topic has been partially considered in adoption studies that focus on gay and lesbian adopters (Gianino, Goldberg, & Lewis, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2011; Hicks, 2005; Wood, 2015), it has not previously been explored outside a sexuality paradigm. Although this current study did not explicitly collate categorical identifiers from those who participated, the content of their discussion revealed experiences that may or may not signify their sexuality. While recognising the sexuality of my respondents was not a defining issue, pronatalism serves to position gender into the embodied capacity to procreate; thus, not procreating is automatically 'othered' to the majority. Therefore, those who want to, or choose to experience parenthood without pregnancy arguably have a different intrasubjective view of being-in-the-world than those who perceive pregnancy as fundamental to parenthood. In the following discussion 'private' had multiple meanings of 'not being public', that was positioned as a way of being-in-the-world that was not visible to those who hold dominant views (Heidegger, 1953/2010). I found the experiences of my participants included the concept of 'outing' themselves as prospective adopters for multiple reasons which included but was not exclusive to infertility.

As discussed in Chapter six, all the participants experienced be(com)ing a potential adopter, and this manifested itself in different ways as they described and I interpreted their shared experiences. All participants had some choice in whether they wanted to participate, and research ethics provided a process of informed consent and withdrawal from the study. Interestingly, the issue of choice is itself of interest when examining aspects of how respondents shared their intrasubjective experiences to participate in the study. For some, participating in this study provided a means by which they could articulate their experiences in

a safe space. Most participants had chosen to discuss their contemplations of becoming an adoptive parent with some people but not with others.

Hilary is one participant who decided that adoptive parenthood was not ultimately for her. In her interview, she reported having long known that she had a lifelong medical condition that prevented her from becoming pregnant. Her contemplation of adoptive parenthood was triggered by becoming a wife, and this brought into focus her long-known infertility. She describes this aspect of herself of not being able to become a biological mother as private.

Hilary: "Yes, I think that's probably, as I said before you started recording I think that is probably why you've had so many people interested and jumped at the chance of being able to talk about it with someone who knows, is interested in it and, um, (.) because as I said if the reason, like with us is, is because you can't have your own children." (Lines: 4133-4137)

For Hilary, taking part in this study created a space where she could talk about her intrasubjective experience of prospective adoptive parenthood with someone who was a stranger to her. Her decision to participate via the telephone reinforced limits on what I would know about her, other than what she wished to share. Despite these limitations, the extract above revealed the enthusiasm she had to have an opportunity to share her experience of infertility with someone who was 'interested'.

Hilary: "I'm a private person but also (.) the whole subject of not being able to have kids, I don't really want to drag other people down, especially if they're, if they are having kids, I don't want them to feel bad about us not being able to, you know I just don't want to have those conversations really, because you don't want to be worrying about what other people are thinking and feeling and how they're reacting (.) um, (.) so, (.) you know, they're probably more calm, probably, (.) um, but I, I, it's, (..) yeah, you find yourself (.) on your own not able to talk about it with other people in the same situation." (Lines: 4142-4152)



Hilary's sense of being a private person, someone who limits her intersubjective engagement with others is clearly stated. However, she positions this against a pronatalist landscape which she feels suppressed her infertile determined experiences of non-motherhood (Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Letherby, 1999; Locke & Budds, 2013). Her concerns manifest themselves around the potential emotive reactions that others would have to her infertility. Hilary goes on to counter this view by contemplating that people may react more calmly than she anticipates; however, the uncertainty leaves her isolated. To manage her own emotions while sharing this experience, Hilary moves from using I, to referring to 'you' and thereby objectifies herself to protect her self-esteem (Morin, 2006, 2011). However, her experience of infertility is shared with her husband, and so in her narrative above she refers to 'us'. As such, there is evidence of various aspects of what she experiences as her private self that which she knows; that which she shares with her husband; and that which she has shared with me as a researcher. Therefore, her private self, albeit under a cloak of anonymity, is now in a public space, where it might be read, interpreted, and understood by many.

Hilary: "Whereas, (.) talking to you is not hard because, (.) it's a different (.) context than a (.) with more of a reason to it and, and I know that you've talked to other people (.) who have probably been in similar situation so, you're like more of a safe space, I suppose (..)." (Lines: 4167-4172)

Therefore, any sharing of her prospective adoptive motherhood necessitates a public sharing of her private embodied self (Park, 2006). A sharing of her embodied intrasubjectivity means becoming known as infertile. Hilary has not, and will never experience pregnancy; the extracts above revealed some of her subjective experience of being a woman who cannot procreate in a world dominated by pronatalism. Despite this dominance, Hilary refers to the existence of infertile women as something that is experienced negatively by those who are evidently fertile. Thus, Hilary misses the shared expectation of biological motherhood that experienced by her friends; furthermore, her position of being other to the

normative experience remains intrasubjective, as she is reluctant to share this experience with others. Hilary expects that sharing her experience will be a burden to others, particularly if they are expecting their own children. Thus, the weight of her own experience is not isolated to her inability to have a biological child but the impact of that embodied infertility being visible within a fertile social landscape.

Implicit in Hilary's statement is the pronatalist bias that being a woman means to become a mother and that not becoming a biological mother is something to be mourned. As such embedded in her experience is the desire to avoid a complex intersubjective encounter where she and her friends would simultaneously feel bad for each other. However, she finds the context of a research interview about peoples' experiences of adoptive parenthood a safe space. The safety of the research interview space suggests Hilary feels an assurance in what I know as a researcher of this topic. That my experience of being-in-the-world relates to sharing stories of non-motherhood, which in turn invites a visibility to a topic often, hid in pronatalist shadows.

Hilary was not the only participant to explicitly refer to her reasons for participating in this study, Cassandra found the process of talking with me upsetting but also cathartic.

Cassandra: "No, and I, I think that's one of the reasons why I really wanted to talk to you about you know, once I saw that you were doing this on twitter I, 'cos I saw it on twitter, and I really wanted to respond 'cos I just, I just really wanted to, because I've never been able to talk to anyone who um isn't involved who (.) um, who, you know I've never been able to just get it all off my chest without, (.) without (.) you know, I know I'll never meet you and (.) um and this is just research and so I can, I can tell you without you having an expectation of me, I can tell you (.) without, you know, yes I'm getting upset, but I'm not going to completely breakdown, I know that I can say it and that's good, and so I just really wanted to tell you, I hope you don't mind." (Lines 7005-7015).

In the extract above, Cassandra provides detail of her motivation to participate in this study. She describes an unburdening of an aspect of her life experience that she has never been able to share with another in its entirety. This process of divesting her experience is an embodied one that she has carried on her chest, and she views this research as an opportunity to offload to someone who has no expectation of her. Thus, Cassandra describes a sense of control over what she chooses to share and her management of the emotional impact of that experience. This is made easier as she knows she will not have to manage my expectations or my emotional experiences that may precipitate from my intersubjective engagement with her experience. This is of great interest as the experience I shared with Cassandra was one of the most emotive for me as a researcher. These predominantly relate to the experiences Cassandra has not had which are discussed later in this chapter. But at this juncture, it is prevalent, as another example of the complex dimensions of intersubjectivity (Gillespie, 2003) and how they relate to ethical research and social work practice (Parton, 2003). Although, the philosophical insights this can offer are beyond the aims of this thesis, further examination of this issue could have implications for future qualitative research and implications for the development of social work practice.

For Cassandra, part of the safety of sharing these aspects of her private 'self' was the fact that she would never meet me. Thus, this suggests there is some security in knowing that she can reveal her intrasubjective self to me without my knowing her social identity. In her interview, Cassandra started off using only an audio connection via Skype, so although I had my camera available to her, I accepted her choice of audio only. However, at a later stage of the interview, Cassandra revealed her visual subjectivity to me by switching on her camera. Later in this chapter, I discuss how this engagement unfolded so it can be understood fully in the context of how it happened. However, at this stage, it is sufficient to note that participants required different levels of privacy, which was assisted, by having some choice in how they participated in the study. However, I was not explicit about the choices available to them in

my information sheet (see appendix 3), and I have since reflected that this may have prevented some people from participating.

For most participants, the tension of their public and private 'self' was evident in their choice of intersubjective engagement with their family and friends. We have already heard from Rachel in Chapter seven, where we discussed how she had shared her contemplations of adoptive motherhood with her sister, but not with her parents or other people. Rachel asserts there are no reasons why she is keeping her contemplations about becoming an adoptive mother from others.

Rachel: "hmm (...) and I haven't \*(.) umm, haven't discussed it much with other people but only really because it hasn't come up, I think, um you know, not because I'm keeping it to myself for any reason." (Lines: 3584-3586)

Rachel explains the absence of discussing her thoughts of becoming an adoptive mother, as the opportunity for that conversation has not arisen. She reveals a sense of agency in having the ability to keep, or not, an aspect of her being, to herself. However, her agency is dependent upon the opportunity presenting itself where she can use her agentic self. Simultaneously, this suggests a lack of agency in Rachel's willingness or ability to create these opportunities for conversation. As such, the analysis of her sense making needs to extend beyond how she presents herself to others. In knowing herself to be a prospective adoptive parent, Rachel ensures that this aspect of herself is always in her perceptive existence (Heidegger, 1953/2010). However, in not communicating that aspect of her 'self' limits the ability of others to share her private view of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

The relationship between public and private experiences of 'self' was also evident in Sandra and William's experiences of their relationship with Samantha. As foster carers, they had wanted to adopt Samantha, who did not want to be adopted. This scenario raises many issues about the complexity of prospective adoptive relationships and choice in what they

are, what they mean and how they are publicly and privately constituted (Pustilnik, 2002).

