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Storying special objects: material culture, narrative identity and life story work for children in care

Debbie Watson[1], Rachel Hahn and Jo Staines, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol

Abstract

This paper considers the importance of material objects for looked after and adopted children integrated as part of life story work practices. Conducting life story work is believed to be good practice within direct work with looked after children in England and there are a range of diverse practices, including life story books, later life letters and memory boxes. Through a creative design project developing a playful memory product for looked after children, we have had the opportunity to capture sector perspectives on life story work approaches and these are interspersed throughout this commentary.

Combining multi-disciplinary theoretical perspectives and these sector insights, we explore how special material objects are important for children's identity and continuity of sense of self. The paper highlights the importance of children telling their own stories of these objects, giving them agency and control over their life story narratives. In a context of austerity, life story work may not be prioritised by social workers who have many other competing demands and limited resources. We emphasise the need for professionals to recognise the value children give to objects and to provide them with opportunities to both keep these safe during placement moves and to tell their own story through their objects alongside more traditional, formal life story work. The recommendations have implications for children in out of home care in many country contexts, not just England where the research has been conducted.

Key words

Life story, objects, memory, identity, children in care, wellbeing

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[1] Debbie.watson@bristol.ac.uk

Introduction

Drawing on research from the development of an interactive memory store called *trove*[2], this paper highlights the significance of tangible objects for looked after children (LAC), particularly those who experience multiple placement moves or disruption. Within a framework of broader life story work (LSW) and theorised through narrative identity and socio-material theories, the paper argues that more attention should be given to enable LAC to keep their meaningful objects safe and to support them to story those objects. Objects are important for the development of a sense of identity for LAC and to provide them with feelings of security, continuity and belonging. This paper contributes to the importance of children's objects in the UK literature on LSW (Ward, 2011), in direct work with children (Lefevre, 2010), and to a growing interest in material culture and objects in social work practice (Doel, 2018; Scholar, 2017). The approach taken is deliberately eclectic, combining perspectives from many disciplines. What defines this paper as a novel and important contribution to social work is a focus not only on children's objects and their inherent value to the child, but the memories and stories they invoke and the central importance of story in identity development and maintenance for those in care and adopted.

Background

The paper is underpinned by three key concepts in the literature: life story work, narrative identity and understanding objects.

Life story work

There is no single definition of what life story work is, nor how to do it (Hooley et al., 2016) beyond a general agreement that it is underpinned by theories of attachment and loss and that it aims to help children to understand their journey through the care system, supporting them to fill gaps in memory and understanding (Livingston-Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2014). In a UK context it is considered good practice for all children in care (Rees, 2018; Ryan and Walker, 2016) and, for those permanently placed, there is a requirement on the placing agency to produce a life story book for the child, mandated in the *Adoption and Children Act* (DfE, 2002). Life story books are understood largely as a product (Livingston-Smith et al,

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[2] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42j-EJcyaN4

2014) of wider life story work (LSW) however and should not be confused with what is commonly understood as a more ongoing process of conversations and activities with the child as part of direct work. Whilst LSW itself is not mandated, the *Children and Social Work Act* (2017) places a responsibility on local authorities to act '*in the best interests of and promote the health and wellbeing of children and young people in care*' and it is argued that LSW can contribute to good mental health (Wrench and Naylor, 2013).

Rose (2012) suggests separating the practice into three categories: *Story Work, Life History Work* and *Life Story Therapy*. *Story Work* focuses on a child telling their own story as they understand it, while *Life History Work* involves a worker telling the child their story. Positioned somewhere between the two, *Life Story Therapy* focuses not only on a child building an understanding of their past, but also supports them to develop their relationship with their carer. *Life History Work* is advocated by those who argue that it is important for the child to have the 'facts' of their life, to enable them to make sense of who they are (Ryan and Walker, 2007). However, merely delivering information to children is problematic as information may be presented as 'fact', whereas there may be multiple ways events can be interpreted and understood (Watson, Latter & Bellew, 2015a). Information may also be lost, inaccurately recorded, or be subject to bias by the recorder. If this ambiguity, and the presentation of multiple narratives, is not allowed for, a child may become confused and end up with a falsely straightforward narrative (Baynes, 2008). Secondly, it does not give a child the opportunity to make sense of their story, or to connect this version of events with their own experience and understanding (Rose, 2012; Watson et al, 2015a).

