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Literature Review

Empirical Research Project

Reflective Commentary

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Doctorate in Psychotherapy (Child and Adolescent)

Eftychia Apostolidou

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DECLARATION

I declare that the material submitted for examination is my own work. The ideas and findings of others have been referenced in accordance with the guidelines provided and any work by others has been acknowledged.

I understand that anti-plagiarism software may be used to check for appropriate use of referencing.

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Impact Statement

This study adds to the body of literature exploring the role of the social worker during the adoption matching process in the UK. The literature review highlighted the many challenges social workers face when working in the field and the lack of knowledge on how they manage the complexities of their role. The offer of 'thinking spaces' for social workers during the matching process can support them manage the pressures and challenges of their practice throughout the matching stages.

The findings of the empirical study offer an insight into the role of the Assessing Social Workers who work with prospective adopters during the adoption matching process as understood via their accounts of their experiences. This study highlights that their role involves complex emotional functions within a context of intense external and internal pressures. Social workers are often trained to follow rigorous procedures and 'tick the boxes' for thorough assessments but are not always facilitated to endorse and use their professional and personal selves in their work.

The understanding gained from this study can inform social care practice in relation to how ASWs approach the matching process beyond box-ticking and 'hard' information. Our findings emphasise the relational aspect of the ASWs' role as they seem to use their own self in the process, namely the relational and emotional aspects of their role and related skills, to inform and enhance their practice. ASWs connect deeply with their prospective adopters while facing the hopelessness stemming from ubiquitous early trauma, balancing their professional power, and reflecting on their own experiences and biases to improve their practice. ASWs seem to value 'thinking spaces', like peer support and supervision, during matching to support them manage the huge pressures coming from the emotive tasks of this work.

Policies should acknowledge the importance of resourcing ASWs during the matching process with training on soft skills and offer them emotional supplies through reflective/containing spaces. A suggestion that consultation spaces for ASWs with other professionals might be helpful towards this end is thus made. This study can also be an important contribution to the field of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy (CAP) as the majority of CAP professionals professionally engage with the LAAC population and the professional networks around them. This work aspires to inform focused consultative contributions to social care practice during the matching process.

Part 1: Literature Review

Title:

Experiences and Challenges of the Social Worker's Role in the Adoption Matching Process: A Narrative Literature Review

Word Count: 8000

Abstract

Aim

Matching in adoption is a highly complex task and the role of the social worker in this process is pivotal within the current UK adoption social care practice. This literature review aims to synthesise and critically evaluate current knowledge from research and practice around the role and involvement of the social worker in the matching process and its challenges.

Methods

A methodical search of various scholarly databases was carried out for this review. This search included reviewing quantitative and qualitative research in addition to UK legislation and practice guidance papers related to adoption and matching.

Findings

The review of literature on current practice and research highlighted that Social Workers participate in various steps of adoption matching in the UK. Social workers grapple with many challenges imposed by external pressures (i.e., tight timeframes, difficulties in decision-making) and internal pressures (i.e., personal experience, or the impact of professional network dynamics). The review showed that there is a lack of research on how Social Workers manage the specificities of this complex process. 'Thinking spaces' for Social Workers during the matching process can support them manage these pressures and, potentially, have a positive impact on their practice.

Conclusion

There is a gap of knowledge regarding social workers' own accounts of their role in the adoption matching process and its challenges within the current social care practice context in the UK. Suggestions are made that further research on social workers' experiences and accounts of how they manage these challenges is warranted. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Adoption Matching Process, Social Worker (SW), role, experiences, challenges

The Experiences and Challenges of the Social Worker's Role in the Adoption Matching Process: A Narrative Literature Review

International and UK literature on adoption was already characterised as 'voluminous' by Thoburn in 1990 (p.4). Within this literature, the term matching has been used rather elastically to refer to various stages of the adoption process. Recently, international literature defined 'matching' as aiming to:

> ...describe the process of selecting a substitute home for a child who needs to be placed away from the care of birth parents. [...] Matching is seen as a process in which the characteristics and needs of the child are linked with [...] (what) a certain foster family, adoptive family or residential institution could provide (Pösö & Laakso, 2016, p.307).

A nationwide review by Adoption UK indicated that more than 4,500 children were adopted in the UK in 2018 (Adoption UK, 2019). During the past decades, the adoption system has changed considerably in the UK. Now, the adoption register is constituted mostly of children who have been removed from their families to social care (Lewis, 2004; Roy, 2020), rather than having been relinquished. Statistics show that approximately 70% of these children have increased needs due to experiences of early neglect or abuse (Department for Education [DfE], 2016). This is particularly significant if we consider the negative impact of early traumatic experiences on psychosocial development (National Institute of Excellence [NICE], 2015) predisposing individuals to mental and physical health difficulties throughout their lifespan (Felitti, 2009; Felitti et al., 1998; Van der Kolk, 2015). Therefore, meeting the needs of these children through the matching process has been a pertinent part of social care work in the foster care and adoption system in the UK (Thomas, 2013).

The professional network around matching is wide with various professionals contributing at different stages of the process. According to the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), social workers play a central role in the adoption process as they are involved in the implementation of adoption policy by 'initiating care proceedings, recommending adoption as a care plan, assessing adopters, matching children, and providing post-adoption support' (Featherstone et al., 2016, p.5).

Despite the importance of their involvement in the matching for the well-being of children and prospective parents, it seems that there is a lack of knowledge about how social workers implement their role. Indeed, BASW recently recognised that not enough discussions have been held about the social workers' role, especially concerning the ethics of decision-making in

matching and other areas of practice (Featherstone et al., 2016). Similarly, other researchers have identified the lack of social workers' accounts regarding their role and participation in the matching (Quinton, 2012; Sims, 2018) or their perspectives on and experiences of the adoption process (Jaggar, 2019).

This literature review explored the social worker's role and involvement in the process of adoption matching in the UK. The aim was to synthesise current knowledge from research and practice reports to understand more about their experiences and challenges in this field.

Methods

A systematic search of a range of scholarly databases in the psychological and social care sciences fields was carried out. Databases searched included PsychINFO, MEDLINE, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) and Social Care Online accessing them via EBSCO, Wiley Online Library and OvidSP online platforms. The following terms and variations were used: 'adoption matching', 'foster care matching', 'matching process', 'social worker', 'adoption transition'. Key terms like 'role', 'experiences', 'views', 'perspectives', and 'challenges' were explored in various combinations.

This search included reviewing UK legislation and guidance papers related to adoption/foster care matching as well as peer-reviewed quantitative and qualitative research articles. Journal articles and reports retrieved were screened to identify relevance to the exploration of the role of the social worker in the matching process.

Adoption and matching practices vary widely between countries with the UK having a unique model of foster care and adoption (Lewis, 2004). Matching seems to be a concept and a set of practices explicitly defined and addressed in the UK social work bibliography (Sims, 2018). Therefore, both quantitative and qualitative research relating to adoption and foster care matching in the UK was included, and relevant international literature was brought in when relevant. Publications and reports only written in English were reviewed for reasons of accessibility and pertinence to current UK social care practice.

Definitions of key terms used are provided here. 'Adoption Matching Process' refers to the process of placing a child that has been removed from their biological family with an adoptive family. The network around children in foster care and adoption comprises many professionals, from frontline social workers in Child Protection or Adoption Teams, Agencies, and Local Authorities (LA), Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), Mental Health Professionals and Social Workers from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) Children's Guardians (Featherstone, 2016). It is out of the scope of this review to describe these different roles in detail. For clarification purposes, the term 'social worker' refers to professionals with social work training who work, from a social care perspective, with children, prospective parents and/or foster carers towards achieving an adoption placement.

Literature Review

History of Matching in the UK: Social Worker's Evolving Role

In a historical overview of adoption in the UK, Triseliotis et al. (1997) explored the changing ideas around the scope of matching through the decades and proposed distinct historical periods also reflecting the socio-political preoccupations of the times. This synopsis is expanded upon in Quinton's (2012) seminal review providing a comprehensive outline of the developing role of the social worker in the adoption matching in the UK.

According to these reviews, current conceptualisations of adoption were first explored in the US and the UK during the 19th century when adoption focused on finding homes for babies orphaned due to parental loss in war or illness as well as for 'illegitimate' children. The focus of these adoptions was to protect these children from harm or exploitation and were monitored by religious agencies. Eugenics strongly influenced the thinking and the practice around which children were considered 'adoptable' (Triseliotis et al., 1997; Quinton, 2012).

Henceforth, the scope of the adoption practice changed throughout the decades in line with social changes and demands. Lewis suggests that 'adoption has been seen as the answer to very different kinds of problems since the first legislation passed in 1926' (2004, p.237).

Following World War II in the UK, the focus of adoption was on finding 'a child for a home' for couples who were looking to adopt due to infertility issues. The emphasis was on finding a 'perfect baby' to fulfil the expectations of the 'perfect couple' and be raised as a 'biological' baby (Quinton, 2012, p.12). Thus, matching the physical characteristics and the religious backgrounds between babies and parents was of primary concern. The biological and cultural resemblance was seen to ensure a 'good fit' between children and families and was believed to sufficiently promote children's well-being. These early matching procedures are said to have been driven by family doctors and were not regulated by the state.

This was followed by a major shift towards finding 'a home for a child' (Quinton, 2012, p.13) during the 1960s. This was driven by increasing numbers of children coming into care with more complex needs due to physical disabilities, psychosocial difficulties, or ethnic minority heritage. The prevailing idea was that placing these children in a caring home was enough to support their well-being. Alongside this, there was an important change with the beginnings of 'professional and state control of all adoptions in England' (Lewis, 2004, p.236). Specifically, with the Children Act 1975 and Adoption Act 1976 legislations, adoption was placed in the hands of professional social workers under LA regulation. Hence, this historical period saw 'the emergence of the "professionalisation" of adoption' and upgraded the role of social work in the regulation of

adoption which was now a profession growing into 'a science of child placement' (Sales, 2015, p.151-152).

Alongside the changing presentations of children coming into care, the number of children available for adoption from social care increased from 7% in the 1970s to more than 40% in the mid-1990s (Lewis, 2004). Most of these children had either specific socio-cultural needs due to their black and minority ethnic (BME) background or complex needs due to physical disabilities and mental health needs (Cairns, 2008). Moreover, a national survey indicated that a deafening percentage (from 63% to 95%) of children in care with a plan for adoption had suffered early relational trauma within their birth families (Department of Education, 2018; Office of National Statistics, 2004). This group gradually formed the 'difficult to place' children as their numbers far exceeded the offer of prospective adoptive families (Department for Education, 2012).