Sandra: "That was just a that was just a private one between us it wasn't any...make it more real because she'd been worried about what she was going to do, where she was going to go (.) and, if you don't want to go, if you don't, you know we see you as our own (..) and eh, I think it got to a certain stage that she said I wished you'd have adopted me now because your surname is higher in the register than mine (laughs). She wished she'd changed because she was always last (laughs)." (Lines: 5661-5673).

The issue of permanence of security in knowing the future is prevalent in Sandra's comments above. In relation to self and the relationship, Sandra shared with Samantha, the writing of the private agreement between them served as a measure of the shared authenticity of their relationship (Heidegger, (1953/2010). There is a rich intersubjective honesty between them that allowed Sandra to announce that she wanted to adopt Samantha and for Samantha to refuse. Despite, this apparent conflict in each of their subjective desires, what is apparent from their relationship is not Samantha's rejection of Sandra as a mother, but as a legally defined adoptive mother (Pustilnik, 2002). However, Samantha needed the long-term parental security that adoptive parenthood is intended to provide and Sandra was willing to offer this. Using a phenomenological lens to consider their relationship means avoiding the fragmentation of other aspects of being that can be wrongfully assumed the markers of legally recognised relationships. Our legal constructs bind families in modes of traditional patriarchy where children often assume the surname of their father or primary biological parent. Names give belongingness to our ancestral heritage, thus adopted children lose their legally registered birth name, the legally constructed public identity by which they have to date been known (Pustilnik, 2002). For Samantha as an adolescent, her biological and legal relationships with her siblings were too important to be severed (Gleitman & Savaya, 2011; McLean & Mansfield, 2012; Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Unlike in our biologically formed and legally documented relationships, Sandra and

William found a means by which they could privately formalise the construction of their relationship with Samantha that created a shared acceptance of the meaning they give to their non-public relationships. Where Sandra discussed the complexity of their private relationship in public spaces, she described the pronouns used between her and Samantha not only about their relationship but also between Samantha and her birth relatives.

Sandra: "I mean her parents are still around, the twin brother sees the dad but she doesn't, I think she saw him last year because her Nan died which was his mum Um, (...) but she's no contact with him as such. She doesn't even call him dad, she calls him by his name and if she speaks to her brother 'oh have you seen him?' er, her mum, lives not far, but she never sees her." (Lines: 5680-5691).

Sandra: "Well she still calls us Sandra and William even when we're out, even though when she's introducing us as mum and dad." (Lines: 5717-5718).

The intersubjectivity of Samantha using both her foster carers' first names and the terms mum and dad is of interest. In an exploration of the maternal subject Baraitser (2008, p.108) reflects on the word 'mum' being something that is secretive "to keep mum, means to keep silent, usually about a secret". In terms of the current study, this aspect of secrecy can be transposed to contemplate the privacy of the intersubjective nature of a maternal-child dyad, and the publicly constructed (none)adoptive relationship shared between Sandra and Samantha. With a focus on the maternal Baraitser (2008) accuses Levinas (1985) of avoiding a biological reference when he cites the following:

*"Biological filiality is only the first shape filiality takes, but one can very well conceive filiality as a relationship between human beings without the tie of biological kinship. One can have a paternal attitude with regard to the Other. To consider the Other as a son is precisely to establish with him those relations I call "beyond the possible" [pp. 70-71].*

The complexity of Baraitser's argument and the interrogation of Levinas' position is set deeply in the bias each gives to the maternal and paternal self. Baraitser notes that to change the term paternal to parental

permits the inclusion of both mother and father relationships with either a son or a daughter child. However, if we exercise the gendered debate, and take Levinas' principle at its simplest in relation to adoptive relationships, it is in consideration of another as son or daughter that one can have a relational regard. Equally, it is in the presence of a son or daughter relating to you as a parent that the sense of an intersubjective sense returns to you (Heidegger, 1953/2010). Legally, adoption services to complete this dialogical relationship by formalising these relationships in the form of legislation and certification (Pustilnik, 2002). However, Sandra, William and Samantha, demonstrate that the values of adoptive relationships can transcend formulaic constructs and that our sense of being in the world is anchored to the essence of the relationships we choose to share with others.

## **8.2 (Re) Creating life as a prospective adoptive parent**

The impact of making sense of a dichotomous experience required many participants to accept the landscape of their worldview and to adapt their self accordingly. Their experiences of wanting to create a life that included the parenting of children were often impaired. Participants' subjective agency and relationships with others both enabled and constrained the re-creation of a potential future self. This required prospective adopters to examine what they knew and to live with the experience of a yet to be known future self (Heidegger, 1953/2010). For some participants, their inability to create life in the embodied presence of a biologically related child was experienced as a loss. Although, this was also a loss of their potential self to become a biological parent, as discussed in Chapter six several participants chose not to experience other routes to biological parenthood such as IVF treatment. This is a key issue for those assessing prospective adoptive parents, as they need to understand that for some, the desire for a biological child may not supersede becoming a parent via adoption. Indeed, some situated the creation of their future parental life as anchored to the intersubjective experience shared with a child. Therefore, of most relevance was the life to be created not the route they took to achieve this.

The creation of new life was highlighted for both themselves and their potential children in the imaginings of the familial experiences they could share. For some, this imagining of a future 'self' was abstract, but other participants relied on their shared experiences with friends who were adoptive parents. Notably, the absence of being an adoptive parent was experienced as a missed opportunity for all who participated. This remained the case even when some had decided and/or accepted they would be unlikely to adopt a child. Several participants identified challenges to becoming an adoptive parent, but they remained resolute that they would eventually succeed. Whereas others retained a deep sense of loss at not becoming an adoptive parent (Pivnick, 2013). The sharing of their experiences during this study was cathartic for some, as many had not discussed these private contemplations with others. I remain honoured that they shared their experiences with me so that we can further our understanding of others.

### ***8.2.1 Making sense of a temporal self***

Colin and Susan explained how they had wanted to become parents for many years and revealed they had experienced several miscarriages. This suggests there was a time when they felt they were ready to become biological parents. Thus it was interesting that their discussions about the delay in pursuing adoptive parenthood included reflections on a transient lifestyle.

Susan: "Well we started trying to have our own child um and I just have had a series of miscarriages err so (.) and I never wanted to go down a kind of IVF route which I always felt if it was gonna be, it was gonna be and that if it wasn't then it just wasn't. And so, then we had quite a transient lifestyle with me being on short-term contracts and you know moving around quite a lot and just didn't really feel settled enough to really entertain the idea (.) of taking on a cat never mind a child."

(Lines: 2688-2690).



In the extract above, Susan explains that she and Colin found they were unable to procreate a child. Susan made sense of this experience by offering a view of allowing destiny to take its course rather than opting for a course of IVF treatment; Heidegger (1953/2010, p.384), defined this process as 'handing oneself over to traditional possibilities'. Susan goes on to explain that they then experienced a transient lifestyle. However, there are no pronouns used in her narrative as she describes moving around, not being settled and unable to have a view of herself, or they as a couple to parent a child or even care for a cat. Although Susan's discourse shared little in terms of the explicit detail of her experience of miscarriages, the extract above suggests it had a profound impact on her sense of self. Following more than one miscarriage, a time came when Susan recognised her future 'self' was unlikely to include being a biological mother (Wachtel, 2009). Heidegger suggests it is in knowing our future self that ultimately means an acceptance of our death, that we can return being-in-the-world as our authentic temporal self.

These Heideggerian concepts reflected in Susan's experience as detailed below demonstrate the multifaceted fragmentation of many aspects of her self at that time. However, our being-in-the-world is always temporal, and Susan's shared experience demonstrates how they are recreating their potential future selves.

Susan: "I think probably even if we managed to have our own child I would have been interested in adopting as well, anyway that, that had always been part of our plan... was to have one of our own and to adopt one." (Lines: 2742-2744)

Susan: "and then I'd take on an adopting child I think probably because I've felt that it might be quite difficult initially and if you've got no real experience of parenting, you could find that quite hard but I don't necessarily feel that way anymore actually (.) and I guess I have more experience with hanging with kids now (...) and different sort of kids." (Lines: 2753-2757).

Susan explains how in the interim period her experiences with children have altered her views about what she can become. Thus, for her, there is a difference in conceiving herself as a parent of a newborn child and of becoming an adoptive mother to an older child. Susan and Colin had always seen themselves as birth parents first and then adoptive parents where they could apply their parenting skills to the adopted child's needs. However, miscarriages meant the creation of a biological family was not possible, and this was Susan's reflective experience of their potential ability as parents. Her view of herself as a prospective adoptive parent altered with her experience of spending time with children (Hohwy, 2007). These experiences gave her a perception of herself relating to different children, which allowed her to contemplate recreating her life with an adopted child.

At the time of their interview, Lynne and Malcolm experienced a feeling of being demoralised and restricted which stalled their potential to foresee a way forward to creating life as potential as adoptive parents. Their attempts to make sense of this led them to compare their lives with those of friends and neighbours and of being ordinary.

Lynne: "Yeah, that whole list was stuff that you couldn't have and we were thinking, we're a normal (.) middle class, you know, we've got a normal house. There is nothing unusual about our house; it's a bog standard mid terrace house. It's the kind of thing that pretty much all of our neighbours either had children, grown up; it's just normal, there's just nothing." (Lines: 1037-1041)

Malcolm: "all of the things, all of (.) the restrictions they placed on us (.) are still going to be there and if we've got to go through the entire process and then be told at the end, well actually you don't (.) achieve it. It's (.) it just seems (.) un.. you feel demoralised by it."

