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# **Adopted children and young people's views on their life storybooks: the role of narrative in the formation of identities**

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports interviews conducted with twenty children and young people adopted from the care system in England, exploring their experiences and views of their life storybooks and examines the role of life storybooks as a form of narrative that contributes to identity development. Despite being a widely used intervention in direct social work practice in England and enshrined as a requirement in law for all looked after children placed for adoption there is little known about how children experience their life storybooks. The data revealed three core themes related to the *child's story*, *identity* and *communicative openness*. These themes provide insights from the children about the levels of honesty in the narrative conveyed, concerns about gaps in their biographies, the importance of treasured material possessions alongside their book, their adoptive identity and the importance of different levels of openness in discussions about their adoptive status. There are a number of important practice implications outlined, as well as an identified need for more research on this topic.

## **Key words**

Life storybooks, adoption, children, identity, narrative, communicative openness

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## **1. Introduction**

The importance of direct work with children was reinforced in the UK in the *Children Act* (Department for Education and Skills, 1989) the *Adoption and Children Act* (Department for Education, 2002) and updated in the *Children and Families Act* (Department for Education, 2014a) which outlines expectations on adoption agencies to collect information on the history

of children who are in the care system and those placed for adoption. The associated draft guidance (Department for Education, 2014c) specifically states that ‘all children with a plan for adoption must have a life storybook’ (3.10, p.45). This draft guidance requires that life storybooks be given to the child and adoptive parents no later than ten working days after the adoption order (Department for Education, 2014c).

Life storybooks constitute both a *process* and *product* (Livingston Smith, 2014) and are based on the premise that children in care often have gaps in their biographical memory, particularly if they have experienced multiple placements (*Ibid.*). Social work interest in life storybooks emerged in the 1980s in the UK with the seminal work of Ryan and Walker (Ryan & Walker, 1985) and practice interest and guidance materials have since proliferated (Hammond & Cooper, 2013; Harrison, 1998; May, Nichols, Lacher, & Nichols, 2011; Rees, 2009; Rose & Philpot, 2005; Ryan & Walker, 2007). Whilst there is a substantial amount of practice guidance, there is a dearth of research that supports the use of life storybooks (Gallagher & Green, 2012, 2013; Livingston Smith, 2014; Shotton, 2010; Willis & Holland, 2009) particularly related to perceived efficacy of the intervention (Baynes, 2008; Quinton, Rushton, Dance, & Mayes, 1998; Rushton, 2004). The centrality of narrative in children’s biographical meaning-making and the role of life storybooks in facilitating identity development are the focus of this paper which reports interview data collected with 20 adopted children and young people.

## **2. Literature review and theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Life story work and life storybooks**

Life story work is theorised drawing on attachment and loss theory (Ryan & Walker, 2007) and the role of narrative in identity development in order that children can come to better understand their family history (Treacher & Katz, 2001), as well as their adoptive status (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984; Rushton, 2004) and develop a coherent narrative that incorporates the trauma and losses they have experienced (Livingston Smith, 2014). Life story work is based on social work assertions that ‘knowing the facts of one’s past is a necessary part of the development of a sense of personal history, identity and culture’ (Aldgate and Simmonds, 1988, p.11). It is important to distinguish between the production of a life story book and ongoing life story work. The two can sometimes be conflated and the production of a book does not signal the completion of life story work. The

book provides the contexts and explanations for, as well as evidence of the child's history, often based on '*informed guesses about complicated issues*' (Livingston Smith, 2014, p.163, *Italics* in original); whilst life story work is open ended (*Ibid.*) and can be done through multiple media (not just a 'book'), but always with the child involved and should be flexible to accommodate children's own changing perceptions and feelings (Rose and Philpott, 2005). The engagement of a child with a life storybook, it is suggested 'places a sense of permanence in the hands of the child' (Cook-Cottone and Beck, 2007, p.195) as the child is able to reminisce and co-construct their past with the help of the narrative and memories in the book and this is believed to contribute to their construction of self. Life storybooks are particularly advocated as a tool to enable children to process their past and prepare for permanency in adoptive families, by assisting the child in the tasks of 'clarification, integration and actualization' (Henry, 2005, p.209). Self-evidently this process is dependent on the child's age – many adopted children enter care before the age of 12 months and may have little memory of events before adoption, but will need information about the reasons for their separation from their birth parents and relatives and a non-pejorative but not sentimentalised description of their parents and family background – as will other children who are adopted or who have lost touch with their birth parents and family. This can be done as the book is being co-produced, but often as an ongoing process after the book is initially produced.

Whilst there is no research that has demonstrated an association between life story work and positive outcomes for children in care, there is research that has drawn attention to the negative impact on children and their adoptive families when life story work has been done badly or where children do not have a good understanding of their early lives (Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa 2015). Looked after children and young people also report the importance of understanding the reasons why they came into care (Children's Commissioner, 2015). Current research suggests that 75% of children who go onto be adopted in England have been maltreated (Selwyn et al., 2015) and this sometimes results in long term trauma with associated risks for maladaptive psychological and biological development (Cicchetti & Banny, 2014). Having a coherent narrative of adverse experiences has been associated with recovery from trauma and PTSD (Adshead, 2012) and, conversely, not having a coherent account is associated with being less able to respond sensitively to one's own children later in life (Kaniuk, Steele, & Hodges, 2004) as well as later mental health problems. The way coherent narratives are created for children in care is through life story work and the

development of a life story book- which, it is argued, contributes to identity construction (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007; Loxterkamp, 2009).