The central feature of the Welfare Principle stated in the Children Act 1989 postulated the idea that matching parental capacities to children's specific needs is crucial. This understanding has dominated the thinking around adoption and matching since the 1990s. This approach to adoption is conceptualised as the era of finding 'a family for developmental recovery' (Quinton, 2012, p.13). This approach is now widely accepted and underpins adoption policy and social work practice in all UK. The aim to place children within a family that will meet their specific needs and support them overcome their challenges has led to seeking prospective adopters with advanced parenting skills (Quinton, 2012).

Besides these demographic trends, the national adoption discussion was directed by the issue of the wide variability of social work practice across different LAs (Lewis, 2004). Moreover, problematic delays in arranging adoption for 'difficult to place' children, severely impacting their well-being and future, were highlighted across all stages of the adoption process. These discussions led to The Adoption and Children Act 2002 legislation with a particular focus 'on putting the rights and needs of children at the centre of the adoption process, reducing delays in social work processes' (Thomas, 2013, p.4). This Act was further supported nationwide by an enriched educational approach for professionals producing cohorts of social workers with specialised training on child welfare (Lewis, 2004).

This overview elucidates how decades of social fermentation and change in the UK political and legislation scene produced significant alternations in the scope of matching for adoptive parent-child dyads. The link between social work and adoption that came from legislation into practice in the '70s is now intrinsic: 'Across practice, policy, legislation and academia, adoption practices and social work practices are closely associated with each other in the English context' (Sims,

2018, p.39). It is widely accepted that 'deciding which child should be placed with which particular family are major social work responsibilities' (Farmer & Dance, 2016, p.975).

Matching as a 'Social Work Process'

As stated above, matching has been used as a term to describe different stages of the adoption process. Recently, there have been attempts at operationalising what matching is within the current UK adoption context. In a literature review of the matching practice for the Adoption Research Initiative, Thomas (2013) highlighted this lack of conceptual clarity. 'Finding a Family' was introduced as an umbrella term to describe the process of 'how a child with an adoption plan achieves a permanent placement' (Thomas, 2013, p.34). A model where matching is seen as the last 'social work process' stage of 'Finding a Family' was suggested:

1. Assessment of the potential adoptive child's needs.

2. Family recruitment: Finding potential adopters and assessing their capacity to meet the needs of children to be adopted.

3. Linking: Identifying a particular family as a possible match for a particular child.

4. Matching: Confirming potential adopters' 'parenting capacities' to meet the 'needs' of specific children.

Many authors have since used this definition of adoption matching as 'a process, not an event' (Simmonds, 2016, p.57). Sims (2018) proposes that matching is a 'process that stops at the point of the adoption order when the scrutiny of the assessment of the family's capability to provide the child with a permanent, appropriate home comes to an end' (p.50). Sims gives a detailed account of the steps of the matching, highlighting that every adoptive matching is intricately unique. Specifically, matching starts from the moment a potential adoptive dyad has been identified by the social workers till the adoption order. This is a long process that involves social work in every step: from match approval to consideration of specific support for adoptive parents, to arrangements for the exercise of parental responsibility (Department for Education, 2016). Statutory guidance includes 'introduction planning meeting(s)' in matching; these typically include prospective adopters, foster carers, their social workers and the child's social worker and may include many other professionals (Department for Education, 2013). The information sharing by and between social workers during the period of transition of the child to the adoptive family is also considered part of the matching (Sims, 2018; Simmonds, 2019).

Matching Factors and Adoption Outcome

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers acknowledge that achieving 'a good match between a child and a prospective adopter is a highly skilled task' (Department for Education, 2013, p.83). However, what a 'good' quality match is and how it is achieved is a complex question (Quinton, 2012). The majority of research regarding the assessment of the match quality associates it with its outcome. A recent review of 31 studies demonstrated that the main outcomes used in literature to assess the quality of the match between children and foster carers, or adopters, can be clustered overall into four main themes: placement stability/permanency vs disruption, parental/carer satisfaction, placement functioning and children's psychosocial functioning (Haysom et al., 2020). Overall, the more stable and permanent an adoption placement is the lowest the negative effects on the well-being of children and parents are, so the 'better' the quality of the match is considered to have been (Farmer & Dance, 2016; Vanderwill et al., 2021).

The review of studies selected from a large pool of international research over the last 100 years also found a trend in matching factors explored throughout the decades (Haysom et al., 2020). It identified that the history of matching research has moved from considering factors like IQ and class towards looking at temperament characteristics between children and prospective parents/carers and attachment, and then towards culture and ethnicity, often related to identity (Thomas, 2013). Matching such characteristics between children and parents was considered an essential and adequate practice for successful adoptive placement outcomes i.e., placement stability (Quinton, 2012).

More recently, research has consistently shown that other characteristics related to the child are correlated to more frequent adoption disruptions. For example, older age of entry into care, frequent placement moves and delays, abuse, or preferential rejection in their birth families (Festinger, 2014; Palacios et al., 2019), physical disabilities, emotional and behavioural problems or being characterised as hyperactive (Rushton et al., 2000) are related to more unstable placements.

It seems that adoption matching research has shifted according to the prominent theoretical paradigms of each era. Seemingly, there has been a move across the decades from looking at 'objective' matching factors towards more 'subjective' and eventually more 'inter-subjective' matching elements (Haysom et el., 2020). Indeed, recently, there has been an interest in exploring the characteristics and expectations of adoptive parents/carers regarding adoption outcomes. For example, Farmer and Dance (2016) identified that parental couples with discrepancies in their involvement or commitment to the adoption and parents that were

'inflexible' or 'unrealistic' in their expectations seem to be more frequently involved in adoption disruptions. Moreover, these authors summarised further factors that seem to add complexity and challenges to the adoption matching; for example, adoption placements in families where there are biological children at home or lack of parental warmth. A recent systematic review of 29 international research articles explored the foster carer and adoptive parent factors that relate mostly to positive adoption outcomes, i.e., placement stability (Vanderwill et al., 2021). This review identified that the foster carers or adoptive parents' factors that related the most to positive adoption outcomes were carers' access to support systems, the economic resources to meet the child's needs and carers' ability to be attentive to the relationship with the child.

Another area of research has focused on looking at how factors related to social work processes and practice impact the adoption outcome. For example, in terms of adoption agencies, a research study correlated disjointed provision of services and insufficient support to adoptive families following the adoption order with higher disruption of adoption placements (Cohen & Westhues, 1990). Inadequate information sharing has also been identified as one of the potential reasons for disruptions (Lowe et al., 1999), also suggested by recent studies (Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2019; Farmer & Dance, 2016; Randall, 2013). In their review, Palacios et al. (2019) explored other practice 'errors' stemming from professional misjudgement: social workers found that many adoptive parents often overestimated their reported capacity to parent children with high complexity.

From carers' perspectives, in a thematic analysis of interviews with adoptive parents, Lewis (2018) found that considerable inconsistency in the social worker's approach during the matching and transition period negatively affected their experiences and thus, initially, the quality of the adoption placement. On the contrary, when Selwyn et al. (2014) explored adoptive parents' perceptions of the support received by social workers, it seemed that parents who experienced their social worker as supportive and available were more satisfied; this level of satisfaction was related to a better-quality introduction meeting. Thus, indications from research suggest that the social work practice quality can, indirectly, impact the adoption outcome positively or negatively.

Despite these attempts to understand the factors contributing to the matching quality and, hence, to better adoption outcomes, it seems that much of this research has focused on individual factors or aspects of the process. Notably, it was recently proposed that adoption/foster care matching research is 'disjointed' and 'lacks consistent or rigorous theoretical frameworks' (Vanderwill et al., 2021). This is, possibly and partly, due to the intricacy and complexity of the social work task of matching these highly complex children. Child, parent/carer and social work factors are in a

constant, dynamic interplay towards the amalgamation of the matching outcome in a particular time and under specific, unique, and, often, emotive circumstances. Equally, Sims (2018) argues for more research focusing on gaining a better understanding of this complex interaction of various factors over the period of the matching process. Significant attempts at streamlining the multifaceted matching process have been made through policy and practice guidance on the matching assessment process.

The Assessment Framework

Research on adoption matching suggests that social workers must consider an overwhelmingly wide array of complex and interrelated factors (Haysom, 2020). Current UK practice has moved away from considering individual physical, racial or cultural factors towards evaluating the holistic ability of the adoptive environment to meet the developmental, emotional, and physical needs of the specific child. Recently, Simmonds (2019) formulated this lucidly:

> [Matching includes] an exploration of the needs of the child based on a comprehensive assessment of their origins, history, identity, development, needs and circumstances to date. The information gathered will be **linked** to what is known about the prospective carers, and the comprehensive assessment of their history, capacity, experience, expectations, motivation, and readiness to meet the needs of the child [...]. Nothing could be more important [p.3]

Yet, the assessment process by which social workers take this information into account and how they 'link' it, how this information is collated or prioritised in importance to inform matching in day-to-day practice is not clearly understood. Indeed, it has been identified that even though much has been written in general terms about adoption matching, there is a lack of literature about the specificities of this highly complex process. Quinton (2012) identified a 'lack even of good descriptive accounts' of matching highlighting that 'there are remarkably few studies directly addressing the process of matching' (p.77), calling for more research focused on this issue. As social workers' participation is critical in every step of the matching process, it seems pivotal to further explore their role and its challenges (Sims, 2018).

The Assessment Framework was developed by the Department of Health [DfH], Department for Education [DfE], and the Home Office (2001) to help social workers systematise factors, prioritise needs and review plans when considering a parent-child adoption match. This framework proposes seven areas of the child's functioning be assessed when considering the needs of adoptive families: health, education, emotional and behavioural development, identity (including race and culture), family and social relationships, social presentation, and self-care.

The assessment of children's needs goes alongside the assessment of the prospective parents' capacity to meet those needs.

As per the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, LAs have a statutory requirement to plan for every child for whom adoption has been decided by court order (Thomas, 2013). Social workers thoroughly assess the child's needs and produce the Child Permanence Report (CPR). This is followed by the assessment of the prospective adopters' profile and capacities resulting in the Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). These reports are brought together by the adoption/Assessing worker in an Adoption Placement Report (APR) where information and evidence collected are reviewed by the Adoption Panel. This Panel decides whether a proposed parent(s)-child match is approved and discusses timescales for an adoption order and appropriate support to be put into place.