Lynne: "yeah, that's the Christian way of describing it. It does feel a bit (...) I don't know, (...) I do feel a bit discriminated against, in many ways, the fact that a, (.) I think if we had been (.) not of maybe the religion

or colour that we are, it sounds horribly racist but it sort of reverse things, you know.”

(Lines: 1355-1365).

Their experience of assessment, which negated their opportunity to become adoptive parents at this time, left them flummoxed. They were unable to see how they were different from any other family or from their neighbours. Lynne and Malcolm represent the white wedded heteronormative population, which as discussed in Chapter three, are most likely to become adoptive parents. They tried to make sense of how despite addressing all the challenges the assessors had placed in front of them, they felt discriminated against. Their reasoning led them to consider that their ordinariness meant they were not a valuable commodity to the adoption market (Blackstone et al., 2004; Clifton & Neil, 2013; Scott & Duncan, 2013). This raised the issue of the barriers to recreating a life as an adoptive parent, and the issues prevalent in those undertaking assessments (Selwyn, 2016). Indeed, Malcolm and Lynne’s experience of not feeling unique challenged the purported focus of assessments on adoptive parental capability. Although the PAR offers a standard structure to the issues examined during prospective adopter assessments, it is important to note that these exist within a commoditised market. As discussed in Chapter three, the impact of the engagement, or lack of, between adoption agencies has had a demonstrable impact on the success of ‘matching’ adoptive placements (Farmer & Dance, 2015; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012).

Other barriers to (re)creating an adopted family life were the need for secure employment this was expressed by numerous participants but was particularly prevalent for those who would be a single adoptive parent. To be more specific, from my participant group this issue pertained to single adoptive motherhood, as all male participants were in a relationship. Rachel’s contemplation of single adoptive parenthood raised conflict between her professional role as an obstetrician and her potential self as a single mother. However, this was not a binary dilemma, and she

identified experiences from her professional life that she thought would assist her in parenting a child who may have experienced trauma.

Rachel: "but then the other thing that I'm sort of balancing is that I am a doctor, and I am quite (.) busy. So, if, I think, (.) I think it would not be a brilliant fit if it was quite a, umm, a difficult child who needed, difficult is the wrong word just a child who needs a lot of support time and attention, maybe I wouldn't be the best parent for that child (.) but then at the same time, I've worked on the rape crisis helplines I've worked on rape crisis helplines for a lot of years, so I'm reasonably (.) um, familiar with childhood sexual abuse and (.) and I have kind of a reasonable understanding of the amount that, that goes on, so in a way I think I may be quite a good choice to parent a young girl who's experienced that because it's something that I'm pretty familiar with (.) So these are some of the thoughts that are going around in my head about it". (Lines: 3499-3521).

In the extract above, Rachel explores several aspects of her professional self as and how it may hinder and assist her as a single prospective adoptive mother. In her deliberations, she notes the value of the knowledge and experiences she has had in her work and reflects on how she could usefully apply them as an adoptive parent. More specifically, she sees the unique value that her experiences could offer a girl who has been sexually abused. Her perceptions extend pronatalist idealism and rather than perceiving a child who has suffered abuse as a challenge, Rachel is assessing the potential balance created by the combination of their previous experiences (Glidden, Flaherty, & Mcglone, 2000; Kaniuk et al., 2004). However, this has to be balanced with the professional demands of her being a doctor and a single mother (Copeland & Harbaugh, 2010) the parental time an adopted child would need. Rachel's deliberations can be viewed through the linear stages of change proffered by (Prochaska et al. (2005), which positions her in the pre-contemplative and contemplative stages. Although, these simplistic models can be a useful tool in deciding readiness, what this thesis is consistently evidencing is the complexity of the participant's

contemplations, but also their active engagement in understanding themselves as prospective adopters (Rober, 2005).

### ***8.2.2 Temporal prospective adoptive relationships***

Some participants had completed the adoption process and had an awareness of a child whom they envisaged adopting. Kate's experience demonstrates that there can also be a temporality in the recreation of a prospective adoptive relationship. Kate explains she was 'matched' with a little boy and attended an adoption activity day so she could meet him. However, a few days before the activity day she received information from the social worker that a birth family member lived close to her address and this created a risk to the placement.

Kate: "So I went on Saturday and (.) obviously, originally the plan was I was going there to meet this little boy and that he would be you know, so he was there, and I did play with him, but in my head I was still thinking through all this decision that I had to make, it was really, it was quite hard really 'cos I could tell the foster carer really wanted me to be I, it felt like I'd not had time to even digest the information, thinking about it and thinking about the implications 'cos in me head I was trying to work a way round it. So I was thinking well actually we could move, or we could, but then at the weekend I just sat down and thought actually this child needs permanence, he doesn't need to come to a new home to then, because they changed the guidelines about when he could go to school because he was, he's four in August, at first they said I could keep him off and delay him starting And then they changed their minds and wanted him to start in September, so I was thinking, he'd come to me, he'd go to school and then we might move house that's no start for anybody. It's so turbulent, (.) so I was thinking, no actually, realistically one of the reasons why I'd thought about now as well was because of where I live because of what I can access and actually it is so child friendly, to then move and (..) not have access to the things that would make our life really nice, it was just really, really, difficult."  
(Lines: 5202-5237)

The extract above evidenced the way in which Kate re-examined the potential to create a family with this little boy after receiving information that there was a difficulty about where she lived. Although, the event itself highlights the potential value of interagency placements if there is a need to ensure that the geographical location of an adoptive placement is a suitable distance from where the birth family reside (Farmer & Dance, 2015). That issue aside, the notable points for Kate was that she had begun to view herself and this child as a collective. As such, her contemplations of addressing the location issue led her to think 'we could move'. It was only in the separation of their prospective intersubjectivity that Kate was able to determine that there was an irreconcilable difference in their subjective needs (Ammaniti & Trentini, 2009; Davies, 2011). At its most basic, this little boy needed a caring and supportive home and Kate could provide that. However, her ability to provide that parental care was intrinsic to the support network that she had around her; moving home to meet a need for the child threatened the stability that led to her approval as an adopter.

Kate's experience illuminates the other factors that can impact on the matching process, the first being the age of the little boy who was reaching his fourth birthday and would soon be categorised as a child who was 'hard to place' (Kaniuk et al., 2004). It is apparent that this was a difficult experience for Kate and that she felt positioned as the decision maker. Notably, she does not fully articulate what she perceived to be the wishes of the foster parent. Although she inclusively uses the pronoun 'we' when talking about her potential relationship with him, she maintains a distance in not referring to herself as his prospective adoptive mother or to him as her potential adopted son. In addition, Kate positions her analysis of the complex situation as a cognitive process where information was digested. Despite the turbulence of the situation, where it appears the social worker was still keen for the little boy to be adopted by Kate, she refrains from using terms that would reveal the emotional impact this situation had upon her. Finally, Kate decides against adopting the little

boy, but her experience highlights concerns of the ethical dilemmas potentially experienced by some prospective adoptive parents.

Positively, Kate's experience has not deterred her, and she continues to imagine her future life with an adopted child. For her, becoming an adoptive parent means contemplating how her dog would be integrated as part of adopted family life. Kate explained how her rescued greyhound dog was an integral part of her life and she visualised the relationship that her adopted child might have with her dog.

Kate: "that was another obstacle I was thinking how would I manage a child and a dog when I was out for a walk what if the dog sees a squirrel, you know, how would I manage that and I need to be able to tell them about the rules of how they behave around a dog like that, so not like normal dogs there, they've been working dogs, so that was another obstacle and that was another thing that I was still go over about how will I, how will I manage walking a dog and having a child (.) there, how they'll interact and what if they don't like each other (.) 'Cos I'd be distraught if I had to give up my dog, or you know so it's (..) it's all those little bits isn't it that you can think about actually it would be really nice to have a child and be a parent and be part of that process, but (.) life is (.) full of all sort of little bit of things that. I think it's that (.) I have to try and not think too far ahead. But think working out the practicalities so thinking about maybe what I'd do is instead of having the dog on a longer lead I'd have a short lead." (Lines: 4979-4994).

Kate was concerned that if her potential adopted child and her dog did not have a reciprocal regard for each other that she would have to find another home for her dog. As part of Kate's contemplation, she imagined the inclusion of an adopted child while undertaking daily routine tasks. Her feelings towards her dog are so strong that she would feel distraught if he was not part of her life. However, her thoughts also focused on more practical details such as how she might manage to take both her dog and adopted child for a walk. Kate's narrative reflects her need to anticipate practical problems as a means of preparing herself for a new way of being in the world (Prochaska et al., 2005). Although, she recognises that she cannot predict all the issues that she may encounter or the decisions that

she might need to make. She is conscious of not trying to think too far ahead, which suggests there are limits to the value of envisaging our future sense of self.

### ***8.2.3 Be(com)ing normal: Adoption as an equal route to parenthood***

Chapter six explored the negotiation experienced by prospective adopters who traverse dominant pronatalist narratives that situate adoption as a less preferred route to parenthood. Thus, for Ann, achieving parenthood via adoption, was not immediately available for her to experience, as discourses for primarily choosing to become a heterosexual adoptive parent are not promoted. Indeed, contemporary research into motivations of British adoptive parents found that gay, lesbian and heterosexual adopters chosen route to adoption, continue to follow normative expectations (Jennings et al., 2014). Notably, the participants in Jennings et al., study were all approved adopters. Ann describes the realisation that she could choose adoption as a preferred route to parenthood as a 'lightbulb moment' in which she determined it was acceptable to experience adoption as an alternative route to create a family. However, the intersection of dominant pronatalism (Brown, 2005; Daly, 1988; Daniluk, & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003), with adoption as a primary choice, particularly, for heterosexual couples to achieve parenthood, raises a new challenge to social workers. It could lead to assessments that have to determine the value of a heterosexual couple's desire to experience adoptive parenting as opposed to the normative biological route. More specifically, naturally experiencing oneself as a coupled, heterosexual prospective adoptive mother, challenges theories of maternal instinct, in which Chapter five demonstrated, remain dominant in the recruitment of prospective adopters. This issue is further highlighted in Ann's anticipation that she will instinctively feel motherly towards her adoptive child.

