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Names and naming in adoption: birth heritage and family-making

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Abstract

In this article, we consider the significance and practices of names and naming in adoption, to develop understanding of the issue amongst scholars, policy makers, adoption practitioners, and adoption communities. Research on the topic of names and adoption is scarce and focused mostly on international and domestic adoptions in the United States. We draw on the research literature to critically explore names and naming in adoption through two recurrent and related themes. The first is 'birth heritage', where names, forenames especially, are shown to be important in the approach taken by adopters to their child's birth family and cultural identity. The second theme is 'family-making', where namesaking and homogeneity of surname emerge, amongst others, as strategies to create, sustain and display 'family'. In gathering together for the first time an otherwise scattered, disparate body of research, our article showcases names and naming as illuminating distillations of key contemporary challenges experienced by families formed through adoption. We conclude our article by considering emergent gaps in existing knowledge and understanding about names, naming and adoption that might usefully be addressed, to inform professional advice and familial decisions about names, and enhance outcomes for adoptees and their families.

Key words: adoption, names, naming, family display, family-making, adoptive identity

Introduction

Adoption is a set of legal processes and social work practices through which parental responsibility for a child is legally transferred from, most often, birth parent(s) (and sometimes the State) to adoptive parent(s), resulting in a new permanent family. In England and Wales, as elsewhere, legal adoption is consequential for a child's 'identity documents' (Goffman 1968: 78): a child's original certificates of birth are replaced by an adoption certificate and a new certificate of birth. An essential difference between these 'before/after-adoption' identity documents lays in the *names* recorded within them. Whilst the original, detailed, certificate of birth shows the forenames and surname given to the child by its birth parent(s), along with the name(s) of the birth parent(s), the adoption certificate records the name(s) by which the child is to be known *after* adoption, and the name(s) of the *adoptive* parent(s) (Blyth *et al* 2009). The example of birth certificates suggests several implications of legal adoption for names and identities – for a child's name-based civil-legal identity; for their knowledge of their birth names, and the names/identities of their birth parents; and for the place of names in adoptive family making.

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In this article, we present a critical review of international research evidence that, directly or indirectly, shines a light on the significance and practices of names and naming in the processes and lived experiences of adoption. We do so in the development of our argument that names and naming are illuminating distillations of key challenges in contemporary adoptions; that is (1) 'the requirement to create a new version of kinship that includes both adoptive relatives and birth relatives' (Jones and Hackett 2011: 45), not least so that; (2) individuals who are adopted are able to make sense of their 'adoptive identity' (Grotevant 1997) throughout their lives. The purpose of our article is to further understanding of issues of names in adoption amongst scholars, policy makers, practitioners, and adoption communities.

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Our opening example of birth certificates provided a useful introduction to the 'entanglement' of adoption, names and identity. Other potential entanglements are suggested by insights drawn from the developing field of the sociology of names. Scholars argue that personal names (both forenames and surnames) sit at the nucleus of both individual identity and family affiliation (Anonymous 2016; Finch 2008), as well as socio-cultural identities, including gender (Anonymous 2017), ethnicity (Wykes 2017), and social class (Lindsay and Dempsey 2017). These observations are pertinent when we consider the contemporary landscape and contours of adoption. For example, in general, adopters are more likely to have privileged social class status and majority ethnicity; children placed for adoption tend to be less privileged in terms of social class positioning (Sweeney 2012). It is likely, then, that associations between names, social class and/or ethnicity, demonstrated by sociological studies of names and naming, will feature in adoption processes: children who are adopted join their new adoptive family with names, given by birth parents, which not only convey their individual identities and birth family affiliation, but may also signal their cultural

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heritage of, say, social class and/or ethnicity. As our critical review of research evidence will show, families formed through adoption may face a variety of naming and identity issues – and not only related to the names of *children* – that impact upon transitions to adoptive family life and a child's (birth and adoptive) identity.

Focusing specifically on England and Wales, we begin our article with an account of changes in the UK culture and governance of adoption, and in the profiles of children placed for adoption, which together make our critical consideration of evidence on names in adoption especially timely. The main part of our article draws on international research evidence to explore, question and make sense of names and naming in adoption. We use our findings to consider emergent gaps in existing knowledge and understanding about names and adoption that might usefully be addressed, to inform professional advice and familial decisions about names, and to enhance outcomes for adoptees and their families.