The Adoption Panel has been characterised as a complex, intrusive, and demanding process (Kirton, 2013). Still, Quinton (2012) has concluded that how exactly the two reports are 'brought together' and how the panel decides what might be a 'good quality match' seems to be arbitrary. Quinton highlights the lack of knowledge regarding the effectiveness of this social work matching process in tailoring adopters' capacities to meet children's needs at any level of specificity. Cousins (2003) also suggests that while the matching process is based on a collection of much information by the social workers, the rest of the matching process is more about hope and best guess since it is impossible to predict how the parent-child dyad will react to the new reality of becoming a family.

Social Worker's Role and Challenges

The review of the literature shed light on the many challenges social workers grapple with during adoption matching. These challenges are imposed by either external pressures related to practice guidance and day-to-day practice reality or by internal pressures associated with how the social workers' current and past personal experiences 'interact' with the matching task.

Decision-Making in Matching

Undoubtedly, the social worker's role is pivotal in making matching decisions which can have profound consequences for the lives of children in care and adoptive parents. Therefore, the need for providing social workers with validated, evidence-based ways of making decisions has been recognised (Taylor & White, 2001) and there is an increasing emphasis on more objective approaches to the matching process (Hanna & Mcroy, 2011). Both in the UK and internationally, there have been several legislations (see review by Quinton, 2012) and practice frameworks

(Thomas, 2013) as well as attempts at creating research tools (Steele, 2006) to support objective decision-making in adoption matching.

However, professional decisions in the child welfare field are impacted by various circumstantial and interpersonal factors in addition to the historical, social, and political context (Duffy & Collins, 2010). A recent literature review on factors influencing social workers' decision-making in social care matching processes underlines the existence of major gaps in our knowledge in this field (Zeijlmans et al., 2017). Research on foster care matching indicates that decisions concerning children in social care are often made under circumstances that are far from ideal due to time pressures, circumstances at the time of matching, lack of resources or alternatives, and missing information (Pösö & Laakso, 2016). Hence, instead of basing important matching decisions on analytic strategies and structured decision-making protocols (Meiksans et al., 2015) or specialist tools (Department for Education, 2016), these decisions are often based on heuristic choices, intuition or 'rules of thumb' (Zeijlmans et al., 2019). Moreover, fieldwork practitioners often have difficulties adhering to matching guidelines due to a multitude of unpredictable and case-specific reasons. In a qualitative study by Zeijlmans et al. (2018), social workers reported that deviations from guidelines are part of their daily decision-making practice as they regularly encounter situations where the matching is compromised due to a lack of resources, time, alternatives, or unforeseen events and, thus, they must reassess priorities to tailor the match or lower standards. Therefore, social workers expressed wanting practice guidelines to take these obstacles more readily into consideration and re-determine what a 'good-enough' matching is.

Despite attempts for a systematised approach to adoption matching decision-making, it has been reported that tools used in day-to-day social work practice to inform decision-making, such as the history of child and parents, past records, open-ended interviews with parents and foster cares, are much more subjective than objective (Hanna & McRoy, 2011). Reportedly, social workers find themselves relying more on subjective understanding than on objective tools and measures (Kang & Poertner, 2006). This may include varied professional experience with adoption/foster care matches, personal experience as well as huge variability in personal views, values, or standards. The use of this 'tacit knowledge', or professional intuition, in the field of social work assessment has stirred up a debate regarding its validity (Taylor & White, 2006; Turney, 2014). Geen et al. (2004) suggest that matching decisions is the stage of the adoption process 'where workers' beliefs and attitudes come into play the most' (p.16). Similarly, Quinton (2012) concluded that 'practitioners are left to their experience, presumptions, and practice pressures' (p.21) in making highly complex, significant matching decisions.

Usefulness of Theoretical Framework?

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973; see review by Holmes, 1993) has provided professionals with significant ways of thinking and talking about the development of new relationships for children for whom early attachment experiences have most commonly been fraught (Fonagy, 2001; NICE, 2015). This understanding has offered an important theoretical framework that influenced the approach to good quality matching in foster care and adoption. The UK National Institute Centre of Excellence Guidance has officially endorsed attachment theory as a framework to help professionals understand better the vast needs of children and young people in care, or at high risk of going into care, or those being adopted from care (NICE, 2015). Indeed, practice reports and clinical papers in the field suggest that professionals, including social workers, use the theoretical framework of attachment as an integral part of their approach to adoption (Simmonds, 2020).

The formulations of attachment theory have also produced a body of work of assessment tools used to lay down the evidence base for measuring attachment (Howe, 2011; Steele, 2006; Walker, 2008). The development of assessment tools to measure prospective carers' capacity to foster secure attachments in children in their care has been a significant contribution to the foster care field. For example, the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George et al., 1996) and the Narrative Story Stem Assessment Profile (Hodges et al., 2003) have been used to explore the formation of attachment patterns in biological and non-biological parent-child dyads (Dozier et al., 2001; Kaniuk et al., 2004). The AAI has been recognised as a specialist tool for informing social workers' views on the prospective parents' ability to support adopted children form secure attachments (Department for Education, 2006). Though data supports the use of AAI in matching (Bifulco et al. 2008), there are barriers to the routine use of standardised measures such as that professionals need to be specialised trained in the use of these measures which, inevitably, is costly and time-consuming (Blazey et al., 2013). Further, the AAI process might be experienced as a further emotional and time burden to the already demanding assessment process prospective parents undergo.

Despite indications for the clinical usefulness of such tools in the selection and targeted support of carers/adoptive parents, little research has focused on this area, and most is on selecting and matching children with foster carers rather than adoptive parents (i.e. Blazey et al., 2013). Remarkably, research articles on matching in the UK do not directly refer to the use of attachment theory as a framework. Indeed, a recent review highlighted a striking absence of the use of attachment-informed ideas in the matching research (Haysom et al., 2020). It has been

suggested that beyond the theoretical understanding this framework does not offer practical, accessible tools and ideas relevant to social workers' thinking, actions, and relationships (Jaggar, 2018). Social workers' training seems to lack access to the clinical understanding of what attachment theory provides, thus leaving them to their own devices about how to use this framework in their fieldwork routine (Selwyn et al., 2006).

Challenges due to Time Pressures

Delays in the matching process have been a key concern of the UK government and agencies during the past few years (Coram Impact and Evaluation Team, 2016). Adoption UK found that 58% of adoptive parents reported severe delays in the matching procedures related to administrative hindrances or other social work-related issues (2019). Social workers now have the challenging task of making high-quality matching decisions while decreasing delays (Simmonds, 2019). Unfortunately, these delays have been exacerbated due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Adoption UK, 2022).

In parallel, authors in the field have voiced worries that when adoptive matches are rushed important processing time is lost for all parties involved: parents, children, and professionals. Ali (2016) found that social workers are apprehensive towards the recent focus on speed and the pressure put on them to balance making quality matches in a short time. Similarly, Sagar and Hitchings (2008) interviewed social workers on their perspectives on the 'More Adoptions, More Quickly' approach to adoption under the Children Act 2002. The authors highlighted social workers' concerns regarding the difficulties of helping prospective parents understand the level of need children who are available for adoption have. All social workers thought that this difficulty is concerningly aggravated by time pressures and that their training does not give them the necessary tools and skills to manage this, often perplexing, communication in such pressurised time scales.

On the other hand, Thomas (2013) explored adoptive parents' ambivalent experiences during the introductions with potential adoptive children–feeling overwhelmed and pressured by strict timelines, but also yearning for quick procedures. Likewise, Boswell and Cudmore (2014), Lanyado (2003), and Wakelyn (2012) have all highlighted the emotional impact of rushed procedures on foster carers, adoptive parents, and children in transition to adoption.

In support of social workers having time to manage the matching process, Selwyn, et al. (2014) proposed that social workers' availability is paramount to adoptive parents' feeling supported which in turn has a positive impact on the quality of the introductory meeting with the matched child, also supported by recent reports from 2,500 adoptive/prospective parents (Adoption UK,

2022). However, social workers' physical and emotional availability is negatively impacted by pressures due to heavy caseloads, understaffed services, and time constraints (Sims, 2018).

Social Workers' Personal Experiences and Internal Challenges

Besides the external challenges social workers face due to the complex demands of their professional role, they reportedly get emotionally challenged by the internal pressures related to their personal experience of involvement in matching. Certainly, the emotional dimension and investment in social work practice are being increasingly understood (Leeson, 2010; Ward et al., 2010) illuminated by the evolving field of a relationship-based approach to social work practice (Ruch et al., 2010). However, few research articles and clinical accounts are exploring social workers' experiences of the adoption matching process.

Farmer and Dance (2016) suggested that some social workers might get personally and emotionally involved in specific cases, searching for a specific or 'ideal' type of family for a child. Further, Jaggar (2018) suggests that research has not paid enough attention to learning more about the perspectives and experiences of social care professionals themselves working in the foster care and adoption field. To explore this more, Jaggar (2018) conducted interviews with supervising social workers and analysed these using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings reflect how difficult and emotionally demanding making important matching decisions can be, albeit rewarding when an adoptive placement goes well for the child.

Similarly, Sims' (2018) qualitative exploration of social workers' accounts of their experiences found that the matching process can be a 'very emotionally and physically exhausting experience with huge demands made on prospective adoptive parents, as well as social workers' (p.194). The author gives a poignant personal account from their own adoption social work practice emphasising especially how the matching process can be a 'deeply personal and emotional experience' (p.25). They highlight some of the risks involved in this highly demanding process if the social worker does not have the physical and emotional space to reflect on this experience and discuss their practice with other colleagues or supervisors (Sims, 2019).

In a review of professional judgement and decision-making in matching, Simmonds (2016) proposed that social workers' views and judgements related to adoptive matches will inevitably be coloured by their views and values, family representations as well as their own experiences of being parented and/or parenting also previously proposed by Kang & Poertner (2006) for other social care decisions. For example, it is suggested that whether social workers' will consider matching a child with a gay adoptive couple and how they will judge the quality of this match is mainly influenced by their personal views or life experiences related to homosexuality and

parenthood. Simmonds highlights the lack of knowledge regarding how social workers' personal views and experiences influence how they execute their role in the matching process.

Thus, it seems that social workers' personal history and experiences have an important influence on how they approach their role and decisions as well as how personally involved they might become with specific cases. Indeed, it has long been recognised, especially by the 'helping' professions, that personal experiences might influence the choice of profession in an attempt perhaps to help or heal oneself (Groesbeck, 1975). Roy (2020) interviewed a professional working in the adoption field who was an adopted child herself. The account gives insights into the emotional challenges professionals might face especially when stories of children and families they work with stir up feelings from their personal history. Professionals can find themselves personally involved and caught up in their own 'plights' and 'distress' (Roy, p.127) instead of being able to objectively support the families they work with.