Ann: "I felt that I would have no problem bonding and, and having that sort of um, motherly instinct I think that



would occur quite naturally for me. (.) And I never considered adoption, it just didn't come into my head and I always thought if you were to adopt it would be because you can't have your own children, but, you know you weren't able to conceive [mm], so I always felt like that mm, (...). Mm, it never occurred to me (.) until you know you have a sort of light bulb moment and then I felt that (.) adoption was just really an alternative route to having a family, that's just the way that I thought. It was, it was not something that you could or couldn't do whether you couldn't conceive it's just another option of having a family' (Lines: 101-110)

The above extract details how Ann's maternal instinct transcends pronatalist assumptions of a biological, evolutionary based drive that promotes the desire for a biological child as normal (Boyle et al., 2004; Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016). In doing so, it also disrupts normative views of maternal bonding, which Stern, (2002, p.23) purports that 'mothers act very differently with infants than with other adults or older children'. However, even feminist theorists are troubled by distinguishing between biological and adoptive mothering. In her desire to be inclusive of all mothers, Ruddick (1989, p.51), separates the labour of birthing from mother's work, which leads her to distinguish labour as the 'birth giver' and propose that in a social context all mothers are 'adoptive'. Despite her aim to be inclusive, Ruddick's (1989) position, as anchored to the primacy of biological motherhood, struggles to bridge the biological and social void. Arguably, Ann's experience helps to scaffold how being a prospective adoptive mother, should be valued as equal to even if different from biological motherhood.

Other female participants also expressed the view that they anticipated no difference in the experience of motherhood via adoption. In her narrative, Ramneet asserts her expectation that the love she would feel for either an adoptive or a biological child would be the same. As discussed in Chapter six, Ramneet had always wanted to become an adoptive parent. However, her ex-partner had not shared that same experience of self which contributed to ending their relationship.

Ramneet: "I don't feel any different, you know if we, even if it was my own child or an adopted child there wouldn't be any difference for me because I would love him or her the same and seeing and working with children (cannot understand word) because I did some training experience working with children and seeing how neglected they were, has made me think I could offer so much more and as a single person as well too um to kind of give back and to have some self-satisfaction too, rather than just having my own children." (Lines 226-223)

Thus Ramneet's previous experience of perceiving herself as a prospective adopter had been as part of a couple but now lay in single adoptive parenthood. In the extract above, there is an element that this was once a shared experience with the use of 'we' but quickly becomes apparent that her experience of being a prospective adopter is in being a single parent. Although Ramneet's experience of her perceived 'parental self' was previously as part of a heterosexual couple, it had not included exploration of biological parenthood. Thus, her experience differs from that of single heterosexual women prospective adopters, such as Ben-Ari and Weinberg-Kurnik (2007) who interpret the decision of single women to become an adoptive parent, as a transition from a private self-centred existence to one that is socially independent.

The normality of adoption as a route to parenthood was not limited to female participants. Several male participants saw adoption as a positive choice, albeit, after biological options were redundant. In his interview, Peter explained that the potential for him to consider adoption had occurred 15 years earlier when he registered with a dating agency.

Peter: "The first time I even considered it a possibility was umm, internet dating 15 um years ago or so, when they used to have an option on, I can't remember which site it was they used to ask the question would you consider adopting I think that's gone now, (..) but, maybe it was before then, but certainly from then I've always thought well maybe I wouldn't be able to have children because not everyone is, um, (.) fertile. So, it's always been in the back of my mind as a as a possibility (..) um, (.) but it's been in the back of my mind for a long time (Lines: 6424-6434)

Completing the application for the dating agency provided Peter with an opportunity to contemplate the potential of becoming an adoptive father. He reflects he never took fertility as a certainty, and therefore had long contemplated adoption as a route to creating a family. This experience enabled him to contemplate himself as a prospective adoptive parent at a time before being in a relationship. Indeed, Peter's narrative explains that he has long had the perception of himself as a prospective adopter embodied in his mind. Thus, contrary to often, emotive rhetoric in recruitment campaigns for adopters, Peter's experience suggests it could be useful to provide everyday opportunities where people can contemplate being a prospective adopter. Such a concept dovetails with the experiences in the previous section of this chapter, which highlight the benefit of opportunities for prospective adopters to safely reflect on and share private aspects of their self.

### **8.3 Experiencing the missing of experience**

All participants shared the experience of missing an experience of self. This may have been in their situating themselves into yet becoming or had concluded that they would never experience adopting a child. Thus, our experiences of who we remain in constant flux with who we are not and create a need for us to make sense of why we are not able to be the self we perceive ourselves as being. For some, this was having the opportunity to have their perceived experience of being a parent. Although he had a child, Noah, whom he loved very much, James expressed his desire to parent a child who was neuro-typical. Both James and his wife, Elizabeth, had spoken of having a second child and had perceived themselves to be a family of four, so space for their second child remained missing in their lives, and the scoping of a biological solution to that was unsuccessful due to genetic complexities.

James: "wanting a bigger family and wanting to love and experience another child and bring them up and part

of it is also is the opportunity, er, to bring up a child that is neuro-typical, that er doesn't have autism, because although Noah is absolutely amazing, he's a wonderful child and we love him to bits , it is very challenging and I do feel like I've missed out a lot on the developmental stages that you would have with a neuro-typical child and I would love to have those experiences" (Lines: 500-506).

James' narrative reflects the contribution that parenting a child can bring to an adult's experience of life. In the abstract above, James potential states that adopting a child would enable him to create a larger family. This simultaneously provides him with a broader range of parenting experiences and thereby a more expansive experience of his self. This does support statements made in NAW campaigns discussed in Chapter five about the value of adoption being positioned as a positive life choice. During this doctoral study, we have seen the success of recruitment campaigns to lead to a surplus of approved adoptive parents. In Chapter three I argued for the importance of the humane approach to social work advocated in child protection practice (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Featherstone, Morris, & White, 2013), should be extended to a transformative view of adoption. Such an approach presents a challenge to our profession and how we ensure the principles of humane social work practice (Broadhurst et al., 2010). It requires the creation of a service where both children and adults needs and experiences are comprehensively understood, so we are not seen to disregard them.

James alludes to the parental challenges raised by Noah's diagnosis of autism, and this leads him to reflect on his missed experience of parenting a neuro-typical child. It is important not to be dismissive of James' experience of parenting Noah, and as reported in Chapter three, terms such as 'challenging' are often attributed to children with disabilities and adopted children. Concepts of idealised pronatalism lead adults to expect to give birth to a child who will represent the normativity of child development. James' experience reveals that an adult's experience of parenthood is intrinsic to how they view their subjectivity in relation to

their child's subjective self. Indeed, pronatalist dominance of transitions to parenthood is also embedded in the expectations of a child to follow linear developmental pathways (Kaiser, 2004; Parratt & Fahy, 2011; B. Rasmussen, Dunning, Hendrieckx, Botti, & Speight, 2013). These are subsequently, integrated to the expectations of being a parent of a child who is not disabled. As such, James' perception of fathering a neuro-typical child is a treasured aspect of parenting that he is missing. As in most research on parenting, there is a bias towards mothering, the same is true in the literature that explores parenting a child with a disability (Harrison et al., 2007; Resch et al., 2010; Unger et al., 1988). Furthermore, there is a tendency to position the disabled child as 'hard to place'. James does admit that there are challenges in caring for Noah but also notes how amazing his son is and how much he is loved. Close attention was given to the needs of children already born to and living with the prospective adopters. James and Elizabeth had to consider their son Noah but found that extended family also expressed differing views in relation to their preparedness to adopt and the potential impact on Noah.

Elizabeth: "We just couldn't imagine (.) life without another child in it and (.) we felt that we've gotta lot of love and (.) we wanted a brother or sister for Noah, which kinda felt like we were kinda at a loss with the three of us (...) [right] and that we felt life would be a four. I don't know I sort of see us as an uneven number but, but, and at the time we just wanted to kind of fill what felt like a gap (.) um (...) and we decided to go for it, (...) funny enough we had we came across, some members of our family were up for it, and other members weren't so much (.), so that was interesting so it, (.) it (.) wasn't met with joy by everyone."  
(Lines: 594-603).

In the above extract Elizabeth talks about the experience, she shared with her husband James, and the absence they felt of an imagined fourth member of their family. How it was unimaginable to contemplate herself without another child. Despite Elizabeth, feeling her family was incomplete, she and James made the decision not to have any more birth children after Noah, because of the likelihood that another child would also be born with high-level care needs. However, they also wanted Noah to

have a sibling, and there was some awareness of this being an enduring relationship that Noah could share once his parents had died, so he was not alone in the world. These experiences note the multifaceted value that an adoptive child can bring to multiple members of a family, but equally the loss that is felt when that experience is not lived.