## **2.2. Narrative Identity**

The link between narration and the construction of identity for individuals is described as *narrative identity*; defined as the: ‘internalized, evolving story of the self that each person crafts to provide his or her life with a sense of purpose and unity’ (Adler, 2012, p.367). The concept of narrative identity has roots in Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963) in respect of the importance of narrating stories of the self in order to address important questions of ‘Who am I’ and ‘How did I come to be me?’ It has also been argued that strong commitments associated with Marcia’s final stage of identity development, ‘Identity achievement’ (Marcia, 1966) also relate to adolescent development, whereby:

Strong commitments go together with more adjustment (less depression and anxiety and more well-being), a more positive personality profile (less neurotic and more extraverted, open, and agreeable), and warm, supportive, and less-controlling parenting (Meeus, 2011, p.90).

Given the ubiquitously reported poor outcomes for children in the care system (Jones et al., 2011), it could be argued that enabling a strong sense of identity is crucial for this population to avoid later mental health and other socio-emotional problems, including poor educational outcomes and offending behaviours which are significantly worse in the English looked after population than the general population (Department for Education, 2013).

Being able to narrate one’s past is part of the challenge in respect of identity coherence and telling and re-telling stories helps the narrator to achieve coherence of the story (Welbourne, 2012). Stories also need to be constructed and retold in order to construct the self:

Through repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted, retold, and subjected to a range of social and discursive influences, as the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p.235).

Narrating the self, however, is something that children need to learn to do over time and have opportunities to practice and, it is argued, that parent-child conversations about events and emotional responses to events are crucial in building children’s narrative skills and capabilities (McAdams & Janis, 2004). There is also evidence that the ability of attentive

listeners being able to confirm personal stories and agree with particular interpretations of events also links strongly to an individual's ability to retain this information in long term memory (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Moreover, the listener has a role in the co-creation of the stories, as personal narratives are 'entangled' with those of other people (Welbourne, 2012, p.81). These are essential features of narration that children in the care system are unable to experience with birth family members (as perpetrators of abuse and neglect) that can help them to process and make sense of their story. Memories are often disrupted and partial, littered with gaps in knowledge or traumatic events that prevent the child engaging in telling themselves or anyone else a coherent account of who they are and the "journey" they have taken in becoming the person they are. Whilst foster carers, social workers and adoptive parents might be able to fill this gap, they require accurate pre-care information in order to undertake this important work (and this is often not available); such third party facilitation is also challenging if the memories are not shared by the adult concerned. It is also exceptionally difficult for adults to listen to children's stories of abuse – therefore social workers and foster carers who have little training in this area tend to avoid providing this listening role to children.

In critical psychological theory, Bamberg interrogates the link made between life story, narration and identity and questions whether 'this close connection between life and narrative is said to require a particular retrospectiveness that only credits "life as reflected" and discredits "life as lived"' (Bamberg, 2011, p.14). He argues for "narrative" to be described in the noun form as "narration": as an ongoing embodied and performed act of storying the self; rather than a fixed "narrative" that positions the individual in a teleological space that he argues is incongruent with other theorisations of the fluidity and complexity of identity. He suggests that researchers need to address three dilemmas, viewing the narrating subject:

- (i) as not locked into stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place, but contextually and locally held together;
- (ii) in terms of membership positions vis-à-vis others that help us trace narrators' "means of showing how identities, social relationships and even institutions are produced" (Baker, 2004, p. 164); and
- (iii) as the active and agentive locus of control, though attributing agency to outside forces that are situated in a broader socio-historical context as well as in bodies and brains. (*Ibid.*, p.9).

This poses huge challenges for life storybooks that are intended to mediate the children's gaps in memory, trauma, loss and replace the parent-child conversations that McAdams (2013) argued are essential to the development of children's narrated identity over time. It is important to appreciate that life storybooks are also intended to provide the *start* of the conversation about the child's life, signalling to the child that they are entitled to know about their life story; rather than expecting the book to provide the coherent and only account of the child's life. But, importantly, life storybooks are narrative histories written *for* and *about* the child and this paper critically explores their contribution to identity development for children and considers in what ways they can support the child become narrating subjects of their life story. The paper next examines critiques of life storybooks evident in the literature and we draw upon these and the critical perspectives offered above on narrative identity in our consideration of children's accounts of their books later in the paper.

### **2.3. Challenges for the life storybook**

Life storybooks do not reflect an unproblematic reality, rather they are narratives that represent a version of reality designed specifically to enable children to create a positive sense of self (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007; Treacher & Katz, 2001; Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Yet as representations they are often partial, with missing parts of the story common for many children; they are also largely filtered by the professionals who have produced them, or in many cases foster carers, extended family members and indeed, adoptive parents, and this is arguably an exertion of power over the child's story (Baynes, 2008). Rarely do life storybooks capture what Baynes (2008) has described as the 'untold stories' - the honestly portrayed and difficult to convey impact of domestic violence perpetrated by fathers for example, or the effects of drug and alcohol misuse that prevented birth families from keeping children. As Treacher and Katz (2001) argue, there are pervasive narratives imbued in life storybooks that communicate a positive and reparative purpose. Narratives often emphasise a determination not to demonise birth families; rather there is a focus on their personal circumstances (such as drug and alcohol use; poor education and skills) as the reasons for the child being in care; but with an underlying message that they are very much loved by birth families and adopted families alike. Some commentators suggest that this presents a happy ever after 'story' that often does not reflect the realities of the children concerned who may have memories of abuse and neglect and then struggle to reconcile the conflicting narratives into a coherent whole (Loxterkamp, 2009). But this is a difficult balancing act as the book is



attempting to provide a frank account about birth parents in a way which does not leave the child burdened with feeling sorry or responsible for their parents' unhappy lives, whilst also allowing for more detailed understandings for their being in care to emerge in age-appropriate ways that do not contradict with earlier understandings.