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Adoption, names and social change in England and Wales

In England and Wales, the adoption of children was first made a regulated and legal process via the 1926 *Adoption Act*. Before the 1970s, the majority of legal adoptions in England and Wales were of babies voluntarily given up by birth parents – typically, an unmarried mother. In such circumstances and in the interests of all parties, it was thought best for adoption to represent a 'clean break' from a child's birth family and a 'fresh start' with the adoptive family (O'Halloran 2015). Consequently, in the 'traditional closed form' (O'Halloran 2015) of adoption prevalent during much of the twentieth century, birth-given forenames and surnames of children were routinely changed by their adopters (Robertson 2016). An adoption culture of confidentiality and secrecy also meant that adoptees were often given

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little information, if any, about their adoption, including their own birth names and the names of birth family members.

Since the 1970s, there was a shift in professional understandings and practice of adoption in England and Wales, with adoption increasingly viewed more as a 'means of meeting the care needs of certain vulnerable children rather than as a solution to the perceived problem of unmarried motherhood or to the needs of infertile couples' (Thomas 2013: 2). Today, the majority type of adoption in England and Wales is domestic non-kinship adoption. Most adopted children have previously been 'children looked after'; that is, 'looked after' by the State, via a local government authority, because their birth family was unable to provide them with suitable care. Over the last 25 years or so in England, around 2,000-4,000 children annually have been placed for adoption, having been previously in local authority care. Most children leaving the care of a local authority for adoption are aged 1-4 years (71% of those adopted in England in 2017) or 5-9 years (21%). Only 7% of children adopted from care in England in 2017 were babies under a year old (Department for Education [DFE] 2017; For comparable data from Wales, see Welsh Government 2018). Around half of children waiting to be adopted from care are part of a sibling group, who ideally need to be placed with a family together (Coram 2019). The typical profile of contemporary adoptees makes it likely, then, that these are children who will know their own birth forenames (and often surnames), as well as the identities (forenames and surnames) of birth family members.

Naming issues in adoption are also magnified by a changed culture of adoption, away from secrecy and toward 'expectations of openness' (Jones 2016). It is now widely accepted that, unless it would be detrimental to the child's safety, adoptees' birth families and life stories are central to who they are and who they will become (MacDonald and McSherry 2011).

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Expectations of openness in adoption involves, at the very least, 'communicative openness' (Brodzinsky 2006); for example, information is disclosed to adoptees about their 'adoption story', including birth family history and identities (via 'life story' books for young adoptees and 'later life letters' for when they are older). There may also be 'structural openness' (Brodzinsky 2006), involving indirect contact (for example, via a 'letter box' system), and even ongoing direct contact between adoptees, adopters and birth family members.

The 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNCRC] also has implications for the place of names within adoption. Its codifying of principles of children's rights was subsequently reflected in the 1989 *Children's Act,* and in UK adoption legislation (including the current *Adoption and Children Act* [ACR] 2002) and associated statutory guidance documents (e.g. DFE 2013; DFE 2014). These changes placed children's rights, welfare, safety and needs at the centre of adoption processes, giving recognition to the importance of identity for children's wellbeing, and emphasising access to services and information to enable adoptees to make sense of their adoption throughout their lives. The 1989 UNCRC directly invoked names in relation to children's identity rights, specifying that every child has 'the right to a name' (article 7) and a right to 'preserve his or her [sic] identity' including their name (article 8). Yet, the issue of names remains remarkably under addressed within adoption legislation and associated statutory guidance in England and Wales. For example, specific provisions on names and adoption within the *ACR* 2002 relate solely to the timing of surname change for a child during the process of adoption, and there are no provisions whatsoever relating to forenames.

Adoption cultures and practices are also influenced by legal judgements on surnames and/or forenames. The landmark English court judgement - re *DL and LA (Care: Change of*

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Forenames) [2003] FLR 1 339, upheld subsequently in other cases - insists on (a) the priority of 'the identity principle' (our term to encapsulate the importance given to both forenames and surnames for a child's identity) and (b) the deployment, in exceptional circumstances, of the 'welfare principle' (see also Welbourne 2002) as the only justificatory rationale for children's forenames to be changed. Essentially, this remains the 'official' position on name changing within adoption practitioner communities (e.g. Brain and Dibben 2010; McAlpine 2013). However, it is unclear how legal judgements impacting on names in adoption are translated into social work practice and the lived reality of adoption.