Notable for all participants was their ability to make sense of their world and to reason the choices or lack of choices they had. Importantly, choice and lack of choice remain, as with many experiences, not mutually exclusive. James was also reflective of the competing career and educational experiences that he and his wife desired. He had a successful career in a job that he loved whereas to date, Elizabeth had missed career opportunities because she had provided the primary care for their son.

James: "Well, I think the most likely thing that will happen is that it will continue to drift [right] and that we won't do it yet. Hmm, because I think Elizabeth's now finished her degree, she wants to get onto her masters, she wants to er, get her career started, if we adopted, that would stop. I don't see how there would be any other way and we don't want to do that". (Lines 551-555).

James reflects on how achieving Elizabeth's career ambitions could impede future opportunities to adopt. James is supportive of Elizabeth's goals, and his quandary signifies the continued challenge that parents, predominantly women, face in choosing between their career and motherhood. Therefore, James expects a sense of drift to take place, and unlike biological parenthood, they are not pressured by fertility levels. However, we live in a world where most people's lives are organised around their employment and this role then becomes part of our social identity. The issues prevalent above for James and Elizabeth is embedded in the relationship between pronatalism and British society's capitalist patriarchy (Brown & Ferree, 2005; Folbre, 1983; Kawash et al., 2011). Notably, as the mood for equality ebbs forward, family choices for Elizabeth and subsequently for James are constrained. However, this does not constrain the government led rhetoric in Chapter five that saw a keen

focus on women in NAW recruitment campaigns. Women in our society continue to be socially controlled by their potential fertility and gendered role as carers in society.

For Hilary, contemplating what personal choice she had or did not have was very distressing for her. Hilary describes herself as a 32-year-old writer and editor. A lifelong medical condition means that Hilary is unable to have a biological child and she explains adoption was something she explored with her husband after they married. For her, it was important the man she married was content not having children, as she did not want to deprive him of the opportunity to become a biological father.

Hilary: "at that point, we were thinking (.) you know, how great you, we have an option to give a child a life that they wouldn't (..) you know, otherwise have it's hard to say it without sounding (..) bad isn't it ?(..) that you know, you just (...) you can't really um, (..) underestimate the impact that (..) trauma (.) will have on your life (.) and um you know, why adoptive parents and you know that (.) they don't pull their punches um (..) and it is (..) just an absolutely massive undertaking and I think it is, I think also we feed off each other, I think (.) if, if one of us was absolutely committed and passionately (.) for it they would bring the other one along." (Lines: 4250-4265).

Their research into adoption led Hilary to the view that adoption was not simply an alternative to having a child of your own but was a completely different undertaking. Although she perceived adoption as a socially good thing to do, Hilary also viewed it as a potentially arduous and demanding task with no guarantees of a happy outcome. This uncertainty is present with all routes to becoming a parent, but dominant pronatalist views proffer positive messages about biological parenthood. After contemplation, Hilary explained that she was not prepared to put her current happiness at risk and was thus no longer as excited about the possibility of adopting (Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016). Her experiences highlight the importance of continuity to support prospective adopters' perception of themselves as adoptive parents. However, it also highlights

the construction of adoption and the hegemonic needs of adoptive children, demanding a more challenging form of parenting. Therefore, for Hilary, adoption was no longer considered a viable choice.

For Cassandra, recalling her missed experience of parenting an adopted child was extremely upsetting. After achieving approval as an adoptive mother, Cassandra was shown photographs of her potential adoptive son. However, she became seriously ill and was hospitalised, which disrupted the adoption process. When her health returned, Cassandra was unable to contact her social worker, and despite again commencing the adoption process she never reached a stage where she was matched with a child. Some years later, her friends then approved adopters saw photographs of the same child.

Cassandra: "while I was talking to my friend, one of the children that they introduced her to was the same child that they'd introduced me to, so I knew that two or three years down the line that he was still, he was still waiting to be adopted and (.) and, and that was just, I mean, you know, I didn't have (.) I didn't have anywhere to go with that I didn't have anyone to talk to about that, I didn't have anyone to (emotional) you know express exactly how that made me feel, how unhappy that made me feel and you know, it was just horrible, it was horrible (..)." (Lines: 6738-6746).

The impact of her own loss and her perception of the child who has missed the experience of her adopting him had a huge emotional impact on Cassandra. Her connection to the child developed from seeing his photograph, the photo of the child that might have become her son. He is unlikely to know there is someone who is attached to him this way. Thus, he is unknowingly missing the experience of knowing someone wanted to adopt him; although this ignorance equally, this spares him from the emotional turmoil of this particular loss. Ultimately, the awareness of his time waiting for an adoptive parent and the loss of what he also has experienced is palpably intertwined with Cassandra's own loss. But she had nowhere to go with those emotions, no one to whom she could express the bereavement that she felt. Her experiences reflect that she



invested much of her prospective parental self in her contemplation of motherhood with a child she will never meet. In social work practice, Cassandra's experiences raise awareness about the impact of recruiting prospective adopters who may not become an adoptive parent and the lack of support available if they have been unsuccessful.

Cassandra: "I really wanted a boy and I knew, that this boy was there, (.) and I knew that he was there two, three years later (emotion) and um and then at the time you know there was a lot, it was under the last Labour government (.) and so there was also, well not the last one but, it was under a labour government and there was an awful lot of conversations and talk about (.) and making the process easier because of all these children waiting um and I knew that , yeah there are children waiting but sometimes their waiting not because there aren't the people who are coming forward but because (.) because the processes in the Local Authority agencies can just be so shambolic, and because their shambolic children are just left (.) and it's heart breaking and um (..) and that's what happened to me and I wish I could have told somebody (.) that at the time and that it was just too, it was just too painful, it was just too raw, and I couldn't stand, I wanted to scream at the world (.) but I couldn't scream at the world." (Lines 7127-7139)

For Cassandra, the missing of this experience is not passive and dull; it can rage and fill a void like a silent scream. Cassandra spoke of wanting to scream at the world over a sense of injustice but not being able to overcome shambolic governmental processes that disable rather than enable the creation of families, leaving would be adopted families in fragmented states rather than adopting a shared experience of a familial adopted self. At a time when we have more approved adopters waiting than children who can be adopted, we need to question the impact that waiting has on them. This is not to say that children should be waiting for adults. We have no idea about the boy that Cassandra had hoped to adopt as his story; his potential screams are hidden from our view. To disregard the impact of societal constructs on any person is to lose touch with humane social work practice (Broadhurst et al., 2010; Featherstone et al.,

2013). The marketisation of adoption should not lead us to consider the balancing of supply and demand but the very nature of how we nurture humanity so that we can better nurture each other.

Peter describes the existential panic he felt at the prospect of not becoming a father be that by birth or adoption. However, he makes sense of his anxiety by positioning it alongside his wife Fiona's potential experience of never having a biological child (Rumsey, 2003). The experience of the maternal-child dyadic bonding is associated with theories advocating the specialness of what it means to be a biological mother (McElwain, Booth-LaForce, & Wu, 2011; Suwalsky et al., 2012). Thus, Peter finds himself estranged from those first experiences that are understood to be privately shared between mother and child (Harris, 2008).

Peter: "umm, *Fiona's* still not sure whether she wants (.) whether she thinks we should (.) try adoption or try and conceive and that's partly because we are getting the impression that umm, you (.) can't (.) probably can't adopt a baby (.) and (.) she (.) I think because she would very much miss the (..) the experience of having a baby." (Lines: 6491-6495).

As Peter reveals here, for some prospective adopters, the adoption of a child does not prevent you missing the experience of having a biological child. His reflections on his wife's desire to conceive reveal the intrasubjective experience that maintains the prevalence of pronatalism in the shared embodiment of pregnancy. The lack of availability of babies for adoption constructed in campaigns to adopt older children as described in Chapter five. These discourses serve to define the scope within which prospective adopters try to make sense of what adoption and becoming a parent could mean for them. Peter is left with having to contend with the fact that if they cannot have a child biologically, that a missing of a much-wanted experience could forever be part of his being-in-the-world (Duyndam, 2007; Kleiman, 2004; McGinley, 2011).

Furthermore, contemplating adoptive parenthood is arguably more difficult when there is an absence of discourses on be(com)ing a non-biological parent. This diversion from the norm feeds into the othering of what a potential adopted child could be like when there is no scope for knowing the personality of the child you might be matched with. Notably, this is rarely a thought for those who decide to become biological parents. This uncertainty of whether they would 'like' their adopted child, deterred Sandra and William from adopting, despite feeling that children of their own were missing from their lives. However, this decision led them to foster children and on that journey to meet two children that they would have wanted to adopt and to have the shared experience of being their parent.

William: "So there was always something missing in our life (..) I don't know if it's children (..) so urm, one day we sat down, we (..) we talked about adoption (..) we were interviewed (..) um, had a few tests and stuff like that and then (..) we will go down that route (..) and then one day we were sitting thinking about it (..) what if we don't like the kid that comes to us. What was, wouldn't that be awful, (..) if I had to turn and say well I don't like you, you'll have to go back. So, we said 'no, not adoption' (..) 'cos said we did fostering instead (..) because we knew, it was short term." (Lines: 6010-6021).

It is interesting to reflect on the temporal and permanent basis on which people make decisions to adopt and the potential impact on a child if they were subsequently 'not wanted'. The absence of children for Sandra and William remains a loss, and even though they were approved to adopt, they have never adopted a child. Despite this, Sandra and William's lives have been filled with foster children. Although William viewed fostering as a short-term pursuit, their foster daughter Samantha is now aged 26 years and is currently living at home with them. Williams' statement does raise the issue of the intersubjective connection between any two people, which extends beyond the comparisons of categorised lists of attributes and perceived capabilities. Important for social work assessments of prospective adoptive parents is the amount of thought and reflection that

prospective adopters give prior to putting themselves forward for assessment. Thus, this raises the potential for them to complete a self-assessment. This process would provide a means by which they can reflect on their own thoughts and decisions about what aspects of their lives they are willing to miss to become an adoptive parent. Whereas, currently, an assessing social worker may want to determine that for themselves and in the case of a couple how these decisions were formed (Wood, 2015).