The final approach that Rose (2012) described is *Story Work*; this is based on a child's memories and understanding of the events in their life and focuses on the child's narrative rather than the stories of others. It is usually carried out one-to-one and items such as music, photographs and documents, including birth certificates and newspaper cuttings, can be incorporated into this work. This approach gives the child an opportunity to tell their story and to be heard. Children are not challenged on inaccuracies, poor memory recollection or confusion: instead they are encouraged to focus on their perception, which is given value and thereby validated (*Ibid.*).

A risk with this approach is that if a child's memory of what happened is internalised as the 'truth' and accepted by the listener as valid, then the child may be less able or willing to

consider a different, perhaps more evidence-based, story (Rose, 2012). This could be problematic if this leads the child to accept unquestionably that events of their childhood are his/her fault, for example. However, giving a child an opportunity to tell their story offers them agency and control - limited for children in general, and particularly LAC (McLeod, 2007). While there is an argument that story work cannot include pre-birth history or the first years of a child's life (Rose, 2012), objects may be able to bridge this gap, by representing and linking to a past of which children have little or no conscious memory (Belk, 1991). We believe *Story Work* is how the approach discussed in this paper should be framed as this focuses on the child's active involvement in the story making.

It would be easy to critique the sector for not undertaking LSW in a comprehensive way; but we recognize both the huge variety of practice across the sector (Hooley et al., 2016; Watson, Latter & Bellew, 2015b) and that social work comprises complex, challenging interactions (Ruch et al., 2018), within a fast-paced, pressurised context, with competing demands and a significant level of paperwork (Yuill, 2018). Doing any kind of direct work with traumatised children is extremely demanding of skills (Baynes, 2008) and emotional resilience on the part of the professional and good supervision is fundamental (Wrench and Naylor, 2013). The pressures have been exacerbated globally by austerity, which leads to budgetary restrictions, higher caseloads (Hooley et al., 2016; Rees, 2018), and in turn, more stress and less time (Grootegoed and Smith, 2018). Less money spent on training and bringing in other professionals contributes to concerns about the quality of LSW and potentially negative implications of this not being done well (Selwyn et al., 2015). Although there is no agreement within social work about what 'good' LSW is (Hooley et al., 2016), it is apparent that however it is done, it needs to address children's questions and help them understand their reasons for being in care (Livingston-Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2014).

The challenges of doing LSW are reported in many other countries and the insights reported here, whilst focused on the English context, have implications for direct children's social work across the world. For example, a recent paper from Aotearoa reports a '*haphazard approach*' (Atwool, 2017:72) to LSW but that:

> *A tangible and visual record of the child's time in care maintained from the outset through the use of memory boxes and life story books is essential to ensure access to a coherent narrative* (*Ibid*: 73).

The role of LSW in identity development and maintenance is understood in literatures on narrative identity which are considered below.

Narrative Identity

Narrative theorists have drawn from a constructivist epistemology to understand human meaning-making processes (Jirek, 2017) and claim that telling and retelling stories helps the narrator to achieve coherence of the story, which is central to narrative identity (Welbourne, 2012) and achievement of the master-narrative central to identity (Jirek, 2017). Stories need to be constructed and retold to construct the self (McAdams and McLean, 2013)- this is something that children need to learn to do over time and have opportunities to practice.

Parent/carer-child conversations about events and ensuing emotional responses are crucial in building children's narrative skills and capabilities, yet these are the relationships that LAC often lack access to (McAdams and Janis, 2004). Narrative also has temporal elements and serves an important function in enabling children to place life events in a temporal order, not only in the past, but present and future (Bamberg, 2011).

Having a coherent narrative of adverse experiences has been associated with recovery from trauma, particularly when there is disruption of the narrative (Jirek, 2017). Using life stories as part of identity formation is effective because people use narratives to present themselves as someone who remains the same yet is simultaneously always changing (Bamberg, 2011). Hence, identity is both fixed and evolving and there is a need to reconcile these conflicting positions to establish a sense of self (Ward, 2011). For children in care or leaving care, who may experience frequent change and limited opportunities to form enduring attachments, this can be particularly challenging (*Ibid.*).