Pressures from the Professional Network

Bion (1952) and Menzies-Lyth (1960) have long explored ideas around group functioning, hypothesising how groups collectively receive, experience, and respond to unconscious communications via projections. Applying these ideas to the professional networks working with children and families, Britton (1981) proposed that 'profoundly disturbing primitive mechanisms and defences against anxiety used by children and families' (p.48) can get unconsciously 're-enacted' by professionals in the network. Britton unpicked mechanisms of how professionals working with families may unwittingly identify with different family members at various instances and act out–or re-enact'–these unconscious identifications or dynamics. These powerful 're-enactments' can give rise to all sorts of responses that affect professionals' judgements and ability to engage usefully or 'objectively' in the work.

The significant level of disturbance associated with severe early trauma and deprivation often experienced by children removed from their biological families (Department for Education, 2016) seems to have an added bearing on the professional networks in the foster care/adoption system. Hence, psychoanalytic thinking has been further applied to understanding more deeply the workings of the dynamics in the professional networks around children in the field of child protection, foster care, and adoption and the powerful effects of these children's traumatic past experiences on multi-agency communication in the care system. Specifically, it has been suggested that primitive defence mechanisms employed unconsciously by children to manage their traumatic early experiences are also activated in the networks and professionals as part of how children communicate their internal world to those around them (Conway, 2009). Hence,

psychoanalytic ideas of splitting, projection, denial, and more, have been used to describe how professionals in the network around such children find themselves being impacted by and act themselves in unexpected ways.

In addition, the professional networks can be wide and change at various steps during the matching process. Children will often have experienced many changes in professionals, especially social workers, by the time of adoption due to staff turnover, re-organisations, long-term sick leave, or other reasons. The rapidly changing nature and structure of these professional networks make them even more susceptible to frequent or powerful unconscious re-enactments (Shulman, 2008). Reflecting on a consultation with a professional network around a child moving to adoption, Sprince (2000) describes:

> It gave me an insight into [...] how powerfully clients project into their social workers, and how field workers, in consequence, become so identified with the families they work with that they are unable to think [...]. It was the best possible demonstration of the pressures under which field workers operate (p.417)

These network dynamics unavoidably affect all professionals involved in different ways (Conway, 2009). There is a plethora of psychoanalytically informed accounts from psychoanalytically-trained child psychotherapists (CAPPs) on powerful re-enactments of professionals working with looked-after or adoptive children that had to be managed in the network (Emanuel, 2002; Lanyado, 2017; Solomon, 2020). These dynamics and enactments can have catastrophic results for the well-being of children as they impede professionals' thinking, reflective and containing capacities as well as their ability to communicate and collaborate (Conway, 2009; Sprince, 2000). Professionals can often find themselves acting in ways that are unlike them, unprofessionally or outside of their role (Sims, 2018). Consequently, the professional network itself can eventually contribute in this way to the neglect and deprivation children in social care and their carers have already experienced (Emanuel, 2002).

Thinking Spaces for Social Workers

As discussed, social workers encounter many challenges and must manage both external and internal pressures. While the relationship-based approach to social work practice proposes models for reflective supervision and structures that support containing thinking (Lefevre, 2015; Simmonds, 2010; Ward, et. al, 2010), there have been no systematic explorations of the role of supervision or practices of collective or personal reflexivity in social work in the field of adoption matching.

Given the demands of their role, it has been suggested that foster care/adoption social workers would greatly benefit from having dedicated reflective spaces and supervision time to discuss views, perspectives and experiences regarding the nature and challenges of their professional roles with colleagues and supervisors (Simmonds, 2016). Sims (2018) argues that this is especially significant during the short and pressured period when a parent-child match is being considered. The access to other 'minds' that are not themselves caught up in the intensity of the matching attempt can provide critical space for reflection on relationships and processes. Access to reflective spaces can help with developing enhanced self-awareness and, eventually, improve practice as social workers learn from each other (Ruch, 2007). Similarly, Roy (2020), through the words of her interviewee 'B.', reflects on the importance of social workers in the field using their own therapeutic spaces and reflective clinical supervision to understand their history and become able to support the people they work with using their emotional experience without being too caught up in their predicaments.

Jaggar (2018) suggests that 'relational reflexivity' could also be employed as a technique between social workers and foster carers or prospective adoptive parents. The author proposes that this approach could promote open communication in the professional network and between all parties. In turn, this can facilitate the smooth matching and transition process to adoption, thus, eventually, benefiting the well-being and placement stability of the adoptive children.

Another form of professional reflexivity in social care can be cultivated through consultations with professional networks around foster and adoptive families. For example, at least 88% of child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists (CAPP) engage routinely with the `looked after and adopted children (LAAC) population. CAPPs regularly provide psychoanalytically-informed professional network consultations using their knowledge and understanding of child development, unconscious dynamics, group functioning and the impact of early trauma (Robinson et al., 2017). These consultations aim to support reflective social care practice during various stages of the adoption matching process (Sprince, 2000). There are anecdotal accounts of the benefits of these consultations on adoptive children through the offer of processing time and understanding of the enormous pressures that often hinder communication and collaboration in the professional networks around children in care (Emanuel, 2002; Lanyado, 2003; Solomon, 2020). These authors also support the idea of offering network consultations during all stages of the matching process as potentially beneficial for individual practitioners like social workers 'to keep thinking and feeling as much as possible, about the painful issues they are trying to work with daily' (Sprince, 2000, p.419). Such consultation spaces can reduce the

risk of destructive re-enactments by professionals in the network, including social workers, and foster effective communication between all parties involved. This, in turn, can promote positive outcomes for the children undergoing the emotionally demanding process of matching.

Discussion

This review looked at the involvement of social workers in the adoption matching process in the UK to illuminate the particularities of their roles and the challenges they encounter. An overview of the historical changes in the scope and focus of adoption matching in the UK demonstrated the increasing significance of the role of the social worker in every step of this process towards current practice where matching is considered a 'social work process'.

Positive adoption outcomes, as measured mostly by placement stability, are considered indicators of a 'good quality' matching. Matching factors have been looked at by research related either to the child, the adoptive parents/carers, or the social work practice. Yet, although matching is reportedly a highly complex process, there is not enough research exploring how exactly social workers consider these factors when they navigate this intricate task. Furthermore, social workers responsible for the matching process between parent(s) and a child face many challenges imposed by the obscurity of the task, the complexity of children in care and the prospective parents as well as by the challenging realities of day-to-day social care practice.

Much focus has been given to the development of practice guidelines and there have been attempts to systematise the matching process to give social workers sound tools and solid frameworks within which to operate. However, social workers seem to, often, be left to their own devices when managing complex, demanding and important decisions, especially in the context of the occasional ambiguity of official guidance.

This review demonstrated that how social workers encounter the adoption matching process and navigate the demands of this task is often left to a more 'subjective' rather than an 'objective' or ideal practice. This means that, unavoidably, social workers are influenced by their professional experiences, knowledge of and theoretical approach to adoption, but also by their personal experiences and history. Moreover, social workers receive major pressures from the dynamics of the professional network around foster care and adoptive families; they often find themselves personally involved and emotionally preoccupied with their cases, especially in the context of demanding caseloads and time pressures to avoid delays. Thus, social workers encounter many challenges during the adoption matching and must manage the balance between professional and personal pressures as well as the emotional demands of the matching process. Certainly, since their role is so important in matching, how social workers experience and steer this process might have an impact on choices made, the support given and eventually, possibly, the quality and success of the match.

There is a significant gap in the literature around how social workers themselves think and feel about their role in the adoption matching process and the challenges they face implementing this role in the current social care practice context of adoption in the UK. Future research on exploring social workers' accounts of experiences and how they manage the challenges of their role in the matching process is warranted.

'Thinking spaces', such as reflective supervision or peer discussion spaces, consultations to the network, for example, by CAPPs and even personal therapy, have been suggested as useful in helping social workers face some of the challenges encountered in their matching practice. These reflective practices can provide the time and space for social workers to think things through and understand more about the external and internal pressures, as well as the way their personal views and histories might be affecting their practice and experiences of their role. There is some anecdotal clinical evidence that these thinking spaces can have positive effects on the social workers' practice and their communication with other professionals in the network and, so, eventually to children's well-being through better experiences of matching and stable placements.

Future research can investigate quantitatively the links between 'thinking spaces' for social workers and matching practice or adoption outcomes. Furthermore, qualitative research can shed light on how social workers find and experience such supervision and peer thinking spaces in the adoption field and what are the facilitators and barriers to accessing such spaces. Despite the plethora of accounts from clinical practice regarding consultations to professional networks around LAC and adopted children, there is no systematic research exploring this practice up to date. There is a place for future research in the field in order to understand more about how often professional network consultations happen in routine practice and whether it affects the outcomes of placements or to hear more about the social workers' views and experiences of consultations from CAPPs. Future research can explore further a training framework in the social work matching field that promotes social workers' reflective capacity so that they will 'identify, own, express and work through the emotional aspects of their job' as Winter et al. (2019, p. 230) have suggested; this would be in the benefit of children and families whom social workers are looking to match.

Conclusion

Despite social workers' role in the adoption matching process being of pivotal importance, they are often left to their own devices to manage the enormity of this highly complex and, often, emotive task. Studies to date have not considered what social workers have to say about how they navigate the complexity of adoption matching. There is a lot to be learned about the role of the

social worker in this significant period of the adoption as well as how they overcome the challenges that the intricacy of their role imposes, especially in the context of day-to-day practice. This becomes even more significant considering research demonstrating that social work practice can have a positive or negative impact on the quality of parent-child matching and thus, potentially, on the adoption outcome itself. Further research is needed to understand better the role of the social worker in the adoption matching process to inform current practice for the benefit of adoptive children, prospective parents, and newly formed families.

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Part 2: Empirical Research Project

Title:

'It's about Gut Instinct' & 'Roller Coasters': Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the Assessing Social Worker's role in Adoption Matching beyond 'box-ticking'

Word Count: 8620

Abstract

Background and Aim

Matching a potential adoptive family to a child is a long and complex process. The role of the social worker is pivotal in every step of this process. There are no studies on the role of the Assessing Social Workers (ASW) working with prospective adopters in the adoption matching process. This qualitative study explored the ASWs' understanding of their role and accounts of their experiences during the matching. The aim was to illuminate how ASWs manage their role's emotional and relational aspects and the pressures of the matching task.