Knowledge of birth families is an undeniable right for children in the UK care system and essential for children to have a sense of who they are and where they belong (Grosso & Nagliero, 2004). Adoptive identity is highly complex and needs to be understood in the context of the kind of adoption involved and the extent to which there is an openness about birth origin and adoption and the existence of any ongoing contact with birth families for individual children (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000). But a healthy sense of identity for an adopted person is complicated by identification and belonging to at least two families (Loxterkamp, 2009) as, for example, for children removed during infancy the family remembered may be one or more foster families. Whilst some argue that there is an imperative for adopted children to 'feel positive about their origins' (Brodzinsky, 2005, p.164), others argue that a healthy identity can emanate from rejection of the birth family as well as acceptance, particularly where the experience of the birth family is one of abuse and/or neglect (Loxterkamp, 2009). This suggests a highly skilled role for the life storybook in conveying the child's biographical history in ways that are honest, believable in the context of their memories and provide enough information for them to work out the complexities of their past. This demands a great deal of 'communicative openness' (Brodzinsky, 2006; Jones & Hackett, 2008) on the part of social workers, foster carers, adoptive parents and other family members to ensure that the story conveyed is one that meets the child's needs in age appropriate ways and as a tool that enables adoptive parents to have ongoing open discussions about adoption with their child.

It is also important to acknowledge that the life storybook is just one part of life story work that may be ongoing over many years enabling children to work through issues of their past and adjust to new information as it becomes appropriate for them to know more (Livingston Smith, 2014).

#### **2.4. Children's views**

Whilst there is a considerable body of writing both in practice and academic fields of the potential importance of life storybooks, there is very little direct research that has reported children's views of the process, or reflections on their life storybook. Of the few that have

reported children's views (Gallagher & Green, 2012; Neil, 2012; Selwyn, Meakings & Wijedasa, 2015; Willis & Holland, 2009) only one focused specifically on children's reflections on life story work (Willis & Holland, 2009). The study by Willis and Holland (2009) involved interviews with 12 looked after young people aged 11-18 years in one local authority in South Wales about their experiences of life story work, which included the production of the book. Overall, the authors reported the importance and value that young people afforded the life story work, although it provoked strong emotional reactions including tedium, boredom, anger, sadness and pleasure; feelings that contributed to one young person completely destroying her work (Willis & Holland, 2009). The importance of photographs to enable participants to explore aspects of their identity such as physical appearance and familial likenesses were also highly regarded by the young people. Although in other studies, birth family photographs that were outdated and did not reflect what birth family might look like in the present were sources of frustration (Neil, 2012; Selwyn et al., 2015). Children in the study by Neil (2012) also regularly reported gaps in understanding due to lack of information in their life storybooks- in one case this included one boy expressing concern that he did not know how his mother had died.

The existence of original photographs and other examples of material objects and mementoes were important to the young people in the Willis and Holland (2009) study where it was apparent that the life story work, and the book in particular, provided both a narrative account and a container for 'material links with the past and absent present' (Willis & Holland, 2009, p.49). Physically being able to touch, hold and explore objects such as teddies, ribbons indicating their length at birth, and drawings and certificates from their childhood enabled young people to feel more connected with their biographies. This reflects the early history of Coram as the Foundling Hospital established by Thomas Coram in 1739, where 'love tokens' such as scraps of cloth, ribbons, buttons or coins were left with babies and children as markers of identity should the mother ever be able to come back and reclaim their child (Styles, 2010). Whilst the tokens were not gifted to the child there is an important early connection and recognition in this organisation's work of the importance of material souvenirs or tokens of parents' love in providing anchorage points around which biographical narratives are woven. The importance of loved objects in a biographical story is often explained in respect of the material culture being viewed as part of our extended self through which individuals 'enact personalized versions of cultural scripts' (Ahuvia, 2005, p.172). The

meanings of valued possessions to a sense of identity continuity has also been noted as particularly important in major life transitions for individuals (Kroger & Adair, 2008).

The studies that have focused on children's perspectives do generally agree upon the importance of life storybooks to looked after and adopted children. They are valued and seen to be of utility for children and young people in making sense of their lives and who they are. What is also clear is that, as Willis and Holland (2009) note, there is a need for more research with wider samples of children and young people in order that we can better understand their perceptions and experiences of this intervention. This paper aims to provide more information to contribute to addressing this gap.

### **3. Methods**

The aim of this study was to access children and young people's perceptions and experiences of life storybooks, and as such this overarching aim positioned the methods within an exploratory interpretive framework. Within this overall aim we also identified the following research questions:

- How successful does the child feel their life storybook is in conveying their life story?
- To what extent does the life storybook support their understanding of the reasons for their being in care/ adopted?
- In what ways does the life storybook support identity development through enabling narration of their life story?

Given the potentially sensitive nature of this topic and the fact that children were likely to have disrupted care histories, experienced multiple placements and been subject to abuse and/ or neglect, we were concerned not to expose them to further risk of harm through the research process and believed that one-to-one methods of data collection with skilled and knowledgeable researchers would be most appropriate as adopted children are far more likely to have come from abusive or neglectful backgrounds than the rest of the care population (Department for Education, 2014b; Selwyn *et al.*, 2015). We also acknowledged that there was a higher chance of children having learning disabilities and emotional difficulties than in the general population that may have impeded their ability to complete questionnaires, so facilitated semi-structured interviews were utilised as described below. Ethical approval for

the project was provided jointly by the School for Policy Studies ethics committee at the University of Bristol and Coram's ethics committee.