In the extract below Peter provides detail on how he experiences this dichotomy.

Peter: "I kind of get a sense of panic, that we're never gonna (..) um, have a child in any way. So, a real (.) deep (..) kind of existential panic (.) and at other times I feel I need to be patient (..) um, kind of for *Fiona's* sake (.) but also (.) it is less than six months since we got the IVF results. So, she's now thinking she shouldn't give up on some kind of biological motherhood (.) um (.) as yet (..) so, (.) so that throws me back and forth a bit (..) it's easier to settle on, (.) it's easier to be kind of mourn the loss of your biological baby (.) and move onto adoption. That's not easy, but you feel you want to do one or the other basically, you feel you want to focus on (.) biological conception and or adoption and I don't feel I can do either at the minute." (Lines: 6246-6269).

Peter reports feeling a sense of panic that challenges his very sense of self and well-being. He describes the sensation as an existential panic, one that occurs deep inside his self. In a study exploring the credibility of fatherhood and the existential concept of adoption, Duyndam (2007), considers constructs of personhood and the absence of being an adoptive father. Although Duyndam's focus is on absence in a broader context of society, I suggest Peter's experience provides evidence that it is also applicable to the individual. Thus, for Peter, not becoming a father is missing the uniqueness of what could become his sense of personhood via his experience of being a father. His experience of emotive forces that create within him a panic within his very 'self' is common to other men experiencing involuntary childlessness (Bos et al., 2005). This knowledge

challenges the absence of fatherhood throughout the history of adoption depicted in Chapter two. In addition, it provides a greater sense of the meaning of what the NAW campaign positioned adoption as a means of men fulfilling a sense of self. However, for Peter, fatherhood was not anchored to his biological connection with a child, the importance was on his opportunity to socially experience himself as a dad (Wells, 2011).

#### **8.4 Chapter summary**

For many participants, their vision of becoming adoptive parents remains a perceptual reality, even if they were yet to contact an adoption agency and commence the assessment and approval process. For them, there exists a belief that adoptive parenthood, would or could, be achieved. Re-creating life included ways of imagining the way they could be with their prospective adoptive child. For others, the realisation of the loss of their ability to create their future 'parental self' was keenly felt. However, to simply situate this as an aspect of their belief in a potential or absence of a future self would be misguided. All participants identified as prospective adoptive parents, and this experience of 'self' was not conditional to the recognition or approval of others. As such, this is an aspect of their self, which endures even when the likelihood of 'becoming' an adoptive parent has diminished. Therefore, their current sense of being in the world is one of being a prospective adoptive parent, which differs from, but is simultaneously intrinsic to, becoming an adoptive parent. Be(com)ing an adoptive parent or being perceived as a prospective adopter is dominated by the lens of the 'other' looking onto those who wish to adopt. However, the experiences of my participants reflect that their perceptions of be(com)ing are rich in their diversity. Furthermore, their experiences present a challenge to normative thinking, which raises issues about their recruitment and assessment, limited to societal constructs and demands of what it means to be a prospective adopter.

## Chapter Nine - Conclusion

*"As being in the world, Dasein has always already discovered a 'world'. We characterised this discovering, which is founded in the worldliness of the world, as the freeing of beings for a totality of relevance. Freeing something and letting it be relevant occur by way of circumspect self reference which is grounded in the previous understanding of signification." (Heidegger, 1953/2010, p. 111).*

The overall aim of this thesis was to understand prospective adopters' experiences and to interrogate those experiences in relation to the way in which prospective adoptive parenthood is constructed in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. This is important, as the prevalence of adoptive families in British society remains a key focus of government policy. To situate the learning emerging within this thesis, I discussed the historical legislative shifts integral to the construction of adoption in the UK (Lang, 2011; Watson, 2007). The structures which construct adoption extend beyond legislation which itself reflects enduring paradigms such as biological determinism and pronatalism. Thus, any examination of prospective adoptive parents intertwines with the dominant grounding of pronatalist and legalised constructs of familial relationships.

Two related research studies were undertaken during this doctoral study as a means of understanding the experiences of prospective adoptive parents living in the UK. To interrogate the complexity of prospective adoptive parenthood one of the first objectives was to understand the rhetoric, which discursively constructs prospective adopters. I interrogated these established notions in the first study using a social constructionist approach to thematically analyse the discourses used in 184 newspaper articles during the 2012 and 2013 NAW campaigns. Undertaking this first piece of research provided insight into the language used to recruit prospective adopters. Chapter five detailed the findings of that study which critically examined the concepts of myths

about adoption amid the complex role of the state's need to create adoptive families.

The second study aimed to understand the experiences of 21 prospective adopters living in Britain. Employing a phenomenological approach encouraged a view of prospective adopters' subjective agency to come to the fore, which proved important when the powers of structural models are pervasive. Unfortunately, previous studies that examined prospective adoptive parenthood have not always explored the macro and micro power dynamics that constrain the knowledge produced. Importantly, this study valued the experience of prospective adopters, and in doing so, it gave voice to those experiences and considered them equal to other contributory forms of knowledge. This inductive approach saw three themes emerge; the first explored how prospective adopters traversed dichotomies that defined what they wanted, what choices they had and whether they were ready to become adoptive parents. The second phenomenological theme examined participants' experience of socio-familial relationships as they contemplated adoptive parenthood. Finally, Chapter eight provided a phenomenological analysis of the experience of self in the be(com)ing of prospective adoptive parenthood. This conclusive chapter revisits the key findings of both studies before moving on to consider the implications of this doctoral research.

## **9.1 Summary of major findings**

The social constructionist framework for this thesis ensured that we understand the findings that emerged within the British socio-political landscape. The qualitative methodology is therefore intrinsic to both the contribution of those findings and the limitations of this doctorate. As discussed in Chapter five the thematic analysis of 184 newspaper articles used in the 2012 and 2013 NAW campaigns provided new insight into the way in which prospective adopters are constructed. I critically examined the emergent themes in relation to the social and legislative infrastructure that informs what is understood as child adoption. The analysis

highlighted the prevalence of gendered and pronatalist repertoires that served to highlight the role of women and in comparison, negate the role of fathers. Thus, I demonstrated how what was said is equally important to what remains unsaid. In doing so, I illuminated the absence of discourses directed at people from BAME heritage backgrounds, which I argue is likely to contribute to the lack of BAME prospective adoptive parents. The NAW campaign analysis also identified how the language in the newspaper articles limited the subjective agency of prospective adopters by not providing them with sufficient information with which to determine their suitability. Therefore, the limited language used which encouraged prospective adopters to 'opt-in' for an assessment, further reinforced the power and responsibility of the state to determine who can become an adoptive parent.

The analysis of the NAW campaigns examined the limitations of simplistic and at times conflicting discourses and showed how they contribute to the construction of prospective adoptive parenthood. To complement this, the second study in this thesis provides innovative insights into the experiences of 21 prospective adoptive parents living in the UK. Unlike previous qualitative studies about prospective adopters, all of those who participated have yet to become adoptive parents that provided a unique perspective on their experiences. The first theme of traversing dichotomies discussed in Chapter six highlighted the complex negotiations that prospective adopters undertake when contemplating whether they could adopt a child. Participant's narratives revealed their pendulum of thoughts and emotions, which reflect the underpinning complexities of these experiences. The analysis demonstrated that participants simultaneously experience co-existing aspects of their prospective adoptive self that intertwines over time with concepts such as gender and sexuality. In doing so, I evidenced how it was in the act of examining both the potential and limitations of a dichotomous ontology that participants found meaning in a post-dichotomous self (Beech & Cairns, 2001).



Another key finding was in the examination of Prochaska et al. (2005) linear staged model of change. Although there was some support for a staged process, the discussion in Chapter six demonstrated that people could identify as prospective adopters for many years and their state of readiness can change over time. This study has also found conflict in the power dynamic of who determines 'readiness', with some prospective adopters believing they are ready and this not being agreed by an adoption agency. One of the novel findings of this study was the assertion from several heterosexual participants that adoption was their preferred route to parenthood.

## **9.2 Review of findings in relation to existing research**

As detailed in Chapter two, historically adoption has been a response to society's need to care for children who were neglected or abused by their parents, born out of wedlock, or unwanted (Keating, 2001). Those who were encouraged to parent these children were adults who were infertile and therefore unable to reproduce biological children of their own. This positions both adopted children and prospective adoptive parents as 'othered' to the perceived normative view of parenthood being a married heterosexual couple biologically producing a child. Other social influences that have contributed to 'othering' were constructed in relation to illegitimacy, and thus adoptive families were tainted because of the social status of their child's biological parents (Davis, 1939; Fink, 2011). Arguably, such factors contributed to the hiding of adoptive relationships and desire of prospective adopters to have a child that genetically resembled them. I have evidenced in Chapter's three and five that discourses about prospective adoptive motherhood are entrenched with enduring issues of pronatalism. This is often revealed in the assumption of an innate need to produce a child biologically, that can be met or not, by adopting a child. In this regard, it was vital to understand the social and political landscape against which research into adoption takes place.