Bamberg (2011) argues that it is questionable what content in terms of lived experience is relevant to be admitted to life stories. He posits that the events themselves are not relevant; more relevant is what they denote, that is how they connect with other events and how they help to differentiate individuals as unique. Making sense and attributing meanings to stories is how we construct identity and sense of self. Most narrators have plenty of 'experiences' or 'life-events' to choose from and arrange (or re-arrange) in their narratives (*Ibid.*). The choice

over and priority afforded to different experiences is fundamental to the stories constructed and incorporated into individual narrative identity and this demands that the narrator is actively involved in the story making and telling. The linking of narrative and identity through LSW is not new in social work. However, focusing on children as the narrators of their life story is novel, as is bringing understandings of material culture and tangible objects to this debate, to which we now turn.

Understanding Objects

The study of the material world originates in disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology and philosophy. From an anthropological perspective, material culture includes our clothing, our homes, the objects that we carry with us through life and the media we engage with (Miller, 2010). For Sartre (1956) material objects were symbolic extensions of the self, fundamental to being, where things and people are in a tautological relationship- one only existing because of the other (Miller, 2010). Depending on personal circumstances and cultural histories of individuals and groups, objects may be limited in number and hold no material, or indeed functional value, but as Miller (2010:76) claimed: '*the study of persons' relationships to things should always finally be reduced back to social relations*' and by inference, to memory of relationships and events. This linking of persons through material objects may be particularly important for people who have experienced loss or trauma, or who have had to leave their homes such as in forced migration (Ho et al., 2011). Refugees often take with them photos, letters or other personal effects that have no utilitarian or market value, but which represent a link with their previous life and perpetuate their personal and cultural identity (Parkin, 1999) as they evoke and anchor memories (Turkle, 2007; Ahuvia, 2005).

Objects are often used in reminiscence work with people with dementia (Stephens et al., 2013) using artefacts such as clothing (Twigg and Buse, 2013) or handbag contents (Buse and Twigg, 2014) to provoke memory. As Turkle notes: '*We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with*' (2007: 5). Death of a loved one invokes the keeping of a few key objects used to '*transform the memory of that relationship from a more actual to a more idealized component*' (Miller, 2010:151). This connection of people through specific objects is also utilised in bereavement therapy (Gibson, 2004) and there are arguably overlaps for children in the care system who experience loss akin to death of loved ones.

Like adults, children may form very strong attachments to objects (Gelman and Davidson, 2016); although anthropologists such as Miller (2010) argue against psychoanalytic approaches that force a separation between object and subject through describing children's object-relations, common in most psychological literature. Meaningful objects and mementos often symbolize important past events and significant relationships and through their use it is thought children attempt to rediscover previous thoughts and memories (Santrock, 2008). For many children, it is not the object *per se* that is important, but the memories, emotions and meanings attached to that object, such that children will reject an identical object, such as a toy, because it is not 'their' toy (Hood and Bloom, 2008). The object may have no extrinsic value (being a stone, stick, flower, ticket stub etc); its value lies in the meaning attributed to it by the child, which makes it irreplaceable.

Reflecting on the project, *Displaying Social Work in 42 Objects* (Doel, 2017) describes 'charged objects', illustrating the point with a Foundling Hospital token:

> *It acquires its charge from its physical presence and from the resonance of its symbolic meaning- loss, grief and poverty* (Doel, 2018:11).

Despite never being given to the foundling children, the knowledge that your mother gifted an object as an identifier signifies her hope to be reunited with you and can '*have a profoundly healing function*' (Pollak, 2007:228). Miller (1987) argues for the 'humility of things' and suggests that objects frame subjectivity. He claims that far from being obvious and ever-present, material culture is largely '*familiar and taken-for-granted*' (50) and that what makes us who we are is the material world that operates as '*an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us*' (51). This suggests not only the symbolic nature of objects and the relationship between symbolic objects and social life (Miller, 2010) but that objects have agency and '*can make their presence felt*' (Scholar, 2017:637).