### **3.1. Participants**

Data collection with children took place within a wider project exploring adopters' perspectives on their children's life storybooks and the data are reported elsewhere (Watson, Latter and Bellew, 2015). As part of this data collection process adoptive parents were asked if they felt their adopted child(ren) would agree to take part in an interview. As such the sampling method was purposive and reliant on adoptive parents as gatekeepers; but we felt this was the safest way to approach children and to ensure adopters had confidence in their child engaging with the study. We were clear that we did not feel it was appropriate to include children who were not settled in their placement or who were currently receiving therapy.

Twenty children and young people agreed to be interviewed living in nine local authorities in England. All the interviews took place in the child's home with an adoptive parent present in the house. The interviewer requested that they met with the child alone, but respected the child's wishes if they asked for a parent to be present. The majority of the children were white British (n=16); two were of mixed ethnicity and two children were of Eastern European ethnicity. Only six of the 20 children were boys and ages ranged from seven to 15 years, with one participant of 27 years. Excluding this older adoptee, the mean age of children who participated was 11 years. The older participant contacted us as she had heard about the research and was keen to convey her experience of life storybooks. We felt it was appropriate to include her in the study. All participants have been given pseudonyms and their specific locations, ages and gender have not been provided in order to protect their anonymity.

### **3.2. Interviews**

Interviews were conducted by authors one and two either alone or together following a semi-structured interview schedule, with age appropriate prompts and explanations provided. Interviews commenced with 'silly' questions that allowed the child to practice saying 'no' and 'I don't know' or 'I don't want to answer that' to ensure the child was confident to disagree and dissent in the interview (Tisdall, Davis, & Gallagher, 2008). The data has numerous examples of children enacting this strategy, for example, Peter (one of the youngest children in the sample), in response to a question about how it made him feel to look at his book commented: *'I don't want to answer that question because I'm not sure'*.

Each child was then shown two examples of life storybooks to appraise that have been used in training social work professionals. This focus on concrete anonymised examples ensured that the children focused on the elements and organisation of the books rather than on the personal story told- although points of familiarity in the “anonymous” stories and their own were often noted by the children. They were assured that we did not need to see their life storybooks, nor were we there to ask about their life story, but in most cases they were keen to show their own. When there was concern that the child was being impulsive or overly trusting, assurance to share the book was sought from the parent and this reflects an uneasy balance between a child rights perspective that asserts the right of the child to participate in decision-making and a child welfare perspective where protection of children from harm often overrides principles of participation (Carnevale, Campbell, Collin-Vézina, & Macdonald, 2013). In some cases parents advised the child to not share sections of their books or not show certain volumes, but otherwise seemed happy for their child to decide what to share.

Interviews consisted of the child’s appraisal of the ‘anonymous’ books as well as of their own and lasted between 20 - 40 minutes. At the end the researcher carefully checked with the child and adopter that the child was not left in any distress. Throughout the interviews guiding ethical principles in research with children of ‘respect, benefit and justice’ (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson, & Fitzgerald, 2013, p.11) were considered. Whilst children and adopters had signed formal consent forms we also utilised processes of ‘embedded assent’ (Cocks, 2008) within an ethical framework of reflexivity and constant vigilance to ensure that we were doing no ‘emotional or other harm’ (BERA, 2011, p.7). In only one case was an interview terminated, and this was with a child who became agitated when their parent left the room (at the child’s request) to collect their life storybook. The interviews were all digitally recorded and transcribed, they were then analysed using a general inductive thematic approach (Thomas, 2006) in NVIVO where patterns and relationships between codes were explored through visualisation techniques. Three core themes became apparent in these processes: *The Child’s Story*, *Identity* and *Communicative Openness* and these are used as sub headings to present the findings below, as well as one related to children’s overall assessments of their books.

## 4. Findings

In the section that follows pseudonyms have been used and some attributions have also been changed so that patterns across children's data do not make them identifiable. In respect of the child's general use of their book, most of them reported that they looked at their books infrequently with birthdays and Christmas often triggering a curiosity, as did other people's questions about their birth history, or when they felt something had been forgotten and they wanted to check. Beth and Poppy both commented that they had not looked at theirs at all since they had been made, but this was unusual. Lucy was adamant she did not look at it and would not let anyone else see it as, '*it's a secret, secret, secret*'. Claire's account of her use of her book is more representative of many of the children, although she was one of the few who reported wanting to spend time on her own with her book without her parents' knowledge:

*It depends, around my birthday a lot more, other times a year not so much. If I have an argument with my mum and dad now I do look at them, not a lot, and sometimes not in a bad way being secret about it, but sometimes I do look at them in a secret way. I wouldn't let them see me looking at it. I just take it up to my room, hopefully when they're not around, and they haven't noticed I've taken it [...] I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and I want to read it (Claire).*

A few children were openly dismissive about the need to engage with their book:

*I just forget about it, and just carry on with my life how it's going, or otherwise if I think about it all the time I will be worrying about something what's not happening anymore (Rachel).*

Rachel appeared to define who she was by rejecting her past as not relevant to the present in the sense that she was anxious not to let her past intrude on the present -although her feelings were framed within experiences of mental health support that she had received to move on from her experiences. Carly explained that she had looked at her book in preparation for our interview, but otherwise did not use it. For others their use of their book had changed over time with some reporting greater use of it when they were younger (Emily, Alan) and others commenting that it has taken on more importance as they have become older (Sally).