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Issues of names in adoption are heightened by the character of contemporary societies as 'information societies' (Mansell 2009). Using digital technologies, including social media platforms, many ordinary individuals now have everyday access to information which makes it easier to trace, identify, contact and communicate with persons of interest to them: names are key to these searchable activities. There are obvious ramifications of the relative ease of traceability in 'the digital age' for individuals impacted by adoption, and this issue is increasingly routinely addressed in publications for adoption practitioners and adoption communities (e.g. Samuels 2018). This change, alongside the others we have outlined above - in the culture and legal governance of adoption and in the profile of children placed for adoption– we argue, places the experience of names at the heart of adoption, and provides a catalyst for a more detailed exploration of naming knowledge and practice.

Methods

To establish and explore how international research evidence shows the entanglements of names and naming in adoption, we undertook a critical review of research literature in adoption studies, with elements of a mapping review (Grant and Booth 2009). In other words,

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we aimed to produce an extensively researched review, to identify significant items in the field of interest, and to deploy thematic analysis, including the identification of gaps in coverage. Two research questions guided our critical review of research evidence: (1) What decisions are made about names in adoption processes and practices - that is, about whose names and which names, by whom and when?; (2) How do those within the adoption triad (adopters, adoptees and birth family), and adoption practitioners, experience and make sense of names in adoption processes?

The principal strategy for capturing studies that might furnish evidence relevant to our research questions was a search of key publication databases (including Social Science Citation Index, Social Care Online and Google Scholar). Additionally, we scrutinized publications from recent major UK adoption studies (Doughty *et al* 2017; Featherstone *et al* 2018; Neil *et al* 2015; Watson *et al* 2015a; 2015b; Whincup 2018). Analysis of found publications entailed reading, note-making, and coding to map, index, and categorise studies, and the findings reported therein, in relation to our research questions. A limitation of our approach is that our search only targeted publications in the English language.

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Findings

Our critical review of literature established that names in adoption is a topic that has received scant scholarly attention. We identified only a few empirical studies world-wide that substantively address naming practices in adoption (specifically: Cohen and Winter 2005; Hortsman *et al* 2018; Jacobson 2008; Johnson *et al* 1991; Ostler 2013; Patterson and Farr 2017; Reynolds *et al* 2017; Scherman and Harré 2004; Suter 2012). A small number of other empirical studies, focused primarily on other adoption issues, mention names and naming in passing. Together, these studies explored naming and adoption in varying degrees of detail,

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within different types of adoption, in contrasting national, legal and policy contexts, with differing research designs and from a range of disciplinary perspectives. In this article we bring together, for the first time, this disparate, scattered, and relatively small body of research evidence, with the aim of consolidating and further developing understandings of names and naming in adoption. We organise our discussion around two related and recurrent themes that emerged from our critical analysis: (1) 'birth heritage', where forenames, especially, are shown to be important in the approach taken by adopters to their child's birth family identity and cultural identity, and; (2) 'family-making', where homogeneity of surnames features as a strategy, amongst others, to create, sustain and display 'family'.

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Birth heritage, culture, names and adoption

Issues of names, identity and birth heritage are highlighted in the only UK study substantively addressing naming in adoption processes (Cohen and Winter 2005). Framed by Cohen's own experience of being a 'foundling', and not knowing her birth names or names of birth family members, Cohen and Winter (2005) discuss the impact a lack of knowledge of one's origins has on an adoptee's self-identity, and feelings about names. The importance of birth forenames and surnames for adopted young people's sense of identity and of belonging to their birth families is echoed in a UK qualitative study focused on life story work with 'looked after' young people by Willis and Holland (2009). In their life story work, young people explained 'in detail' about why they were given their birth names and the meanings behind them (2009: 49). In contrast however, Ostler's (2013) qualitative study of children in US foster care (and awaiting adoption) suggests that, for some children, birth forenames are part of their 'past' that they are happy to move away from.