Project Context

This paper is situated at the end of a two-year Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, to further develop '*trove*': now a digitally enhanced memory bag designed for LAC and adopted children to store their precious objects and to record and attach their stories

to the objects using Near-field Communication (NFC)[3] technologies with a bespoke mobile phone multi-media storying app. *trove* aims to support children to keep their own record of their life, through interactive child-driven technology, to give them some control of their life story. *trove* was originally funded under the AHRC REACT programme in 2015[4]: this enabled Watson & designer, Chloe Meineck, to co-design with children in care and adopted children several iterations which were then tested with ten adopted children for four weeks in their home (Watson, Meineck & Lancaster, 2018). These prototypes reinforced the value of the concept of *trove,* but there were several known design challenges including the need to separate children's audio from their objects as the original design had both storage of objects and recording of stories in one place, with little security possible.

The primary focus of the project was to design, develop and test the prototype with children in a residential care context using creative design workshops; this is documented elsewhere (Gray, Hahn, Watson, Cater & Meineck, 2019). As part of the project, we also carried out interviews with key stakeholders to explore their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of LSW and the role of children's objects in practice (see table 1). This data extended beyond consideration of *trove* as a technological solution, as whilst this is one possible tool that children could use, there are broader messages about inclusion of children's objects in LSW to be conveyed that may lead to a variety of approaches. This paper draws on those interviews to provide a commentary on LSW practice and the importance of the inclusion of objects, alongside literature on objects and narrative. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the University of Bristol School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee REC.

Sample and Methods

We employed purposive sampling to identify interviewees using a matrix that covered key statutory and voluntary sectors and a range of experience and role. Nine participants were recruited from existing networks from the South of England.

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[3] NFC is a set of communication protocols that enable two electronic devices, one of which might be a smartphone, to establish communication by bringing them within 4cm of each other.
[4] This provided rapid design and testing funding to University academics working with creative partners.

Table 1: Interview participants

Sector	Role	Pseudonym
Local Authority- Looked after children	Participation worker (PW)	Leah
	Principal social worker (PSW)	Anna
Looked Authority- Adoption	Social Work Assistant (SWA)	Hannah
	Strategic Manager (SM)	Karen
Voluntary Adoption Agency	Life Story Practitioner (LSP)	Rose
Fostering independent	Fostering social worker (FSW)	Ben
	Fostering Manager (FM)	Louise
Therapeutic	Music therapist (MT)	Susan
	Life Story Worker (LSW)	Pete
Academic	Social work academic (SWA)	Angela

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by Rachel Hahn using a semi-structured interview schedule focusing on current LSW practice, how children's objects were used and possible interventions to increase the inclusion of objects. Some participants had heard of *trove* and seen an earlier prototype used, but not all. Interviews took between 40-60 minutes, were conducted in private offices, audio-recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was conducted in NVivo to establish broad themes under which the insights from participants are captured below, illustrating points in the literature.

Findings and Discussion

The value of life story work

Having a clear biographical understanding enables the child '*to live more comfortably in the present and move on to enjoy a positive future*' (Rees, 2018:14). Links are made between good knowledge of one's life story and identity (Habermas and Bluck, 2000), as illustrated by Leah:

> *[a young person might say] 'Well, I want to read my files and actually know,' [but] when they don't have the life story work, you can see, sort of within kind of their identity and how they present themselves, because, obviously, they don't know where it is*

they've come from and stuff, and they don't understand why they're... this journey has happened... (PW, Leah).

Psychological perspectives on life story suggest that younger children struggle to achieve global coherence of a life story and that: '*a life story that integrates single memories and stories with each other and with the self develops in adolescence'* (Habermas & Bluck, 2000: 753). Yet there is some evidence that younger children who have many changes and events in their lives (such as those in care) also engage in life story work although lack the organisational tools to integrate events or stories into a life story (*Ibid.*) -which indicates the importance of adults in supporting them to do this. Life story work is therefore an ongoing piece of direct work, rather than something that can be 'done' in any complete way, as highlighted by Anna:

> *I think our understanding of life story is this shouldn't be a one off, you've had it, tick, it should be something you keep going back to* (PSW, Anna).