Methods

Braun's and Clarke's (2006; 2013; 2020) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was used to analyse data from interviews with four ASWs working in a UK Local Authority with 12 years of average experience in the field.

Findings and Discussion

Three interconnected themes with nine subthemes were generated: 'Beyond Hard Information: Use of Self', 'Emotional Tasks', and 'Communicating and Thinking Together'. Themes capture the relational aspect of the ASWs' role and how they perceive and experience the functions and emotional tasks of this role during the emotionally-arduous matching process. Implications for ASW practice are considered.

Keywords

Adoption Matching Process, Assessing Social Worker (ASW), role, experiences, challenges

'It's about Gut Instinct' and 'Roller Coasters': Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the Assessing Social Worker's role in Adoption Matching beyond 'box-ticking'

The majority of children on the UK adoption register are often highly traumatised and have high-complex needs as they have been removed from their birth family due to a significant risk of harm and early experiences of abuse and/or neglect (Department for Education [DfE], 2019). Current UK social work practice has, thus, moved towards 'Adoption Matching' which entails the evaluation of the holistic ability of the adoptive environment to meet the many developmental, emotional, and physical needs of the child. Quoting Simmonds (2019): 'Nothing could be more important' [p.3].

Adoption 'matching' is described as a 'social work process' (Thomas, 2013) and not 'an event' (Simmonds, 2016, p.57). It involves everything following the time of linking prospective adopters with a child till the adoption order. Social Workers (SWs) have a central role in every step of the matching process (Featherstone et al., 2016): from considering a specific match to the introduction meetings and information sharing (Sims, 2018; Simmonds, 2019) to transition towards the adoption placement (Department for Education, 2013).

According to the current Assessment Framework (Department of Health, Department for Education and Home Office, 2001), the Child Social Workers' (CSW) assessment of the child's needs produces the Child Permanence Report (CPR) while Assessing Social Workers (ASW) assess the prospective adopters' profiles and capacities resulting in the Prospective Adopter Report (PAR). These two reports are brought together by the ASW in an Adoption Placement Report (APR). Information is reviewed by the Adoption Panel to consider the match as to whether the adopters' 'parenting capacities' can meet the specific child's needs.

Although much has been written in general about 'good' box-ticking practice guidelines in adoption matching (Quinton, 2021), there is a lack of literature on the specificities of this intricately emotive process. Cousins (2003) suggested that while linking a family to a child is based on information collected by SWs, the rest of the matching process is more about 'speculation'. Despite a well-defined assessment framework, matching is the stage of the adoption 'where workers' beliefs and attitudes come into play the most' (Geen et al, 2004; p.16). Quinton (2012) noted the lack of evidence on how effectively the Adoption Panel considers the match in terms of tailoring the adopter's capacities to meet the children's needs. Therefore, it has been argued that 'practitioners are left to their experience, presumptions, and practice pressures' (2012, p.21) to navigate this 'highly-skilled task' (Department for Education, 2013, p.83).

SWs must make important, but complex, decisions during the matching process while dealing with intense external pressures, such as managing huge caseloads within tight timeframes (Ali, 2006; Sagar & Hitchings, 2008). In addition, SWs manage immense internal pressures and challenges stemming from their personal experience of the matching. In a qualitative study with Supervising SWs, Jaggar (2018) underlined how emotionally demanding matching decisions are for professionals. Farmer and Dance (2016) suggested that some SWs might get engrossed in searching for 'ideal' families for specific children. To this end, Sims (2018) suggests that the matching process is an 'emotionally and physically exhausting experience with huge demands made on [...] social workers' (p.194).

Sims (2018) emphasises some risks involved in SWs not having the space, practically and emotionally, to reflect on their experiences and the challenges they face during matching. When practice takes place under pressure, there is not enough space for thinking in the network and important processing time is lost (Adoption UK, 2022; Sagar & Hitchings, 2008). This can have a huge emotional impact on foster carers, adopters, and children in transition (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014, Lanyado, 2003; Wakelyn, 2012).

The quality of social work practice during matching can also impact later adoption outcomes/stability. An earlier study correlated disjointed provision of services and insufficient support to adoptive families following adoption order to higher placement disruption rates (Westhues & Cohen, 1990). Selwyn et al. (2014) suggested that adopters' satisfaction level with the support and availability of their SW during matching was related to a higher-quality introduction meeting. In a thematic analysis of interviews with adoptive parents, Lewis (2018) found that considerable inconsistency in the SW's approach during the matching and transition period negatively affected adopters' experiences, and, subsequently, the stability of the adoption placement. Inadequate information sharing has also been identified as a major factor in disruptions (Barth et al., 1988; Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2019; Farmer & Dance, 2016; Lowe et al., 1999; Randall, 2013). In their review, Palacios et al. (2019) highlighted practice 'errors' stemming from SWs' misjudgement of adopters' overestimated reported capacity to parent children with high complexity.

Despite a consensus about the importance of the SW's role in matching, not enough discussions have been held about it (Featherstone et al., 2016). Quinton (2012) identified a lack of accounts from SWs themselves regarding their role in matching and adoption. Since, there have been some studies on SWs' views of matching (Sims, 2018; Jaggar, 2018) but there are still no studies exploring the role of Assessing Social Workers, the social workers who work with prospective

adopters. The current qualitative study aimed to explore their role during the matching process through their accounts. It sought to understand what ASWs understand their role to be, how they experience their role beyond box-ticking and how they manage the pressures of the matching task.

Methods

Research Design and Setting

This qualitative study was designed with the aim to explore the Assessing Social Workers' (ASW) role during the adoption matching process and understand how they experience their role through their own accounts. Qualitative data were collected through interviews aiming to capture the voices of ASWs currently and previously working in the adoption services within one Local Authority (LA). The study was designed and implemented by two researchers who worked closely at each stage of the project. Researchers recruited, collected and transcribed data collaboratively but analysed the data separately to explore two different research questions that were closely aligned: the question of the current study and one that explored the information-sharing process during matching.

Participants

Participants were required to be fully qualified SWs, currently working in the adoption field in the aforementioned LA. The study collaborator ensured all SWs working in the child and assessing adoption teams were contacted (n=16). This selective sampling process provided an initial set of participants (n=5) who expressed interest in the study. The researchers further contacted interested participants via email with detailed information about the research (Appendix I) exploring the role of the ASWs in the matching process and a parallel study on information sharing. Interview dates were arranged with participants who responded positively.

Data from four interviews were used to explore the Assessing Social Worker role (ASW, SWs working with Adopters). Participants had an average of 12 years in social work, ranging from two to 18 years in the adoption field. One participant previously worked in a child adoption team but was currently an ASW in an independent adoption service within the same LA. Three participants worked in the assessing adoption team: a Senior ASW, an ASW for approximately 15 years and a practice manager.

Data Collection

The interview schedule was developed following a literature review. Informed by two pilot interviews with adoption SWs, who did not take part in the final interviews, the schedule was amended. Further discussions in group supervision and with co-trainees, a senior researcher and a senior psychotherapist led to additional revisions. The finalised interview schedule consisted of 13 questions. Participants were invited to reflect on their role in the matching process with prompts for examples from their practice (Appendix III).

Interviews were undertaken by both researchers and lasted between 76 and 110 minutes. The issues discussed were wide in breadth allowing for the collection of rich data. The interviewers adhered to the interview schedule, allowing space to explore areas that came up spontaneously. Participants were asked to draw on previous as well as current experience. The researchers kept observational notes during the interviews.

The interviews were held online using the Zoom platform and were audio-recorded. Researchers transcribed audio orthographically (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The researchers reviewed the entirety of each transcript re-listening to audio to familiarise themselves with the whole dataset.

Thematic Analysis

(Reflexive) Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was chosen to analyse the data. TA is a theoretically versatile method for qualitative research that allows researchers to actively identify, analyse in-depth and report patterns of meaning in the data about the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). The digital software NVivo 1.4.1 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 1999-2021) facilitated data analysis.

A six-phase approach to RTA was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013; 2020): The full transcripts were studied intensively for initial reflections and familiarisation notes. Phase two included complete systematic data coding of each entire transcript aiming to identify anything related to the ASW's role in the matching (Appendix IV). Each extract was coded with as many codes as relevant until a list of 382–from descriptive to analytic codes–was generated. The author identified code patterns across data in the next phases and grouped them into potential themes via concept maps (Appendix V). These were arranged about coded data extracts until provisional themes/subthemes were developed. Each theme was named and given a concise definition. Themes and subthemes were then depicted in a thematic map and checked against the dataset for in-between links exploration.

Braun and Clarke's 15-point-criteria (2006) guided the analysis to attend to trustworthiness and credibility. Analysis was data-driven (inductive); the researcher aimed to stay close to participants' experiences and sense-making using ASWs' direct quotes in findings to offer access to original accounts. The researcher strived for a reflexive stance noting the impact of their own experiences, perceptions, and theoretical background (Johnson & Rasulova, 2017). The researchers compared their observational notes against the data and engaged in analysis-enriching discussions to provide triangulation. At each stage, data analysis and interpretations were refined following group supervision. Information about the study setting was reflected upon in the write-up to aid transferability. A digital journal was used to document the progression of themes and ideas on

data interpretation and a detailed audit trail was kept through software for confirmability purposes (Appendix VI).

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee (Ref:0389/049). Participants were sent information about the research and a consent form to return signed on the interview day (Appendix II). Written consent to video-record the interviews was also obtained and the interviewees' right to withdraw at any time was explained to them. Should participants have wished for further clarification or in the event of any distress caused during the interviews, they were provided with the contact details of the research supervisor. Gender-neutral pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity during data analysis and identifiable details were excluded or disguised from transcripts. The collecting, handling, and storing of data procedures matched the Data Protection Act 1998. All data were securely stored in password-secured folders in Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF) drives until transcriptions are complete and verified. Recordings were destroyed following transcription.