Links between names, identity and birth heritage feature strongly, perhaps unsurprisingly, in studies of international (or intercountry) adoption (Jacobson 2008; Reynolds *et al* 2017; Sherman and Harré 2004; Suter 2012). (International adoptions are much the minority form of adoption in the UK (Hoffman 2013); studies, such as the British Chinese Adoption Study (e.g. Grant and Rushton 2018) have not addressed the issue of names at all). In international adoption, adoptees typically differ in their birth nationality and/or racialised identity from their adopters. Issues of naming in such circumstances can be 'fraught with complications' (Galvin 2003: 242). Many internationally adopted children will come to their new adoptive family with forenames that distinctively reflect their cultural heritage and so 'issues of ties to [host] culture, linkage to birth culture, or to an adoptive family tree, surface' (Galvin 2003: 243). Writing from the perspective of communication studies, Galvin argues that, for parents forming families through international adoption, there is a need either to create narratives which emphasize cultural differences (by 'culture keeping' a birth forename, for example; see Jacobson 2008), or a narrative which reduces differences between adoptive family members (by choosing an American-English forename, for example; see Suter 2012). For Reynolds' *et al* (2017: 1), in a qualitative study of experiences of Korean-American adoptees who later 'reclaimed' their birth forenames, the altering of birth forenames in part or in whole by adopters, is, despite its recognised complexities, a 'distancing mechanism' from the international adoptee's birth heritage, with potential impacts on their understandings of self-identity.

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In Sherman and Harré's (2004) survey of parents in New Zealand who had adopted Eastern European children, the majority chose to retain their child's birth forenames without any alteration. Within internationally adoptive families, practices of 'culture keeping' (Jacobson 2008) of birth family, national heritage, and identity, including through the retention of birth

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forenames, may be linked to factors such as respect for cultural identity prevalent within particular national contexts, or the specific national, cultural or linguistic heritage of adoptees (Sherman and Harré 2004). In contrast, in Suter's (2012) US focus-group study of white parents who had adopted children from China and Vietnam, none chose to keep birth names unaltered: birth culture names were either rendered secondary (used as a middle forename, for example) or excluded altogether. Rationales given by adopters for changing forenames of their children included pragmatism, in the context of practical concerns about non-American-English names and sounds, specifically letter combinations, pronunciations or length of Chinese or Vietnamese birth forenames (2012: 222). More often, though, rationales for changing names given by adopters in Suter's study centred around identity issues. Respecting 'ethnic identity' was identified by Suter as a key parental rationale for the retention of adoptees' birth forenames as middle names (a claim potentially undermined by their acts of choosing new, American-English forenames for their children). 'Family identity' was another important rationale articulated by parents in Suter's study. Giving American-English forenames was explained by parents as a means of endowing in adoptees a sense of legitimate family belonging to the adoptive family, including through 'namesaking'. In this context, namesaking refers to the (re)naming of adopted children after adoptive family members (2012: 219. See also Johnson *et al* 1991).

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Several UK studies indicate ways that, even within domestic adoptions, names can be a problematical issue arising from links between birth names, birth heritage and identities. In a study of the role of social workers in adoption by Featherstone *et al* (2018), a social worker reflected on the fact that, post-adoption order, parents have the power to go against advice and change their child's forename anyway: 'We do really go into [sic] them [adoptive parents] about identity, not changing names – but they do' (2018: 19. See also Hitchcock

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2014). Doughty *et al* (2017) focused on newly formed adoptive families in Wales and their experiences of the legal and administrative processes of adoption. Cases were reported where the child's birth forename had been unusually distinctive, and therefore more easily traceable by birth family members. Consequently, on advice from social workers and, presumably, on 'welfare principle' grounds, these forenames had been changed. However, adopters reported some unwelcome consequences of name changes, caused by out-of-synch records (e.g. a child's birth forename had not been changed in medical records; a room for an adoption celebration hearing had been booked by the local authority under the child's birth name rather than their new name).