The children were asked who had made their book and most were vague about this referring to social workers, foster carers and adopters having been involved in the process. There was a sense of lack of ownership by the children of the books and arguably of their early life story.

Some were aware that adoptive parents had redone or significantly updated books and were largely pleased about their parents' involvement in this process. But most children did not know who had made their book as they had been adopted as babies or as very young children.

#### 4.1 The Child's Story

This theme captures the child's assessment of the biographical story conveyed in their life storybook. For many of the children the absence of a "story" was a source of criticism about their own book and we were regularly told about books that contained photographs but with little account of who was in the photos or how the photos contributed to the child's story. As Jack noted, his book has *'information all in order but it's not very interesting to read'*. There was some evidence in the accounts that where the book was not presented well or lacked a narrative that was interesting or seemed authentic it was often not used. In situations where books lacked a coherent or detailed narrative, some children reported *'stories'* of their past that they had largely constructed themselves through the photographs available (Joanne, Beth). Indeed the lack of narrative was raised by seven children who described their book as containing many photos but *'very little writing'* (Alan).

In the absence of a clear account being provided, it seems children can construct fictional and fantasy biographies:

*You imagine this fantasy world where your parents are rich or amazing or a prince when you're a kid, so when you don't have that information there's a lot more room for disappointment (Beth).*

The absence of multiple narratives and the perspective of the birth parents in the life storybook was the focus of a long discussion with Tara who linked the lack of birth parent perspective with bullying problems she was experiencing in school, as she lacked information about her life that non-adopted children might access through their parents. She emphasised the need for multiple narratives in the book in discussion of a poem that had been written by her birth mother, which she referred to as: *'It's little and special'* and she reflected on the need for social workers to direct birth parents to including such items to provide: *'Their side of the story in the book'*. Whilst there were omissions in the narrative and other aspects of presentation in her book, Tara was grateful that she was provided with an explanation for the poor quality of some aspects of her book or for omissions as she received *'an apology letter that some of my photos were lost'*.

In some cases children were dismissive about their book, as the focus did not seem to be on them specifically. For a few children, photos included were stark reminders of differential treatment of siblings by birth parents and contributed to negative feelings. As Dean commented, the pictures in his book were all about his brother '*opening presents*' and it did not feel like it was focused on his story and hence did not reflect his experiences and appeared to exacerbate feelings of exclusion from his birth family rather than helping him make sense of loss. In Beth's case the fact that she had a book but her brother did not was a cause of further rejection from his birth mother and had led, she believed, to further feelings of loss for him.

All of the children reflected on the structure of their books and whether it should start with the adoptive parents, or whether it should offer a chronological record of their life. Overwhelmingly, all but one of the children reported their book was structured as a chronological record and felt that it would make it difficult to read if the adoptive parents were first, with one child stating he would have to '*read it backwards*' (Peter) and this did not make much sense to him.

For some children the lack of a coherent narrative that they could easily follow was a barrier to their use of their book and it became clear that a well-defined structure was imperative, irrelevant of the actual ordering of events:

*Well, it kind of tells you a bit of my family now and then it goes back to Simon and Louise and then it goes to Sharon and then it goes back to them* (Jack).

This linked to several children feeling they would prefer more information in their books and the gaps that were evident in their stories, as Gary tellingly notes: '*It explains about what happened there, not why I got here*'.

The extent of honesty conveyed to children through the life storybooks was a focus of discussion in many of the interviews as they often identified that the 'anonymous' books were much clearer on the reasons for the child being taken into care than their own book as they: '*shows like what the parents done to get him put into care*' as Emily noted. In contrast, an absence of details relating to the process of their entering the care system as well as the reasons for their final placement in care was mentioned by several children in respect of their own books.



*Doesn't mention once about the sessions that we used to have, you know when, actually it might [ ... ..] So it looks like they just left me, so that's not what happened like - we saw each other (Carly).*

This omission caused Carly to be quite dismissive of her life storybook due to the lack of a rounded account of her birth family's attempts at contact.

Most children understood the need to convey age appropriate information and recognised that their books had been written for them to understand at a much younger age: *'in a perspective you can understand'* (Megan) and some of the older children were aware there was more information available to them when they were ready to receive it such as their 'later life letter' from their social worker. However their book was often not their only source of biographical knowledge as some children had clear memories of their past and the reasons for them being in the care system, and this sometimes conflicted with the lack of detail or superficial account provided in their book. For example, Gary had clear memories of his birth family and described his birth parents as:

*One of them took drugs and smoked and they both smoked and there's a fire and they just got out, they had to climb out the window apparently [....] they would pass like crisps out the window, through the window, because we was kept in the garden a lot.*

In comparison to these memories he expressed concern that the "rosy" pictures included of him with his birth mother in his book did not convey the experiences that he recalled of neglectful treatment.