Researcher's reflexivity

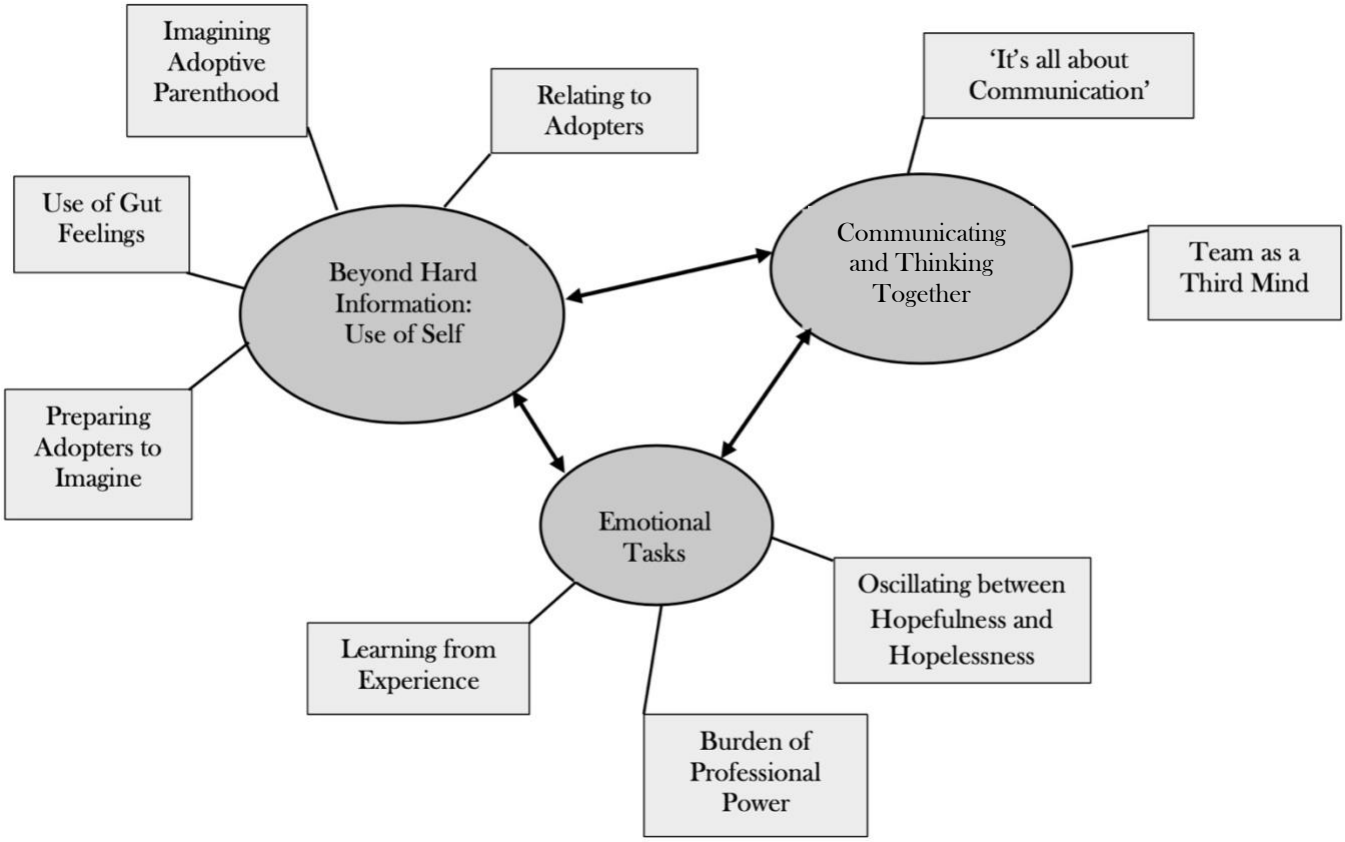
This research was conducted as part of a Doctorate in Psychotherapy (Child and Adolescent). The analytic method is positioned within the critical realist approach (Willig, 2013) to explore ways SWs understand and experience their role in the matching. The analysis considers the trauma context of the UK adoption field within which ASWs operate and how this influences their experiences and meaning-making. The author acknowledges the understanding of data through a psychoanalytic lens influenced by their training in the 'Independent' tradition, their values and assumptions as a clinician in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) working with professional networks around children and their interest in the emotional aspects of professionals' roles.

Findings and Discussion

Three interconnected themes with nine subthemes were generated through data analysis (Figure 1). ASWs illustrated their ideas with vivid practice examples. In the findings below, material from quotes has been cleaned; '[...]' indicates parts omitted for brevity and accessibility. To support themes and enliven their meaning while staying close to data, extracts of participants' accounts are interwoven below. 'Adopters' refers to prospective adopters.

Figure 1

Final thematic map: Themes and subthemes



Theme 1. 'Beyond Hard Information': Use of Self

This theme captured the ASWs' understanding of the use of their self–the relational and psychological aspects of their role–during matching to get to know the Adopters beyond and beneath 'hard' information. The four subthemes created are presented below.

Relating to Adopters

Participants talked about going '*beyond hard information'* to adequately assess and prepare their Adopters for the matching, as Robin expressed: '*The skill of assessing is the questions that aren't on the form'*. Interviewees spoke about their ability to build good relationships with Adopters to

help them feel safe to open up about their experiences, views, and worries. Being empathetic, honest, and non-judgemental were repeatedly described as qualities used to cultivate trust and facilitate robust communication: *'...I hope you can feel you can come and talk to me'* (Alex).

Our ASWs reflected on using their observational skills and feelings to pick up non-verbal signs to understand their Adopters. Their work was often seen as instinctive; professionals become skilled in collecting '*soft information [...] from conversations with people rather than what is written in the report'* (Sam). Similarly, Max spoke about conversations 'on the sofa':

> *'When you're lucky enough to go in somebody's house [...] there's information you pick up as you go along, and you digest it; it's warm in here, they're welcoming, they're friendly- that sort of soft information helps you'* (Max)

This subtheme captures how ASWs use their relational skills and their personal experience of the relationship with the Adopters to collect 'soft information' to comprehend more about the psychological make-up of prospective parent(s).

This is in line with recent research where SWs described the relational aspects of their role as important to effective practice with foster carers (Jaggar, 2018). It has been suggested that a huge emphasis is put on procedures-based practice in UK social care thus restraining SWs' flexibility for more relationally informed professional judgement (Mason, 1993). These constraints have re-sparked an emphasis on good relationships between professionals and clients as a core strength of social work (Howe et al, 2018; Laming, 2009; Trevithick, 2011). Such approaches highlight soft skills, including observation, social workers must mobilise and systematise to achieve thorough assessments and meet their clients' needs. This seems in line with prominent child psychoanalyst's, D.W.Winnicott, ideas regarding the centrality of relationship-building between SWs and their clients (1963; 1970).

Surveys by Adoption UK (2019; 2022) found that 84% of adopters expressed feeling supported by their ASWs during the matching process. Considering many adopters found matching too emotionally demanding to persevere through, their ASWs' support felt extremely valuable. Furthermore, ASW's relation-building skills have been linked to better parent-reported engagement (Forrester et al., 2019). Selwyn et al. (2014) found that Adopters' experienced satisfaction levels with the support received from their ASWs' were related to the quality of the introduction meetings subsequently. Our findings advocate for ASWs incorporating their relational skills beyond 'box-ticking' in their practice as it benefits both sides: it allows in-depth assessment of the Adopters while a trusting relationship is pivotal in helping Adopters manage the matching, also previously proposed (Sims, 2019).

Imagining Adoptive Parenthood

This subtheme gathers ASWs' thoughts about needing to process a huge amount of information regarding Adopters derived from formal and informal data. In this way, ASWs synthesise a mental image of the Adopters' parenting capacity. Talking about a past case: *'...and he's got quite a chequered past, he's a lovely guy, I can already see what type of father I think he would be',* Sam used their knowledge of this prospective parent gained through hard information and their relationship to imagine what sort of father he could become. Most ASWs described this as an important aspect of their work as it provides information on whether/how Adopters will manage to parent a child with a traumatic history. Also, it allows ASWs to start imagining the child that would fit these Adopters and how to support the potential match. Some ASWs described occasions of finding a child that they '*just knew'* would be a good match for specific Adopters: *'I said: I promise, please just look at this profile'* (Sam).

On several occasions, ASWs needed to consider the Adopters' difficulties when proposing a match. Robin assessed Adopters' particular difficulty with bearing uncertainty as a contraindicator:

> *'...And that's part of my process; I'm reading the information, there's this...they're not going to be able to deal with that so I'm not going to show them this child.'* (Robin)

Here, Robin's role is to weigh what Adopters will not cope well with to inform important judgements regarding which child they will propose. Alex remembered some Adopters she considered unfit for adoption. Despite efforts to match them with a child, Alex assessed they had a rather fixed idea of their imagined child and found it hard to adapt their expectations:

> *'They're never going to find [...] the child that they've imagined up in their head...'* (Alex)

This subtheme is not a procedure-based description of how ASWs collect information, rather offers an insight into what is happening internally/mentally beyond 'box-ticking' practice. This is significant as the literature on matching indicates that the process by which social workers use information collected to inform a match has not been researched enough (Quinton, 2012). ASWs in our sample talked about using direct and indirect information on adopters to synthesise an image of them in their minds regarding their parenting capacity of a specific child. This process is reminiscent of Winnicott's ideas of the maternal function when (s)he *imaginatively elaborates* on the child's experience in the mind during 'primary maternal preoccupation' (1956, p.300). The maternal tuning into the infant's needs allows for the emergence of their psychological being (Naffah, 2013; Winnicott, 1945). In analogy, ASWs get 'preoccupied' with imagining their adopters as parents through a 'primary therapeutic preoccupation' (Applegate, 1993, 1997) which allows the ASWs to tune into the Adopters' emotional world of parenthood,

and, thus, facilitates the emergence of an imaginary match with a child...or not, in cases like Alex's.