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Birth heritage linked to names has also been shown to be troublesome in the context of open adoptions and contact between adoptees and birth family members. In letter box contact, adoptive parents may have to write to birth parents using the 'old' birth forename of the child (Doughty *et al* 2017), whilst letter contact between separated siblings (some of whom might retain the birth family surname) can cause adopters to worry about their child experiencing confusion about their identity and belonging (Anonymous *et al* 2017; McDonald and McSherry 2011. See also Hitchcock 2014). Similar concerns may surface in relation to the use of life story books. Watson *et al's* (2015) UK qualitative study found that adopters were worried that, in life story books containing birth family trees, the inclusion of names of birth family members could result in the adoptee using this information to research (via the internet and social media platforms) their birth family, and even trace and make contact with birth family members. These kinds of 'troubles', deriving from the ways names embody birth heritage, can also be viewed as impacting adoptive families in their 'family-making'.

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Family-making, display, names and adoption

Galvin argues that 'adoptive families are constructed through law and language' (2003: 239). This invokes the ways names can be used discursively in 'family-making'. Like Suter (2012), Johnson *et al's* (1991) US survey of 200 parents, 96 of whom were adopters, examined practices of namesaking, as a form of what Finch (2007) terms family 'display' and what Morgan (1996) describes as 'doing' family. A key finding was that, compared to non-adopted children, children who were adopted were more likely to be namesakes of family members. Johnson and colleagues suggest that, for adoptive families, namesaking takes on 'special importance' in reassuring the adoptee, their new relatives, and outsiders to the family, that there are no important differences between the child and its adoptive kin (1991: 369. See also Galvin 2003). The role played by forenames in signalling stages in the journey to adoptive family-making is further illuminated in Ostler's (2013) case study of children in US foster care. The children in Ostler's study, who were aged between 5 and 10 years old, had decided to change their forenames at the moment when their relationship with their birth parents was about to be severed due to an impending adoption. Ostler suggests that, through changing their forenames, these children were able to ward off feelings of trauma associated with the time of transition from birth family to adoptive family, and were purposively severing themselves from their previous identity.

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There is evidence from the research literature that, like forenames, surnames are important in adoptive family-making. A UK study used postal-questionnaires to ask children what they wanted from their foster placement (Sinclair *et al* 2001). One finding was that having different surnames to their foster parents was felt by children to signal, especially to others, the 'lack of normality' of their family life. In such cases, sharing a surname with their eventual adopters was highly significant. Likewise, in Beek and Schofield's UK focus group

study (2002), the adopters of one boy said that, for him, having his new surname written on his school books was very important: he had ripped up school books which bore his old birth surname. However, for some children, sharing a surname is reported as being unnecessary for their feelings of belonging to their foster and/or adoptive family (see Beek and Schofield 2002; Sinclair *et al* 2001).

For adoptive parents, sharing a family surname can also be important in their family-making and family display. A study by Patterson and Farr (2017) of US domestic adoptions interviewed 170 adoptive parents sampled by their sexual orientation. A key finding was that while heterosexual adoptive couples commonly followed patronymic surnaming conventions (deploying the surname of the man/adoptive father for all members of the adoptive family), lesbian and gay adoptive couples were more likely to have retained their own surnames, and to join those surnames together (through hyphenation, for example) for their children. This is both a discursive and a legal strategy of family-making in families which, in being adoptive and other-than-heterosexual, are doubly 'otherwise': in everyday communications as well on legal documents, a joint surname for the child links it to each individually-surnamed parent.

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Adoptive families are faced with creating new versions and narratives of kinship that might include both adoptive and birth relatives. In the context of openness in adoption, this can mean navigating a family creation process which consistently undermines adopters' status as 'real' parents (Jones & Hackett 2011: 45). Names and naming in this context can be important in making and managing 'roles, boundaries and identities in open adoptive families' (Hortsman *et al* 2018: 139). In a US study of 298 adoptive parents, Hortsman *et al* (2018) examines how forenames are used to refer to birth family members. A key finding was that, in adoptive family talk, birth mothers were often delineated by their forenames (e.g.

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'Ellen' or 'Mama Ellen'), so as to distinguish them from adoptive mothers. In a qualitative UK study of post-adoption contact, McDonald (2017) reports that an adopter had asked the birth mother to sign letters to the child using her forename in place of her customary sign off: 'Mum'.