## **4.2. Identity**

Questions of how the life story portrayed in the children's books connected with their sense of who they were now were clearly evident in the data. Some children reported a dissonance between the child who appeared in the book and the child they now felt they were. In a discussion about whether any adults had talked to her about her book and what that had felt like, Rachel responded:

*Sometimes quite scary because I'm not sure what to do and what not to do, and sometimes I don't feel like I'm this girl because I look nothing like her. I don't seem like her now I'm talking right here, I don't feel like this little young girl. It feels like I'm a different girl, I'm not... it seems like I'm not this girl anymore, it feels like I am*

*someone else. But I'm actually that girl talking here, and I am confused [...] it's seems like I'm just a normal girl sitting right here talking to you.*

This view of not being the same child was also expressed by Lara when she explained why she did not like photos in her book:

*I think the hardest thing is the pictures. I like the pictures, but it's hard when you're very young, when you've just left them, and it's hard when you're a lot older and you understand, but in the middle you're just like what? Who is that? You don't understand, because I know I called my family that the day I met them, because I was told I was meeting my new mummy and dad that I shouted mummy across the room at them. But then if I saw a picture of my birth mum I would still be like 'Why is mummy not here?'*

#### **4.2.1 Family likeness and photographs**

Photographs were central to children describing their sense of self and were mentioned regularly in the discussions about the children's books and central to their accounts of identity. For several of the children, birth family photographs were challenging to look at and some reported not wanting to see pictures of their birth parents at all:

*Because that could upset some people, like when I first looked at that [...] I got really upset because I was just, I don't know why, I just felt sad (Carly).*

Megan was the only child who reported as having destroyed part of her life storybook and this involved 'shredding' photos of her and her birth mother. She reflected on the fact that she had been 'angry' but that her adoptive mother had helped her to stick them back together. Some children were dismissive of social workers attempts to capture happy events in the life storybook, such as photographs of the child's early birthdays and Christmas' spent with birth family, as they became events that the child focused their anger on over time:

*I don't think Social Services and things should assume that it would be good to talk about, because quite often it's when they're little, and I know I changed a lot once I grew up. Not everyone does, but I know my anger and things got different, and that's by understanding things mainly, and when you read things some things upset you more (Lisa).*

For most children family photographs were, however, positively received and provided links with their birth family and a sense of who they were in respect of physical resemblances. Children happily showed us photos and talked about the family members involved - largely with affection and interest. Lucy summed up that her life storybook was precious to her because *'I like that it's about my family and not about anyone's family'*.

In discussing her birth family photos, Beth focused on family likeness and the extent to which she could relate her appearance to her parents:

*I've got loads of pictures of them, yes. I don't really look like any of them. I look a bit like my mum, a little bit, but other than that I don't look like any of them.*

When we asked the children what they would recommend for all life storybooks the majority of them were clear that having at least one photo of birth parents was essential to include: *'A picture of your birth family just in case you don't go back and you'll know what they look like'* (Emily).

#### **4.2.2 Object importance**

Children's accounts of life storybooks often included material objects such as birth and foster care mementoes and precious possessions that did not necessarily 'fit' in their books but were regarded by children as important in discussion of their pre-adoption memories:

*I've got a special rabbit from my birth mum upstairs, purple rabbit, can't get rid of it. I've also got a bear that I got given when I was three by my old next door neighbours when I had just moved in. I've got a couple of other things, like a money box and all these things are just so special and you can't let go. I've got a doll I had when I was fostered, I can't let go of it* (Lottie).

Often their material attachments were to original photographs and the importance of owning objects that birth family members had also touched was mentioned by several children.

Letters from birth parents, siblings and grandparents were also often incorporated in the life storybook or in separate folders and mentioned by most children. In some cases these were dismissed, as: *'they don't really say anything about what happened, they're just "We love you" and all of that, just goodbye letters, not really anything useful information'* (Beth).

Letters were generally from birth parents and included cards from birth mothers trying to explain the reasons for relinquishing children.

### 4.3. Communicative openness

Being able to talk about their life story and indeed go through their life storybook with an adult was reported as important by most of the children. Adoptive parents were emphasised as the people most children relied on for support about being adopted and more specifically, about using their life storybook.

However, the joint reading of their book with an adoptive parent, triggered a range of emotions with some children reporting it as ‘awkward’ (Lara), ‘upsetting’ (Lucy) or feeling ‘unhappy’ (Gary) - as he explained that the content is ‘not very nice’ and he was also not ‘comfortable’ hearing about his past; and this was a pattern that emerged across the children’s accounts. Most found it an uncomfortable and unsettling experience and avoided looking at their books, but if they did want to talk about it they would go to their adoptive parents to ask questions. Asha commented that looking at her book made her feel ‘mixed up’. When we asked her to explain what she meant she withdrew from the conversation and her father who was present intervened saying:

*She loves her birth family but she hates them at the same time, and so she’s just trying to come to grips with these conflicting emotions.*

Often parents were seen as safety nets to support the child in working out their biography, providing scaffolding to the child understanding their story: ‘Because I don’t think it would be very nice to work it out all by yourself’ (Jack). For Lottie, discussions with her mother when she was younger had helped her to come to terms with her adoptive status and a sense of belonging:

*Me and my mum when I was younger we read it, and she was like, ‘This is why I adopted you, like you’ve always been, before you were born we wanted you’. So even before I was born my mum knew that she wanted me.*

In some cases adoptive parents had redone books that were felt to be unsuitable and three had involved the child in this process. Megan recounted her experiences of making her book and visiting important places to collect photos and information relevant with her mum:

*She actually got us involved with making the book. So she would explain it whilst we did it, and then she would take us to a place where we were born, and where we lived, and there’s photos of me standing next to my hospital and stuff like that (Megan).*

Involvement in this process was, it seems, essential to understanding her biography and apparently contributed to a greater sense of her ownership of her book and her story:

*Because there's no point hiding from an adopted kid significant parts of their life- because they're going to get suspicious one day and question. So it's best to find out from a young age- I've always grown up knowing (Megan).*

Whilst Megan was clear about the open relationship with her parents and the need to provide adopted children with honest information and her opportunity to ask questions, she was also realistic about the fact that some information needed to be accessed later in childhood.