Having a strong sense of identity requires an individual to have knowledge about their genetic antecedents, as well as the family and social context (Winter and Cohen, 2005). For example, having photographs of their parents, siblings and/or other relatives can help children to recognise shared physical attributes, enhance feelings of belonging and contribute to their sense of identity and participants felt *trove* has potential to do this:

> *Wonderful idea. Looks cool and exciting for children. Promotes children's identity* (SWA, Hannah).

Looked after and adopted children have usually experienced some form of loss, separation, abuse and/or neglect (Harker, 2012). When confounded, these experiences not only build a complex history for the child, but the trauma experienced can hinder their ability to internalise and make sense of their experiences, with claims that some children remain in a state of hypervigilance with detrimental effects on growth and development (Rose, 2012).

Although there is no research suggesting a link between LSW and positive outcomes for children in care (Watson et al, 2015a; 2015b), in their study of adoption breakdown, Selwyn *et al* (2014) reported that some adoptive parents felt excellent LSW had supported placement stability; whilst other parents believed that poor LSW had contributed to their children's

difficulties, particularly as they became older and asked more searching questions about their origins that the LSW they received as young children did not help them to understand. As one of our interviewees commented, LSW needs to be started early in a child's life:

> *From my role, I think that the one thing that I've probably learnt is the earlier that you get the life story work done, the more effective it can be to help that young person kind of build an identity* (PW, Leah).

How LSW can be added to over time in meaningful ways and understanding its role in young people's outcomes in care seems to be an urgent priority, particularly as recent statistics claim that nearly half of children in care in England have a diagnosable mental health difficulty and two thirds have special educational needs (DfE, 2015).

Objects and looked after children

Children who live with their birth families have access to stories of their past, the objects that accompany these stories, and the opportunity to integrate these with the present. However, children who are not living with their birth families do not have such easy access to this information and may find it hard to retain significant objects that could remind them of their history (Ward, 2011). This was recognised by practitioners who valued the work of some foster carers:

> *I guess that's why we value the carers having a lot of memories and mementos and objects and things during the time in placement because it is something concrete, from this time to this time this is where you were, as much information as possible really and as many memories* (FM, Louise).

Looked after children may experience numerous placements within different localities and/or repeated movement between their birth family and care; they may also experience changes in social workers, teachers and other professionals, meaning their past may become confused, lost or forgotten (Ryan and Walker, 2007). But material belongings may be retained and valued as was illustrated by one of the social workers interviewed:

I think he's moved several times, but stuff from his home, and it's sentimental to him… for example it was a piece of paper I think [his carer] found in his room and it was like a scrap piece of paper and for her she was like 'oh, it's a scrap piece of paper', [but] that means something to him, but it's like he wouldn't part with it (FSW, Ben).

The disruption and instability that LAC may experience is exemplified for many by the loss of treasured objects, including mementoes and photos of relatives, carers, friends, pets, previous homes etc (Ward, 2011). Objects may be the only tangible reminder of their past, connecting them with birth families and other aspects of their former selves (Ward, 2011). Fahlberg (1994) similarly noted that the retention of familiar objects serves as a useful mechanism for reducing the trauma associated with moving into care or changing placement; although also observed that a number of these symbolic items were lost during the care episode for many children. The importance of keeping such objects safe was recognised by stakeholders:

No matter how upset they get and they might want to break things, that memory box always sort of stays safe, 'cause it's the one thing that they can keep and look back on (PW, Leah).

Children's objects are sometimes used transitionally to help them manage the challenges of change by providing connections across place and time (Winnicott, 1953; Shotton, 2013; Willis and Holland, 2009). Whilst not all children's objects are transitional, for children who have experienced trauma and instability, their birth and foster care objects may be transitional in form as they mark the familial moves they have experienced. This resonates with objects used in transitional ways in dementia care (Stephens et al., 2013) and bereavement therapy (Gibson, 2004). Children may use items from home as transitional objects to help them cope with the stress of change and instability, just as very young children often carry blankets or cuddly toys with them when going into strange situations. As Winnicott (1953) observed, transitional objects can be the location for tenderness, caring and loving expressions from the person who gifted the object to the child; this was articulated by the music therapist interviewed:

Objects which may seem meaningless often unlock a lot about how the child perceives themselves/others and make sense of their history. Children don't always have the words to form a coherent narrative or are not ready to put intense or difficult emotions into words- but objects can contain and carry this meaning for them, and act as a

record. It's really important to think about means of archiving and keeping these objects safe, which I think trove tries to do (MT, Susan).