The impact of surnames upon family-making also feature in UK adoption studies of 'openness' and contact with birth family members. In contact between adoptees and their non-adopted siblings, surname differences may cause parental worry about confusion of identity for the adoptee (McDonald and McSherry 2011) and prompt challenges by non-adopted birth siblings as to the authenticity of the adoptee's new surname (see Anonymous *et al* 2017). Studies of life story work also suggest how the presence and use of surnames can arise as an issue for adoptive families. The issue of names and ease of traceability via the internet and social media, noted by Watson *et al* (2015), also featured in Beek and Schofield's (2002) qualitative UK study. Here, carers of a child placed with them for adoption worried about the risks of contact should the 'hostile' birth parent come to know the surname of adoptive parents and trace their address via the internet. The use of names of birth family members in cards and letters received by the adoptive family are also mentioned in passing by Jones and Hackett (2011), as part of their qualitative UK study of how adoptive families 'create' and 'manage' family life (see also Jones and Hackett 2012). In other UK studies of post-adoption contact, names are not explicitly addressed (Cossar and Neil 2013; Neil *et al* 2014). However, we think these studies do at least infer that naming impacts upon adoptive families' resistance to and mitigation of the precarious status of their kinship. For example, in Cossar and Neil's (2013) study examining face-to-face post-adoption contact between adoptees and their birth siblings, adoptive parents expressed in interviews their concerns about the risks of birth family information being 'divulged'. Although not explicitly

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mentioned by Cossar and Neil, it seems likely that names of birth family members featured in the 'telling of stories and anecdotes, and the passing on of news' that occurred during contact time between adoptees and birth siblings from whom they were separated (2013: 75).

Discussion

Adoption is a complex process and a multifaceted set of experiences, at the centre of which is a child with often difficult, if not traumatic, previous experiences; and a child who 'belongs' both to a family of origin (a birth family) and to a family of destination (an adoptive family). It is understandable if scholarship in the broad field of adoption studies has not necessarily focussed on names as salient to adoption processes, practices and experiences. Child welfare issues have tended to be foregrounded in adoption more generally, whilst issues relating to identity have had much less attention, at least until recently (McMurray *et al* 2011; Welbourne 2002). Names are, by their very nature, prosaic and quotidian (Anonymous 2016). Yet, as we have indicated in this article, names and naming sit prominently at the juncture of key challenges for those impacted by adoption, and can both help to alleviate those challenges as well as potentially contributing to making an already difficult experience even more complicated.

For Peer Review

This article is primarily concerned with critically exploring research evidence on names, naming and adoption, with a view to considering how the field might further develop, and in ways that might support both professional adoption practice and the lived realities of adoptive family life. It is clear from the research evidence that names as the most ordinary of everyday constructs, and naming as a routine practice, are pertinent to adoption journeys and experiences. While further work is required to fully understand the saliency of names in adoption, the analyses presented in this article do already provide opportunities to highlight

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issues that practitioners might wish to consider. At the very least making names more 'visible' in adoption discourses could be helpful for all those impacted by adoption. For example, prospective adoptive parents could be given more opportunities to discuss and reflect on naming practices within their own and other families; birth families could be supported to share information about their own naming practices which could support children during their adoption journeys and into adulthood; adoptive parents could be provided with more support to think through how decisions to change, or add to, a child's name might be discussed with them as they grow up; and life story work could incorporate more thinking about the saliency of names. There are also potential implications for practice in relation to managing risk in the context of adoption. For example, attending more directly to how children and birth parents should be addressed in indirect contact plans (such as letter box contact) or, where names of children are not changed, actively helping adoptive parents and their children to navigate social media safely.