Engaging in making the book, however, enabled Megan to learn more and understand about the reasons for her and her birth sister's adoptions:

*Yes, and the fact that she let us help also taught us, because sometimes your questions don't get answered. So helping with the book it taught us at the same time, so we're more likely to remember that information and know (Megan).*

Some children conveyed a sense that the adopters often did not have all the answers but their attentiveness to the child's questioning was welcomed by children who commented that they knew their parents '*try their best*' (Tara); but this was often in the context of having limited information themselves. Some children were also concerned not to push adoptive parents for too much information for fear that their parents would be upset by the child seeking this information. For example one child begged the researcher not to tell her parents that she looked at her book at night without their knowledge, one stated that he had questions about his birth history he did not feel he could ask his adoptive parents, and another asked the researcher if she could help in finding her father and made it clear this was not a discussion she had been able to have with her adoptive parents.

#### **4.4. Overall assessments by children**

Children and young people were asked at the end of the interviews to make an overall assessment of their life storybook. They were provided with a simple Likert scale that described in age-appropriate ways where a score of "1" denoted a "terrible book" and a "5" was an "excellent book". One child was not asked this question as the interview terminated early, as the child became distressed. The majority of children (11 out of 19) scored their books either as a 4 or a 5; although of these, six were scoring books made by their adoptive parents and two whose books had been redone by their social worker. Books made by

adoptive parents were highly rated by children. A further four children gave lower scores because parts of their book were better than others.

Even when a low score was offered, children were keen to point out the positives in their books. Some children could not praise their books highly enough, as Lottie noted:

*I think that having life story is probably one of the best things about being adopted, so you can know more about your other life and anything that you want to find out you'd have in it.*

It is important that when asked to choose a number to rate their book children were generally more positive about their books than when we discussed individual aspects. This signals the apparent overall value and importance afforded to their books even though they were critical of aspects and could see their flaws.

## **5. Discussion**

The data reported reveal important insights into children's appraisals of their life storybooks. The *potential* of life storybooks to convey a narrative to the child was expressed by many of the children, but often in terms of what they wanted their book to achieve, rather than what it successfully did achieve. The lack of narrative and the lack of multiple perspectives in the narrative presented was a common theme to emerge. In Beth's case, this resulted in her fantasising about her family as her narrative was left with such gaps. The literature is mixed about the potential harm of fantasy in children's recounting of their stories. All children engage in fantasy and that is part of understanding the multiplicity of lives. But for the adopted child trying to make sense of their story it is argued that fantasy contributes to a set of defensive dynamics that create powerful forces driving stories of adoption (Treacher & Katz, 2001) which, it is proposed, can become enacted in roles such as *victim*, *persecutor* or *rescuer* which prevent the adopted person moving forward in their life as they become fixed within these narratives (Simmonds, 2000). In effect the danger is that the narrative is taken out of the child's hands and they lose the possibilities for them to be 'the active and agentive locus of control' -central to one of the narrative dilemmas outlined by Bamberg (2011, p.9); with inevitable negative impacts on mental health.

As outlined earlier, one of the basic purposes of narrative to identity is to enable the narrator to answer basic questions of 'Who am I?' (Erikson, 1963) and, in the case of looked after

children, 'How did I get here?' (Treacher & Katz, 2001, p.22) and is the first stage in the preparation for the permanence model proposed by Henry (2005). She describes stages that children need to be supported through in order to enable successful permanence to occur of *loss, identity, attachment, relationships* and *safety*. In Dean's case the direct work through his life storybook had not even addressed the first questions about loss, due to the complete lack of coherent narrative presented to him- his life storybook held little narrative function at all. Whilst, in Gary's case, his life storybook contained a narrative, but not one that he could reconcile with his own birth family memories, and had become the vehicle for an untruthful and sanitised version of his narrative that he had no respect for.

Gaps in information and lack of knowledge of parents was emphasised by many children and echoes the literature (Willis & Holland, 2009) although children in this study particularly focused on their lack of knowledge of their fathers, with three children specifically indicating that they would like to know more about their birth father and have a photo of him. Tara was the only child to tell us that she had received an apology from her social worker for the fact that her photos had been lost and this is an important message for social workers engaged in making life storybooks, as she was grateful for this level of honesty.

The lack of narrative was not the only concern raised, however, Dean and Beth's stories of differential life storybooks prepared for them and their birth siblings exemplify the absolute importance of siblings in care receiving equally high quality life storybooks and this may require coordination between different social workers to ensure this is the case. In parallel work with adopters (Watson *et al*, 2015) stories emerged of siblings who had different care journeys receiving identical books, and this situation also is of course unacceptable.

How the life storybook contributes to identity development was illustrated by Rachel's apparent confusion in describing who she felt she was as compared to the child in her life storybook. Her final comment about being a '*normal girl*' seemed indicative of an identity shift that she was aware of, and that brought up emotions about her identity that she seemed to find difficult to articulate. The extent to which these were feelings that any child might express looking at pictures of their younger self, or to which were particular to her adoptive identity was not clear in the interview. But it was apparent that she was using her book and, particularly the photos to re-examine herself and to challenge her adoptive identity (Brodzinsky, 2011) as her comment about being '*a normal girl*' attests.