Many of the participants in this doctoral study challenge the pronatalist view that positions adoption as second best to biological parenthood (Park, 2006). However, the dominance of pronatalism in British society remains present as they make sense of their route to becoming parents. Notably, some participants made sense of wanting to adopt as a means of becoming a parent rather than giving birth, thereby viewing adoption as a preferred choice. Participants narratives detailed how they made sense of the choices available to them, many explored reasons why they chose adoption as opposed to medical interventions such as IVF treatment. For several women who were in heterosexual relationships becoming an adoptive parent was their first and natural choice. However, they were cautious about who they shared these thoughts with, describing tentative conversations with chosen friends or family members.

The affirmation of the subjective agency of participants started at the point of designing this study and decisions were taken about what theoretical approach would be used (Legrand, 2007). Phenomenology provides for the rich subjective experience of being-in-the-world, however, how we use our intersubjectivity to understand the experience of others is complex (Gentile, 2010; Rumsey, 2003). As discussed in Chapter four the decision was taken to adopt a hermeneutic approach, which would allow interpretation of the meaning participants gave to their experiences (Langdrige, 2007). This meant accepting their own expertise in how they view their self, and for some participants, their view was that they did not want to be a biological parent. However, amid dominant pronatalist repertoires adoption is not a normative route to parenthood. The exploration, particularly within Chapter seven, reveals the difficulties some prospective adopters experience in telling their partner, family and friends that they want to become a parent via adoption.

For several participants, knowing adoption was the route for them had been present from childhood. However, most participants had wanted to have a biologically related child. Although some were adamant that they did not want to pursue IVF, others did explore the viability of medical

intervention (Birenbaum-Carmeli, 2009; Birenbaum-Carmeli & Dirnfeld, 2008; Parry, 2005). No participant who had pursued IVF had yet found success, with some being advised that as a couple, they were not genetically predisposed to have a successful pregnancy leading to a healthy child. Though it seems accepted that a decision to pursue a medical route to pregnancy can be made quickly, the same regard does not appear to be given to those who were then perceived to have quickly chosen to pursue adoption. Chapters six and seven explored the intricate subjective experience of negotiating choice within a neoliberal ideological context before examining the barriers some prospective adopters face once they have chosen adoption as their only viable route to parenthood.

In addition, the complex factors outlined above research focused on prospective adopted parents often define this period by comparing the transitional stages in becoming an adoptive parent with those of becoming a biological parent. Often the staged medical progression of pregnancy is used as a guide in addition to considering social aspects of preparation of parenthood (Clark, Skouteris, Wertheim, Paxton, & Milgrom, 2009; Draper, 2002). However, alongside changes in societal constructs of parenthood and families the transition, role and function of adoptive parents are continually changing (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007; Suwalsky et al., 2012; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). This continual development has prompted repeated demands on the need for research and legislation, importantly both social practices not only serve to co-construct adoption but our understanding of self, parenthood and childhood. Indeed, my study has become part of the complex narratives that co-construct what it means to be a prospective adoptive parent, which in turn offers insights into the meaning of family (Dow, 2016; Suter et al., 2011; Wegar, 2000) and westernised constructs of self (Goodley & Lawthom, 2011b; Kriegel, 2008; Longo, Schüür, Kammers, Tsakiris, & Haggard, 2009).

### 9.3 Implications of research findings

As stated in Chapter four, the hermeneutic approach underpinning the design of this study aimed to balance describing participants' subjective 'knowing' of their experiences and how as a researcher I make sense of these. The consequences of this design are worthy of greater reflective exploration, not only as they influence the research analysis but in their implications for assessments of prospective adoptive parents (Stephen Hicks, 2000; Logan, 2010; Oosterman et al., 2007). As such, I suggest the knowledge in this thesis is of value to those undertaking assessments of prospective adopters to assist in the reflection of their perceptions of what be(com)ing a prospective adoptive parent means for some people. Both as a qualitative researcher and social work practitioner it remains essential that we hear individual views and avoid homogenising experience by dominant discourses that situate people within hegemonic ideologies (Dow, 2016; Kahn, Goddard, & Coy, 2013). For example, understanding the assertion of a woman not wanting to experience pregnancy should not be isolated to her sexuality (Cocker & Brown, 2010; Simon, 2013) as to do so limits her subjectivity to that which is defined by a pronatalist paradigm.

The contributions from participants in this study provided rich colour and texture to our understanding of the experiences of prospective adoptive parents. Their contemplations extend beyond meeting a psychological need for biological fulfilment to the social interactions of themselves as parents. Importantly their experiences transcend the binary view of individual fulfilment and social responsibility often placed onto prospective adopters motivations and barriers to adopting a child (Scott & Duncan, 2013; Slauson-Blevins & Park, 2016). In the process of assessment and matching, there is a need to revisit entrenched pronatalist informed views that impose a hierarchy on prospective adopters and the children they could be matched with (Kaniuk et al., 2004; Park, 2006; Randall, 2009; Wainwright & Ridley, 2012). This is of particular importance in relation to the repealed duty to ethnically-match a child with their adoptive parents within the Children and Families Act 2014. The

evidence within this thesis also supports reflection on the construction of the adopted child, positioned as damaged and in need of rescuing (Bibhuti 2000; Kaniuk et al., 2004; Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005; Wind, Brooks, & Barth, 2005). There were multiple examples, within the NAW campaigns and in the experiences of participants that becoming an adoptive parent also had the potential to be an enriching experience. Indeed, children who are waiting to become adopted or those who have been adopted have multiple needs in accordance with the change and trauma they have experienced in their lives. Although it is important not to recreate the biological promise of perfect pronatalism within an adoption framework, there is arguably need to accept that all parent-child relationships are complex, they change over time, and they have an uncertain future. This approach provides a broader basis upon which to develop rhetoric which could be used not only in recruitment materials but also in educating those undertaking assessments so that the view of what it means to be a prospective adoptive parent is extended.

The final implication to discuss now reflects on the implications of recruiting and assessing prospective adopters who may never become an adoptive parent. Several participants shared experiences of engagement with social work practitioners whether this was attending an information event or undergoing the assessment process. In part, these experiences raised challenges to the reduced value of being an expert in their own lives was experienced by some, and James articulated his interactions in detail. For varying reasons others were left with a sense of a missing self, and some participants commented on the value of having the opportunity to engage in this research study to talk about their experience. Several participants were left with a sense of loss and anger. Cassandra gave voice to her feelings and shared the emotional turmoil she had experienced in not becoming an adoptive mother. The impact on what it means to have prospective adopters approved and with the potential of never being matched with a child must be considered when we review the support offered to adoptive parents.

#### **9.4 Limitations of the research – Future opportunities**

A primary constraint in study one was the limitation of my data sample prevalent during the 2012 and 2013 NAW campaign. The data corpus for those two years did provide 184 newspaper articles across the United Kingdom; however, I recognise that these were only two years extracted from a campaign that, at that time, had been running on an annual basis since 1997. Furthermore, I acknowledge the data sample was specific to the NAW campaign, and this may differ from other modes of socio-political rhetoric. The use of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as an exploratory method arguably limited the findings. The scope of the recruitment rhetoric is confined to short articles that further limit the rich descriptive text that interviews can provide. That said, these campaigns are an important part of the dialogue that occurs with the public, and therefore analysis of them is important (Wallis, 2006, Ward 2011). A fuller exploration of the NAW campaigns would include all years and greater interrogation of the changing themes over time may be enhanced by the inclusion of content analysis. A further study could also examine the reactions of the public to those articles to ascertain how individuals interpret the messages they contain.

The limitations in the design of study two have been discussed in Chapter four. However, there have been occasions when I have questioned the value of binary terms such as limitations and benefits of research decisions. Further reflection on this issue would require examination of how what we position as a limitation, reinforces the primacy of 'objectivity' over our subjective experience gained from being-in-the-world (Bogo et al., 2012; Shotter, 2014). In the initial stages of this thesis, I formed the view that any limitations I placed on the expected experience of my participants would immediately limit the scope of what I would eventually come to understand. The decision which allowed participants to self-identify was crucial, and the 21 UK based participants represent a range of experiences from people who have engaged with adoption agencies and those who have not. Some have been approved as adopters and others may never commence the process. This study is not

a comparison of their experiences divided by such categories, indeed being approved had not meant adopting a child for those who participated in this study. I reflect that the richness of the experiences they each bring has benefitted from allowing people to define their own subjective self in relation to adoption. This has led to an interesting conclusion that for all participants whether they will or will not adopt a child the subjective view of themselves is an aspect of their self that remains with them. As such it is a way of being that is not determined by whether they proceed with the process of assessment or not. That concept led to the title of the thesis of the be(com)ing, as they are being-in-the-world as a prospective adopter and the experience in which they came to that state of being and how that continues to be experienced does not conclude as demonstrated most clearly in Chapter eight's examination of the missing an experience of self.

### **9.5 Chapter summary**

This thesis is dedicated to understanding the experiences of people living in the United Kingdom (UK) who identify as prospective adoptive parents. In doing so, it makes macro, meso and micro, contributions to knowledge and lays the pathway for more understanding to develop. At a macro level, it adds important insight into the understanding of prospective adopters' experiences not just within the constraints of binary positioning of adoption rhetoric but also in their intimate, familial and wider social relationships. With its use of a phenomenological methodology, it facilitates exploration of participants' experience of self as a prospective adopter who has yet to or who may never adopt. In doing, so the thesis, nudges the paradigm sufficiently to adjust our perceptions of how we might begin to make sense of adoption in the future. The application of this macro knowledge becomes effective in its implementation across meso level stratospheres in the review of social policies and adoptive agency practices. From recruitment practices to contemplation of the discourses we promote to widen the inclusivity of prospective adopters and their routes to adoptive parenthood. Finally, there are multiple examples where the analysis contributes to

interrogating dominant discourses such as pronatalism (Laufer-Ukeles, 2014) and transitional change, as aspects of what it is to be self. These moments of comparison and argument add weight to the issues above which combine to present a cohesive narrative that broadens our micro understanding of prospective adopters' experiences.