For Peer Review

The first of our research questions enquired about name decisions made in adoption processes and practices - which names, whose names, by whom, and when. We found that studies focusing substantively on names in adoption are especially concerned with forenames of adoptees (Jacobson 2008; Ostler 2013; Reynolds *et al* 2017; Scherman and Harré 2004; Suter 2012). Forenames of other birth or adoptive family members are specifically addressed in only two US studies (Hortsman *et al* 2018; Johnson *et al* 1991), and in passing by UK studies focused on issues other than names in adoption (Jones and Hackett 2011; McDonald 2017). With the exception of the US study by Patterson and Farr (2017), the issue of surnames and surnaming remains underexplored in studies focusing substantively on names in adoption (although see Scherman and Harré 2004). Surnames do emerge as a potentially troubling or disruptive issue in UK studies, whose primary focus lays elsewhere (Beek and Schofield

2002; McDonald and McSherry 2011; Anonymous *et al* 2017; Watson *et al* 2015); an observation which suggests that surnames and surnaming in adoption might usefully warrant much more focused attention and investigation. There is some, though limited, evidence that children make their own decisions about their names and have reasons for doing so (Ostler 2013). Yet, the research evidence on decisions taken about names is mostly from the perspective of adoptive parents. It positions adopters (and perhaps especially mothers – Jacobson 2008) as key agents of naming decisions in adoption.

Scholarship focusing substantively on names in adoption has yet to incorporate, in any significant way, issues contained within the second of our two research questions: how individuals within the adoption triad (adopters, adoptees and birth family), and adoption practitioners, each experience and make sense of names in the adoption process, including in the context of addressing 'birth heritage' or 'identity rights' alongside 'family making', and/or 'welfare rights', and how views might change over time (although, see Cohen and Winter 2005; Reynolds et al 2017; Willis and Holland 2009). Studies of international adoptions, especially, suggest rationales for decisions made about adoptees birth forenames (Jacobson 2008; Scherman and Harré 2004; Suter 2012), but the extent to which these apply to domestic adoptions, and to the UK context, and are mediated by issues shown to be important by sociologists of names and naming, such as social class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, remain largely unexamined. As we note above, research reporting on names in adoption does so largely from the perspective of adopters. We have some insights as to their understandings and experiences from rationales they give in accounting for decisions made about their children's names (Scherman and Harré 2004; Suter 2012) and the use of the names of birth family members (Hortsman *et al* 2018; McDonald 2017). But we are less knowledgeable about the impacts of name decisions on the experiences and understandings

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of adoptees themselves. This perhaps reflects some of the complexities of undertaking research with (young) people with often traumatic histories and potentially vulnerable adoptive identities. A similar reasoning perhaps accounts for the dearth of knowledge and understanding on names and adoption from the perspective of birth families. This is all potentially difficult and distressing territory. That there are no specific studies on names and adoption reporting the understandings and experiences of adoption practitioners, whose guidance on naming decisions may be followed, or ignored (Featherstone *et al* 2018; see also Hitchcock 2014), is perhaps less easily accounted for.

For Peer Review

Evidence about names in adoption that has surfaced from studies whose focus lays primarily elsewhere provides only tantalising glimpses into when, where and how 'name troubles' are experienced in adoption, and by whom (e.g. McDonald and McSherry 2011; Meakings *et al* 2017; Watson *et al* 2015). As it stands, there remains little empirical research on the experiences and understandings of names in adoption, and especially from the perspectives of adoptees, adoption practitioners and birth family members. There is also a lack of evidence about larger-scale patterns and prevalence of decisions made about names and naming in adoption, including in terms of when decisions are made in adoption processes. Nor is the extant research evidence enlightening as to how legal principles on names and adoption, whether via legislation, statutory guidance or case law, are translated into social work practices and the lived experiences of families formed through adoption.

Conclusion

In 1995, Morris argued that names in adoption raise 'a whole range of issues that have yet to be satisfactorily addressed' (1995: 41). Our critical review of the current research evidence suggests that considerable scope remains to enhance our knowledge and understanding in this

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area, and that Morris' claim still has some validity. As Neil (2012: 409) argues, adoptive children must integrate into their adoptive family, but also need to differentiate between their adoptive and birth families, and to make sense of their adopted status throughout their life. Through our critical review we are able to highlight that names and naming might be rather more important to these processes than the current dearth of research attention suggests. Although 'information giving' is acknowledged as a key aspect of openness and contact in adoption (Jones and Hackett 2012), the importance of names in information giving, and also in identity work and family-making, is less well acknowledged. Further research on the lived experience of names and naming in adoption could fruitfully feed into evidence-based adoption policy and practice, including the development of training for adoption practitioners, and of support for adoptive and birth families to help them better navigate the complexities of adoptive family life and adoptive identities.

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