Use of Gut Feelings

Having collected and integrated, on paper and mentally, the information on Adopters and children, ASWs introduce a potential match by sharing the child's profile. The ASWs closely noticing Adopters' reaction to this proposed match came through as a pivotal *moment* in all interviewees' narrations. Participants reflected on the nuances of their role during this phase, closely noticing Adopters' reaction to a proposed match, attempting to grasp whether Adopters feel the child is a 'good fit' and whether they develop an initial emotional connection:

> *'There's just something about that look that just draws them (Adopters) to get more information. And I think that's what we have to work on. It's partly the (child's) information, partly the adopter's information, but partly some of it is about gut instinct, I think.'* (Sam)

In this segment Sam reflects on how matching the child's and Adopters' information on paper is important, but not the 'whole story'. The ASW's ability to get a sense of how this match '*feels'* to Adopters is vital. This 'soft' type of information –or what Sam calls 'gut instinct' –seemed to be an anecdotal source of information that was a '*duty'* to listen to:

> *'I'm watching their faces, along with the SW. And we came out of this meeting, and we were 'Nah, they're not feeling it'. I phoned her the following day, and I said right, how did you feel? –and she says, no [...]. It's my gut feeling, my watching the look and the signals and the things they say, or don't say.'* (Sam)

Max and Alex ASWs shared stories about having to say 'no' to a suggested match following the introduction to the child's profile, despite the huge pressures, based on their felt experience of Adopters. Robin reflected on a case where Adopters were not feeling a connection to the proposed child:

> *'I fed that back to my family, and my family didn't jump up and down.-[...]-I went back to them following day. And I said what's wrong because I'm sensing there's an issue, and then we explored it. They weren't feeling it was right [...], they were mortified [...] letting everyone down.'* (Robin)

ASWs appreciate the need to carefully assess Adopters' reactions to proposed matches and help them express if it does not feel right for them. The introduction of the child's profile to the Adopters seems to be a short moment in time albeit significant in ASW's accounts of their practice. This is corroborated by results from the Adoption UK (2019; 2022) survey where three-

quarters of adopters reported that their adopted child was introduced by their ASW. Thomas (2013) explored adoptive parents' ambivalent experiences during this introduction phase–feeling pressured by strict timelines but yearning for quick procedures. These reports highlight the importance of the ASWs' ability to correctly assess the perceived 'fitness-of-the-match' at this stage (Farmer & Dance, 2016; Simmonds, 2019). This is pivotal as there seems to be a correlation between higher adoption disruption rates and 'stretching' the gap between Adopters' wishes and the actual matched child (Donaldson, 2004; Valdez & McNamara, 1994). Meanwhile, in the most recent Adoption UK (2022) survey 34% of adopters reported having been asked to consider a match with a child whose characteristics were outside the terms of their approval. The idea that the exact moment of matching is a highly significant time has been elaborated by Sims (2018): *'A child can be encountered and parented in a matter of days. [...] Practitioners have to be responsive to the enormity of this process'* (p.193). Our participants seem aware of this *enormity* and know to stay vigilant, observing all (non)verbal reactions at this stage.

Using psychoanalytic thinking, we could conceptualise these 'gut instinct' reactions as ASWs' countertransference feelings generated from what they experience in the matching moments which can potentially be related to and informative of the Adopter's or the child's internal world and experience (Etchegoyen, 1991). Authors like Le Riche and Tanner (2000), and Trevithick (2011) proposed that SWs' decision-making is often partly informed by the workers' felt experience and 'soft' skillset. Observational skills and instinctual reactions, alongside clinical understanding and previous experience, have long been acknowledged as essential tools in the social work and mental health field (Applegate, 1995; Duschinsky et al., 2016; Howe, 2018). Not cultivating the use of this soft skillset can deplete SWs (Mason, 1993; Kang & Poertner, 2006) from using essential aspects of their 'professional self' in routine practice (Schön, 1983). ASWs in our sample seem to rely on integrating this 'tacit' knowledge or 'professional intuition' (Taylor & White, 2001, 2006; Turney, 2014) into making judgements at the crucial stage of the matching introductions.

Preparing Adopters to Imagine

This subtheme considers how the ASWs help the Adopters create space in their minds to think about the matched child beyond their initial responses and reflect on the child's needs. ASWs discussed this in the context of handling all the practicalities for Adopters, '*ticking all boxes'* to ensure that procedures are progressing smoothly whilst emotionally holding the Adopters through this difficult journey and helping them imagine the child:

> *'I think the role of the ASW there is to spend time with a couple helping them [...] understand exactly what that information means, what it means by neglect or what other things actually mean and talk it through...'* (Max)

ASWs seem to immerse themselves into the information trying to imagine the child's experience and support Adopters to imagine it as well. This often entails the ASW having to go beyond reading the lines and speculate, using their personal and professional knowledge, about the child's early experiences and stemming needs and how the Adopters can meet these needs. Alex, referring to a difficult placement:

> *'I said: he's not smearing now, but he might start smearing. How'd you feel if there was poo wiped across the door or poo right down the stairs?'* (Alex)

The ASWs' role is to challenge Adopters to make informed decisions and think beyond the positive aspects to help them understand what life might look like after adopting a child. Sam considers this thoughtfully:

> *'It's about challenging their thoughts all along to make sure that when that child moves in, they are as confident as they can [...] that they've heard enough, we've explored enough, that they have made the decision based on all the facts.'* (Sam)

Ideas captured here suggest that ASWs extrapolate from the child's history information and their knowledge of the impact of early trauma on development (Music, 2016; Van der Kolk, 2015) to imagine the child's experience. The ASWs' function focuses on helping Adopters to '*create an image in their minds'* (Robin), or else 'mentalize'–reflecting upon external behaviour in terms of mental states–for the child and themselves (Fonagy et al., 2018). The foster carers/adopters' ability to mentalize is essential for these highly traumatised children coming into adoption from care (Dozier et al, 2002; Muller et al., 2013), and has been linked with lower placement disruption (Fonagy et al., 1991; James et al., 2004).

Assisting Adopters to 'imagine' was seen as a central component in the matching process. Research has previously described the preparation of Adopters as a vital stage in a successful adoption transition (Cairns, 2008; Farmer & Dance, 2018). Yet, exploring SWs views, Sagar et al. (2008) reported that SWs find it difficult to effectively help Adopters get a realistic understanding of the type of difficulties children available for adoption have and need further post-qualifying training. Preparing Adopters for such a life event is significant (Simmonds, 2020), especially if they have not experienced parenthood before. Perhaps, the mental/imaginative elaboration that occurs during the gestational period in the parental mind (Raphael-Leff, 2018) needs to be facilitated externally for the Adopters during the 'gestational' matching period. Our

ASWs' self-reported 'helping to imagine' function–though not described process-wise–can inform about the emotional skillset needed to support Adopters at this stage.

Theme 2: Emotional Tasks

The emotional tasks intrinsic to the ASWs' role during matching were considered in this theme. Three generated subthemes capture the ASWs' reflections on some aspects of their role that provoke them emotionally during their day-to-day practice. ASWs' active engagement with these challenging 'tasks' during their practice seems to be at the core of working through them. These emotional challenges are in addition to challenges related to external pressures, such as heavy caseload or time pressures, reported in the literature (Ali, 2014; Sagar, 2018).

Oscillating Between Hopefulness and Hopelessness

The idea of oscillating between feelings of hopelessness evoked by trauma and hopefulness for a better future for Adopters and children was interwoven in the narration of most practice examples described. Our interviewees' accounts considered how bearing the trauma is an emotional task embedded in their role:

> *'Even prospective adopters with their histories have experienced huge trauma. [...] I'm always taking that, that trauma is always coming at me...and sometimes that's manageable and other times [...] it's been too big for me...'* (Alex)

ASWs' everyday task is to receive and digest considerable amounts of information about traumatic events ubiquitous in the history of children but also often Adopters, to be able to think of the unthinkable experiences and communicate it back to Adopters in a digestible form. Alex's stumbling over their words above alluded to the impact of the traumatic information on the ASW. Other ASWs gave ample examples of matching children whose adverse early experiences were so painful that it felt difficult to share and think about with the Adopters. Sam reflected on how ASWs essentially must hold on to the hope that communication of trauma, however emotionally disturbing for Adopters and professionals alike, is integrally helpful:

> *'I want to know that I've made a family, but a family that can cope, and can manage. And that we've armed them with enough information that they can take away [...] and have a happy life with the child.'* (Sam)

sighed expressed how important it is to hope that matching Adopters with a traumatised child can help Adopters face their own history and, through this, develop alongside the child:

> *'It is going to be like a roller coaster [...] I think they can do it, but do they think they can do it? Because that's ultimately the thing, isn't it? They need to believe that this is something they could do.'*

ASWs' accounts hinted at the significance of surviving states of hopelessness and despair and preserving hope that a 'good' match will positively affect children's and Adopters' lives; perhaps in what Klein (1932/1975) formulated as 'goodness' surviving 'badness' so that reparative forces can operate. The idea of extreme mental states invoked in ASWs has been understood as part of the powerful unconscious communications made by traumatised children and families on professionals (Britton 1981; Chuard, 2021; Conway, 2009; Shulman, 2008). ASWs' self-reported function of emotionally processing such states emulates Bion's (1962) idea of containment who envisaged the parental function of receiving and digesting the infant's unrepresented experience. This conceptualisation has previously been applied to social work, suggesting the need for professionals to function as containing minds when trauma is fragmenting the thinking capacity of families and professionals (Ruch, 2007).

Concerning matching, Cousins (2003) suggests that, beyond initial linking, the matching process is very much about hope and prediction. It can be proposed that receiving and processing the trauma as well as holding on to hope is a significant emotional task of the ASWs' role which might be fundamental during the matching stages (Lanyado, 2003; Ludlam, 2008; Roy 2020; Sims, 2019).

Learning from Experience

A recurrent theme within the interviews was ASWs' profound emotional experiences whilst accompanying Adopters in their matching journey which most participants described as a 'learning experience'. These experiences were communicated vividly when some ASWs remembered unexpected disruptions during matching and the horrible feelings entailed. Sam recalled a placement breakdown and the emotional toll it had on everyone; they reflected on a significant omission in professional practice despite a previous painstaking assessment:

> *'The only thing that I have changed, is halfway in the introductions now, [...] I go out and see the couple and I sit with them and say right. Are you sure? Do you want them? I really unpick what it is [...] because I never want that again, it was... Yeah.'* (Sam)

Sam struggled to verbalise the difficult experiences for both professionals and non-professionals involved, portraying the intensity of emotions activated. It is noteworthy how this incident led Sam to adapt their field practice. Similarly, Robin touchingly described a placement breakdown:

> *'There was a message [...] saying "I've hit them". [...] The disruption was dreadfully traumatic, but you see, you've worked with these people. You've learned that this is what their hopes are on, their joys were, this is their aim in life, and then that happens, and it all falls apart...'* (Robin)

Robin shared the painfulness of this matching 'failure'. The powerful emotional investment in the Adopters' hopes seems to have been particularly emotive for Robin when things collapsed. This was a '*wake-up call'* for Robin regarding the importance of a thorough assessment of the Adopters' history.

Learning from experience during matching also pertained to the ASW's personal experience. Participants mentioned using their personal experiences to stay attuned to the vicissitudes of the parenthood journey. Robin shared their own parenting experience with Adopters:

> *'That's [...] a personal experience, I became a parent and I know how hard work it is; I know you can be crying your eyes out over the stupidest thing, [...]. And so, I say to them [Adopters], even if you're telling me everything's wonderful, I'm still visiting.'* (Robin)

ASWs spoke about the importance of acknowledging their history and experiences to also be aware of their biases: '*I am thinking something is not right here, but maybe it is just me...'*(Sam). This can also be a source of information used to support their Adopters practically and emotionally.