It seems both Rachel and Lara expressed different dimensions of adoptive identity in the data, including *depth of adoptive identity*, *internal consistency of the narrative* and *flexibility of the narrative* (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011, p.394). They both occupy different positions on these dimensions and are seen to be questioning and reflecting from different vantage points on their adoptive identity and they were using their life storybooks to facilitate these identity explorations.

As such, the role of their life storybook in identity was evident for children and the narrative, as well as family photos and other material possessions were central to their connecting with their past and with previous relationships. There is a need for more research into the importance of attachments to objects in enabling children to cope, make sense of their story and establish a confident sense of who they are. The objects described, however small or few in number, were narrated by children in ways that reflect anthropological observations that ‘gifts link things to persons and embed the flow of things in the flow of social relations’ (Appadurai, 1988, p.11). How and by whom material for life story books and the associated objects are collected is an ongoing challenge. But it is crucial that social workers understand the need to collect photographs and other important objects for the child as soon as a decision is made for the child to enter the care system as it may not be possible to return to birth families and have access to this material later. As such these objects make up part of the wider contexts for life story work that is more than just the production of a book. Whilst recent innovations in digital life storybooks enable a version of material to be kept electronically, this does not replace the physical connection to photographs and objects described by the children in this study. Given the move in the UK to electronic management case recording systems this becomes even more of a challenge as material objects are difficult to accommodate within such systems.

In separate work (Watson & Meineck, 2015) the connection between birth objects, stories and identity for looked after and adopted children is being explored through development and testing of a product called “trove” (a technologically enhanced keepsake box) and working with Coram and a number of English local authorities to explore whether this complements life storybooks with a focus on children’s own stories about their birth objects. Importantly, this work focuses on the role of the child as the narrator of the stories and the importance of them telling and re-telling different stories as their attachment to objects changes over time.



This is a largely under-explored aspect of life story work and has great potential to contribute to narrative identity as the stories evolve and are internalised (Adler, 2012) by the child living their story, interacting with tangible objects, rather than just reflecting on the past (Bamberg, 2011).

There was evidence in some children's accounts of what is described as 'communicative openness' (Brodzinsky, 2006). In the data reported "openness" referred to both the story conveyed and the child's internalisation and meaning making (*intrapersonal*) as well as adoptive parent's abilities to have open and frank discussions within the family about the child's story (*intrafamilial*) (Brodzinsky, 2006). The third level of *interfamilial* openness reflecting 'exploration of adoption issues between adoptive and birth family members' (*Ibid.* p.6) was not reported by children. In particular there was insight offered from Megan of the importance of making the book for her and for the whole family in terms of making sense of her adoption and of the 'development of shared family values and a family identity' (Jones & Hackett, 2008, p.20) whereby in piecing together hers and her sister's biographies and attempting to answer questions together in the activity of making their books that a 'shared family script' (*Ibid.*) was able to emerge that enabled both girls to better understand the reasons for their being adopted. Her story was probably the most clear account of how life story work and the co-construction of her book had enabled her to engage in telling and re-telling her story (McAdams & McLean, 2013) in an embodied and complex way, in some cases by actually going to places and experiencing them herself, that was authentic and appears to have genuinely enabled her to make sense of her loss and trauma and has positively contributed to her identity through this ongoing act of narration (Bamberg, 2011). But Megan's account was unusual in the data and it would be unfair to suggest that all life storybooks need (or can, with scarce social care resources) be made in such a co-produced manner- and hers would not have been so if her adoptive mother had not taken this as her project to improve the poor book that had been provided. Other children's books had aspects of narrative function that were of importance to identity development as already discussed- a lesson from Megan's experience is the need for ownership and agency and this comes down to the format of the book, the information that is made available to families and the opportunities for the book to be updated (preferably with the child's involvement) as they grow older.

## 6. Conclusions

This study begins to fill an identified gap in knowledge to understand how adopted children receive and experience life storybooks. What is clear from the data is that, despite a number of criticisms, children value highly their life storybooks as providing connectedness to their past and as part of the narrative of their life in contributing to their identity development by providing some information towards their understanding their reasons for being in care and a sense of who they are and where they came from. With minor exceptions, the life storybooks we heard about did not necessarily manage to deal with the dilemmas of narrative outlined in the theoretical section of this paper, but we also need to acknowledge that they are part of a broader set of life story work activities and discussions that are ongoing with children and young people who are in care and adopted and should not be judged as the only tool to enable a coherent narrative identity.

There are a number of practice implications raised from the study. Children were consistently clear that the narrative presented in their book should be of *their* biography, representing multiple actor viewpoints including those of their birth family. They welcomed the honesty conveyed in their book and this was seen as part of their ability to come to terms with the loss of their birth family and comprehend their adoptive identity. Yet this perspective needs to be balanced by the practice challenge for social workers in presenting a story that is age appropriate, honest but also does not demonise birth parents and indicates a pressing need for ongoing and high quality training in addressing these often conflicting demands. Life storybooks need to be regularly audited and monitored for quality, yet it is not clear whose responsibility this should be. Support and training also needs to incorporate adoptive parents, for example local authorities should be providing workshops for parents to understand how to build on life storybooks and revisit them with their child as they become older to actively engage with adoptive families after adoption to do work on life story, to emphasise the value of holding a few meaningful objects for children and the need to help capture the stories and memories for their child.

Finally, there is an ethical duty on professionals and agencies to ensure that the potential of life story books to enable a positive narrative identity that results in better outcomes is optimised. All humans have a right to know their story and to understand who they are and the books are hugely valued by children. As Peter told us: *'It's nice to have one if you do have one, and that's it'* (Peter).

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