The process of collating objects and their associated memories can be an empowering experience that fosters a sense of security and consistency despite placement instability (Cooke-Cottone and Beck, 2007; Buchanan, 2014). Ultimately, these special objects may be vital in offering children '*a continuous thread, linking the past to the present and the future'* (Ward, 2011: 2517). Practitioners recognised however, that collecting and keeping safe children's objects is not straightforward:

> *And then, you know, what happens when people move on eventually with the memory boxes, who knows really whether it is just left round a mate's house, under the bed or….. certain things get left behind and it's like 'where's this, where's that, this has got lost in the move* (FSW, Ben).

Children's story-making

The level of agency children that should have over the production of their story is debated (Baynes, 2008). Rose and Philpot (2005) suggest LSW can commonly either be too adult-led (a child has no say and their input is not validated) or too child-led (any false assumptions held are left unchallenged). Children may feel that their life story book lacks a coherent narrative or presents a narrative with which they disagree (Watson et al, 2015a). This can lead to dissonance between their identity and the identity presented in the book, leading children to believe that including multiple perspectives would be beneficial (*Ibid*.). However, this is not an easy task, particularly when a story is presented in book form. For Rose (2012) therapeutic LSW should focus on the child being able to internalize their story *'as the child reaches an understanding which is reframed and acceptable'* (29) but this requires the story to be known, shared and recounted (Watson et al, 2018). In the *trove* project, LSW is completed by adults and children working together, allowing them to integrate information about their past with their memories, knowledge and significant objects. The value of engaging children in storying their life through objects was recognised in interviews:

> *'Cause you just give it to them and go, 'This is for you to put anything in. Any objects that are either from home, during being in care, and we can either sit down and record*

together, or I can just show you how it works and you can record from there,' and then, actually, I might never see it again, and that's fine. (SM, Karen)

I think that's a nice way, 'cause actually, then the young person might start to do life story work and they know that they've got someone to go to if they're starting to feel overwhelmed by it (LSP, Rose).

Children can have ownership of their story work via choosing which objects to story/not story and by dictating the pace at which the work progresses:

I think it's a great concept and would be a good idea for children to have ownership of their stories and memories (FSW, Ben).

Other professionals emphasised the control it gave children to engage in their own story and to do so in multi-media:

Very exciting, love that it gives meaning making back to children (SWA, Hannah).

Very useful. Respectful of children's need for creative/tactile/individual engagement with their life story, and the opportunity to author this at their own pace/share with others at their discretion (MT, Susan).

Participants also confirmed that enabling LAC to keep important objects safe should be prioritised alongside LSW, rather than replacing it:

I think it works as like, the side bit, so it's like, 'You can have the book and you can also have this box, you could do it all if you want,' and actually, I think the more ways you do it, the more the young person has a chance of understanding and actually, memories aren't really the same 'cause these might be memories that you make while in care as well as before care…(PW, Leah).

And they may not be the same as and have the same outcome as life story work, which is about understanding (LSP, Rose).

The objects themselves do not give children information, but rather help create and frame a space for them to tell their story - something often lacking in traditional LSW models (Rose and Philpot, 2005). Whether the benefit of LSW lies within the process itself or in the material output of the process is debated (Buchanan, 2014; Baynes, 2008; Willis and Holland, 2009); here it is argued that both are of equal value and children's objects have an important role to play. As one interviewee said:

> *I think that process is important. I think it's also important to go, 'Right, well, what memories have you got? Let's put them in, and actually, what objects or what photos have you got and what do you want to write about that photo?' and let that young person write about that photo* (PW, Leah).

Ward (2011) also argued that greater attention to the preservation of possessions that have a symbolic value might be a simple means of helping care leavers develop a stronger sense of connectedness.