More specifically, the extent to which pronatalist assumptions are applicable to the assessment of who could be an adoptive parent requires greater exploration. The findings of this study reflect that the sexuality of a prospective adopter illuminates the complexity of how pronatalism is experienced. One of the challenges in this study was to explore the multiplicity of these issues while endeavouring to remain critically aware of conflicting social norms (Goldberg, Downing & Richardson, 2009). I avoided rhetoric that perpetuates the othering of gay and lesbian adults who adopt. This required constant reflection and awareness of my own subjective positioning as a white British cisgender heterosexual woman who is not a parent. This thesis does not analyse my own contribution to the interviews and that of my explicit intersubjectivity, but this issue could form part of a reflective paper as a means of sharing my postdoctoral learning. Thus, I look forward to postdoc analysis investigating a dialogic perception of the research interview, arguing that it must include the participation of the researcher and participant (Russell & Kelly, 2002).

Importantly, the themes that emerged from the analysis are permeable and non-hierarchical. However, I found myself considering the order in which chapters and subsections of chapters should be presented. This itself is of reflective interest and demonstrates the invasiveness of pronatalist views in adoption that biological intervention should be considered prior to other social considerations that influence the experiences of prospective adopters. Thus, I decided not to move the sections to mimic the staged approach expected of transitioning from potential birth parent to prospective adoptive parent (Prochaska et al., 2005). We all live within a multitude of dynamic social structures, which are arguably as profound to our experience of being-in-the-world as is our genetic blueprint. However, we also experience the world uniquely as



individuals as well as having the capacity for shared understanding, and that is itself key to the contribution of this thesis. In relation to adoption, the state will continue to have ultimate responsibility for the decisions made for adults and children in its care. The legal processes and social policies that support the state's interaction with its populous will benefit from interrogating the judgements that are made and the implications they have.

The knowledge emerging from this thesis will assist this pedagogical process and develop an understanding of the intersubjective processes that take place with prospective adopters (Gentile, 2010; Trevarthen, 2009). It suggests the provision of greater engagement with the public to share their views of prospective adoptive parenthood, which can help disrupt hegemonic ideologies. The contributions from participants reveal expert capacity in their own lives, which can inform our view of them as prospective adopters. The inclusion of their views can help disrupt pronatalist structures that currently dominate and arguably restrict the capacity of who will be deemed a suitable adoptive parent. Extending the message to include a conversation with the public, could see discourses such as 'no blanket bans' replaced with more reflective questions that would lead to a subjective determination of being and becoming rather than limited to age, gender and economic status.

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Be(com)ing a Prospective Adoptive Parent

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1

#### Ethical approval

Your SREP Application - Donna Peach (PhD Student) - The discursive construction and lived experience of prospective adoptive parents (SREP/2014/005)

Fri 28/02/2014, 17:01  
Donna Peach U1367362;  
Abigail Locke;  
Kirsty Thomson

Dear Donna

That's all fine, you now have ethical approval.

Kind regards  
Jane

Dr Jane Tobbell  
University Teaching Fellow  
Department of Behavioural Sciences  
University of Huddersfield  
Queensgate  
HUDDERSFIELD  
HD1 3DH  
00 44 (0)1484 472588

## Appendix 2



### **The discursive construction and lived experiences of prospective adoptive parents**

#### **Invitation to take part in research project**

I am a researcher in the School of Human and Health Sciences at the University of Huddersfield. I am studying people's experiences of thinking about being an adoptive parent. I have ethical approval to recruit a number of individuals and couples to discuss this topic with me. This would involve you agreeing to an audio-recorded interview. Anonymity is assured. Thus, no names will be used, and all data would be protected by strictly following data protection rules.

If you have thought about becoming an adoptive parent, whether or not you have made contact with an adoption agency, I would really like to hear from you.

For further information about the study, please read the information sheet attached. If you are interested in taking part in the research, please send me an email at [U1367362@hud.ac.uk](mailto:U1367362@hud.ac.uk) or contact me on 07910161592. If you have any questions in relation to the study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Should you have any further queries or complaint, please feel free to contact my supervisor Dr Abigail Locke.

It is understandable that thoughts relating to adoptive parenthood may be upsetting, if this occurs, you can contact:

After Adoption Action Line: 0800 0 568 578

Adoption UK Helpline: 0844 848 7900 (Monday to Friday 10am-4pm)

Samaritans by telephoning 08457 90 90 90 or email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter

Best wishes

Donna Peach

PhD Student  
School of Human and Health Sciences  
Sciences  
University of Huddersfield  
Huddersfield  
HD1 3DH

Supervisor: Dr Abigail Locke

Email: [A.Locke@hud.ac.uk](mailto:A.Locke@hud.ac.uk)  
School of Human and Health

University of Huddersfield  
Huddersfield  
HD1 3DH

### Appendix 3



## The discursive construction and lived experience of prospective adoptive parents

Donna Peach 07910161592 Email: [U1367362@hud.ac.uk](mailto:U1367362@hud.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Dr Abigail Locke Email: [A.Locke@hud.ac.uk](mailto:A.Locke@hud.ac.uk)

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### Background to the study:

My research study aims to understand the experiences of people who have thought about becoming an adoptive parent. In order to research this topic, I would really like to hear from a number of individuals and couples who would be happy to be interviewed about their experiences of wanting to be an adoptive parent.

### Can I take part?

If you would like to take part in this study, you will need to have had given thought about your ability to become an adoptive parent. You may or may not have initiated contact with an adoption agency.

The interviews will last around an hour in length and can happen in any place that is most convenient and comfortable for you. For example, I can make arrangements to interview in your own home or at an alternative venue, such as a room at the University. I will need to audio record your interview and will seek your permission for this.

### What happens after the interview?

After the interviews have been recorded, they will be typed out word for word. During this process, any identifying and personal details, such as names and places will be changed to ensure your identity remains anonymous. The interviews will then be analysed and the analysis written up. It is important to make you aware that in the write-up some direct quotes from your interview may be used. However, all personal details will be changed, and so it will not be possible for those reading the analysis to identify you.

All interview data, both digital and paper copies will be strictly confidential. Only myself and my research supervisors will have direct access to this data. All audio data will be kept in a secure location on site at the University of Huddersfield and will be destroyed no more than five years after publication of the research. Up until then, data may be used for subsequent research studies.

Please note that once you have agreed to take part in the study, you have the full right to withdraw, without having to explain your reasons. You are free to stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue. Once the interview is completed, you have the right to

## Be(com)ing a Prospective Adoptive Parent

withdraw from the study at any time during the following calendar month. We will agree this date at the point of our interview, and I can provide you a reminder of this date two weeks afterwards. If having completed the interview you decide that you wish to remove yourself from the research, all data will be destroyed and not included in the study. Please also be aware that you are not obliged to answer every question posed to you in the interview. If there is a question you would rather not answer please, just say, and I will move on to the next.

The findings of the study will be shared within my phd thesis, through journal publications, academic conferences and research reports.

If you would like a copy of your transcript after the interview has taken place, please mention this after the interview or contact me at any point thereafter. I can also make a summary of the research findings available to you once the study has been completed – again, please let me know.

### **How do I take part?**

If you have thought about becoming an adoptive parent and are interested in taking part in the study, please email me at [U1367362@hud.ac.uk](mailto:U1367362@hud.ac.uk) or call/text me on 07910161592. If, at any time, you would like to know more about the study or have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Should you have any further queries or complaint, please feel free to contact my supervisor Dr Abigail Locke.

It is understandable that thoughts relating to adoptive parenthood may be upsetting, if this occurs, you can contact:

After Adoption Action Line: 0800 0 568 578

Adoption UK Helpline: 0844 848 7900 (Monday to Friday 10am-4pm)

Samaritans by telephoning 08457 90 90 90 or email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

## Appendix 4

### The discursive construction and lived experience of prospective adoptive parents

Researcher: Donna Peach

#### Interview consent form

I have read and understand the information sheet provided by the researcher and have been fully informed of the nature and aims of this research.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without giving any reason, and a right to withdraw my data if I wish.

I give my permission for my interview to be audio recorded.

I understand that the audio-recording will be kept in secure conditions at the University of Huddersfield.

I understand that no person other than the principal investigator and her supervisors will have access to the original recording and the resulting transcripts.

I give permission to be quoted (by use of pseudonym) and understand that direct quotes from my interview may be used in future publications and conference presentations, and for teaching purposes.

I understand that my identity will be protected by the use of pseudonym in the research report and that no information that could lead to my being identified will be included in any report or publication resulting from this research.

I agree to take part in this study.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of researcher:

Signature:

Date:

*Two copies of this consent form should be completed: One copy to be retained by the participant and one copy to be retained by the researcher*




## Appendix 5

### **A sample email reminder of notice period to withdraw forwarded to participants**

Subject: Adoption research

From Donna Peach U1367362

Tue 15/04/2014, 07:19

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I hope you are well. This is just a reminder that the time for you to choose to withdraw from this study ends on Monday 21st April 2014.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any queries, but if I don't hear from you in the meantime, I will assume you are happy to continue.

May I thank you for your continued support.

Very best wishes,

Donna