Objects and relationships

In situations of perceived unreliability of close others, an individual's attachment to cherished objects may increase, in a form of '*relationship compensation*' (Keefer et al., 2012: 912). When a valued belonging was removed, participants in experimental conditions, primed with uncertainty about their relationships, showed increased separation anxiety and motivation to reunite with the object, regardless of its perceived importance for facilitating relationships. As such it is as if the object itself becomes a vessel for a part of the person it is linked to, and this draws on psychoanalytic ideas of object attachments where the 'object' can be a carer, who the child no longer has contact with (Thomas, 1967). Reconstructing the relationships represented through objects was recognised by practitioners:

> *If they have got stuff from home, like there are some other looked-after children who might have a teddy-bear from when they lived at home, and actually, it's their pride and joy 'cause it's the only thing they've got from home, so in that sense, the objects are really important and finding out, actually... it might be worth, in that life story work, finding out from the parents, if you can, actually where the teddy was bought from, when... how old were they when they got the teddy, what was their relationship like with*

the teddy when they were younger, and I think, in that sense, they are really important if they've got the objects (PW, Leah).

The memories associated with an object may not be positive; this is little acknowledged in the literature but was evident in our workshops with children. For example, one child built a Lego pencil to symbolise a story of bullying; although was adamant that she was constructing a fiction, not telling her story. Whilst this may have been a positive experience for her to share in this safe way, one participant cautioned:

I worry about re-traumatisation. I worry about something having a meaning for a child that you didn't foresee because you don't know. You don't know what sensory memories there are attached to that thing (LSW, Pete).

Whilst the associations between objects and relationships may seem to invoke negative memories, this is a subjective assessment and it may not be up to the professional to filter:

It's about the things you remember and actually the interpretation you have of that. So there might be something that we see, as professionals, really negative, but as the young person, it was a great experience with their family, so actually it's put in their way of remembering (PW, Leah).

Relational attachment to objects was evident in one workshop where a child chose to bring a garment of clothing belonging to his late father. The connection to his father through the garment was evident as the child held and cuddled it in a form of self-soothing (Jonsson et al., 1993). He was not ready to necessarily 'story' the item, but the connection through this object was symbolic and the concept of contagion (a theory whereby selves are extended onto material objects- see also Sartre, 1956 and Miller, 2010) is relevant here: '*It is as if some invisible link between the self and the object still exists*' (Diesendruck and Perez, 2015:18). Importantly, children's 'stuff' can be used to help the child and new family to understand their journey:

If they've been in placement before sometimes they come with stuff. I think that's quite nice because then the new carers are able to start forming their relationship with the young person and acknowledging you know their life so far, and some of the things

they've been doing recently and stuff, and I think that's nice. Yeah, so you just carry things on don't you then (FM, Louise).

Conclusions

Bringing together the diverse theoretical and practice insights in this paper, the need for children to be supported to tell their own story and the role of material culture in this is evident. *trove* is one possible solution to assisting children to engage in storying their life through objects, but there are other low cost, low technology solutions available such as taking photos of objects and recording stories in a variety of media, which enable some of the functions of *trove*. Further development work is underway to enable *trove* to be manufactured at an affordable cost. Durability of the technologies in *trove* is a concern, which is why we have developed the prototype to use the processor and associated NFC technologies in smart phones. Given the pace of technological developments we cannot futureproof this, but strongly believe that the *concept* of *trove* is extremely important within LSW.

Further research is a priority and we recognise that the insights provided are not necessarily representative of the whole sector. The new *trove* prototype has been co-designed with LAC, as opposed to adopted children who mostly contributed to earlier iterations. This has demonstrated that the concept of storying through loved objects has resonance across both groups of children, with those in care likely to have fewer objects but often very strong attachments to these and heightened concerns for the security of their belongings and any stories that are recorded, particularly if living in shared residential care.

The important message for practice is that children's material objects represent opportunities for gaps in life stories to be addressed and for children to have a role in the storying process through retaining connections with past relationships through tangible objects that might operate in symbolic, sensory, relational, memorialising and memory-enhancing ways. They provide tangible connections to past relationships for children, whether these can be articulated or not. This is an under-utilized and under-theorized resource in direct work with children both in England where this study is located, and across the world where services are striving to support displaced children, to have better mental health and identity outcomes.

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