These findings are in line with studies exploring SWs' emotional engagement in the work (Graham & Shier, 2014; Leeson, 2010; Ward et al., 2010;). In matching, for example, SWs can be preoccupied with searching for an 'ideal' family for a child (Farmer & Dance, 2016). Our ASWs reflected on using their professional and personal experiences to guide them and improve their practice in the service of Adopters and children, reminiscent of Bion's ideas about learning from one's experience (1962) or Kolb's experiential learning (1984).

Some ASWs acknowledged the need to reflect on their biases and personal history and the impact it might have on a particular match. In a review of professional judgement in matching, Simmonds (2016) proposed that SWs' decision on adoptive matches will unavoidably be shaped by their views and values, family representations as well as their experiences of being parented or parenting. Therefore, ASWs reflecting on their history and learning from their practice can help them support Adopters more effectively without bringing too much of their views or affect into the work (Roy, 2020; Simmonds, 2010; Sims, 2018). Similar to Kenrick (2018) and Sims (2019), SWs using the 'right' amount of personal involvement and experience to inform their practice, but also reflect and learn from it, is crucial to enhancing their approach to help create 'new families'.

Burden of Professional Power

Professional power has been recognised as an integral part of any helper-helpee working relationship (Bundy-Fazioli et al., 2009). This notion appeared in our interviewees' words

regarding their role in decision-making during matching. Professional power was understood as a feature inherent in their role, but one to also monitor within themselves. Alex expressed her mixed feelings: *'I think professionals, social workers have this power, erm, which is really difficult [...] but I don't enjoy it. I, it leaves me feeling very uncomfortable'.* Nonetheless, Alex later talks about the duty to prioritise the child's well-being which might mean also rejecting Adopters: *'I said I think it's unethical because what they're saying doesn't lend itself to adoption at all'.*

These two segments illustrate that professional power is an essential part of the ASW's role in the matching and how conflicting the exercise of this power can be, also suggested by Bar-On (2002) and Duschinsky et al. (2016). Sam reflected on the significance of scrutinising this power:

> *'...it's the power we hold when we are assessing that can make or destroy somebody's journey. Or the decisions we make, and I think that's where supervision is important to keep checking in all the time.'* (Sam)

Max discussed difficult decisions when things are not clear-cut: *'It's very hard for social workers to make that decision.',* expressing the emotional challenges of saying 'no' to Adopters. Professional power can leave ASWs working closely with and relating deeply to Adopters exposed and powerless. Power was also thought of in relation to ASWs pointing out maladaptive behaviours to Adopters. Yet, Robin later reassures themselves that safeguarding children's well-being is the most essential part of the SW's job.

> *'I had to speak to dad in his own home and tell him [...] 'it's affecting the child and you're doing this; you need to stop' [...] and he never spoke to me after that day, but he did change. That was a challenging one.'* (Robin)

The burden of professional power that SWs are expected to manage as well as the associated discomfort when there is a trusted relationship with Adopters, was shared amongst the interviewees. This is supported by previous views that many SWs struggle with feelings of power and powerlessness (Bundy-Fazioli, 2013) as they must often cope with balancing between building personal relationships with people and asserting their power when safeguarding issues are at stake (Duschinsky et al., 2016; Ferguson, 2011; Welbourne, 2019). This echoes some of Jaggar's (2018) findings where foster carers' SWs reported needing to keep the personal and the professional relationship separate as it felt too emotionally demanding to make important matching decisions under relational pressures.

Equally to previous suggestions (Jaggar, 2018; Ravalier et al., 2021; Sagar et al., 2008), our ASWs expressed vividly how rewarding it is to experience a positive contribution to the child's well-being. Narrative accounts from the child protection field highlight how SWs identify with the children they work with (Roy, 2020; Sims, 2018) and this can be a major motivator in their

strenuous work (Howe, 2018). However, there is no research exploring the particularity of the role of the SWs working with Adopters during matching. Our findings shed light on the emotional predicament of the ASWs' role as they identify also with their Adopters' wishes to become a family by finding them a child (Hindle & Shulman, 2008), but might, in parallel, have to disappoint and frustrate them by asserting their authority when the child's well-being is jeopardised.

Theme 3: Communicating and Thinking Together

The third theme gathered ASWs' thoughts regarding the inextricable nature of their role within the professional network. This theme was constructed by two subthemes and reflects ASWs' views on their role during the matching about building communication and thinking within the professional network and with their team/colleagues.

'It's all about Communication'

ASWs thought about the organising function of their role in the professional network during matching. Robin recognised their responsibility in orchestrating open communication between Adopters and professionals around the matching dyad:

> *'You know it's about communication, it's about information, all we can do is give them what we've got but we've got to be honest [...]. I think it comes back on-I don't think I've ever realized it but I'm saying-it's commu-communication, communication...'* (Robin)

Sam also talked about creating channels of communication to help support Adopters obtain and digest information about the child. Sam expressed their view of the ASW as being the 'Central Negotiator':

> *'My role is to liaise between the adopter and the childcare worker. So, my role becomes very much that central negotiator. Booking the appointment [...] so that foster carers and the adopters can meet, so that they can build a relationship to share information on the child.'* (Sam)

Most ASWs, like Sam, reflected on the importance of forging good communication between the Adopters and the foster carers in the introduction phase. Alex and Robin, for instance, acknowledging how demanding these introduction meetings are, described how they give particular attention to preparing new foster carers who have not experienced a transition to adoption before to smooth the process.

These findings suggest that ASWs acknowledge their salient role in creating communication channels within the network to ensure good relations and information sharing between professionals to support the new match. This is in line with policies highlighting the importance

of effective multi-agency communication and sharing comprehensive information with Adopters around children in care for effective adoption procedures (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2007). Much research suggests that a lack of information sharing can have detrimental effects on the adoption outcome (Barbosa-Ducharne & Marinho, 2019; Farmer & Dance, 2016).

Our participants also highlighted the crucial role of the adopters' good relationship with foster carers which has previously been suggested as a significant contributor to more successful adoption placements, while the opposite is linked to placement breakdowns (Blackmore et al., Boswell & Cudmore, 2017; 2020; Reams, 2021; Selwyn et al., 2014). This was acknowledged by our interviewees who suggested that, sometimes, they need to be proactive in cultivating this relationship to make it work.

However, authors like Conway (2009) have argued that policies are inefficient in the day-to-day dealing with the fragmentation that develops between and within services working with children in care who suffer from severe early trauma (Department for Education, 2016). As an example, data from the national Wales Adoption study (Doughty, et al., 2017) showed that 39% of adopters had experienced severe delays and unsettlement in the adoption placement as a direct result of poor communication in the professional network.

Despite ASWs' accounts regarding open communication, there were various case examples of dynamics muddling up communication within the professional network. Conflicting and confused states were expressed. Strong emotions, such as '*angry', 'enraged', 'mortified' 'shameful', 'mistrust', 'rejection', 'shocked', 'devastated'* were verbalised by our ASWs and noted to be communicated non-verbally when interviewees were relaying past matching cases. A plethora of practice accounts from psychoanalytically-trained child psychotherapists (CAPPs) describe occasions where dynamics are routinely re-enacted in the networks around looked-after or adoptive children (Emanuel, 2002; Lanyado, 2017; Solomon, 2020; Sprince, 2000). These relate to the impact of early trauma on children and families and can have catastrophic results as they impede professionals' reflective capacities and, hence, the communication and collaboration between them (Britton, 1981; Chuard, 2021; Conway, 2009). It has also been suggested that the non-functional birth parental couple within the adopted child's internal world might be acted out by the professional networks around these children (Solomon, 2020).

Authors have acknowledged that during introductory and transition stages there are also complex unthinkable and unprocessed feelings regarding loss and moving forward by both children and foster carers (Blackmore et al., 2020; Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; Selwyn et al., 2014). These can

negatively impact the experiences of the transition for all parties involved and the placement itself (Neil, 2018). The ASW's role in maintaining communication becomes then particularly significant during these emotionally intense and complex matching stages.

Team as Third Mind

All interviewees reflected on the importance of having the support of their team in executing their role effectively. Access to peer and supervision thinking spaces was seen as an essential provision where ASWs can feel supported to reflect on their role and process their experience. This helps them feel confident to make difficult decisions that serve both children and Adopters during pressing times:

> *'I did not wait for supervision, I just messaged [Name] [...]. We talked about it, and I was able to unpick it...I was challenged, besides the safety that was raised, what are the goods, what are the negatives, what do you think we need to do?'* (Sam)

All participants placed significant importance on working alongside others, reflecting on past incidents, and discussing dilemmas and uncertainties of their work. This helps them develop and think from different perspectives for future work. One participant said about doing joint visits with other ASWs to families:

> *'...I'm happy to do that. I think that's quite a good way of working because it's useful sometimes to see how other people view the same situation'* (Max)

Max then spoke about ASWs not being '*working machines'*, encapsulating the complexity of making important judgements beyond objectivity and box-ticking practice. Instead, our ASWs admit their subjectivity and that they must use other minds and thinking spaces offered by their team–an essential skill in ASWs' toolset. Robin expressed this robustly:

> *'...that's about your skill of going and talking to your colleagues or your manager and saying this has happened.'* (Robin)

Being challenged to think stands alongside the sense of being held in mind by peers to feel emotionally contained (Bion, 1962). ASWs' ability to ask for and allow themselves to receive support while also being challenged was seen as a major part of effective and developing practice.

The importance of such thinking spaces for SWs has been proposed before (Lefevre, 2015; Simmonds, 2010, 2016; Ward, et. al, 2010). Access to reflective spaces helps the development of self-awareness and improves social care practice (Ruch, 2007; Rustin & Bradley, 2008). Our ASWs recognised '*being lucky'* (Alex, Sam, Robin) to have this amount of support as, unfortunately, such supportive spaces are rare in many social care services (Simmonds, 2010). Participants also reflected on 'thinking spaces' being of pivotal significance during the matching

period. Likewise, Sims (2018) argues that during the pressured period when a match is being considered the access to 'other 'minds' that are not themselves caught up' (p.193) in the intensity of the matching attempt provides critical space for reflection on relationships and processes.

Further Reflections

Our themes attempt to capture the ASWs' understanding of their role and experience during the emotionally arduous matching process: a role of holding and processing massive amounts of information, balancing relationships with Adopters and forging communication within the network while managing external and internal pressures. Experience and its accounts are never unambiguous therefore, inevitably, there were between-themes overlaps. An attempt to draw interlinks is made here using psychoanalytic ideas to speculate on the internal processes underpinning the functions captured in the data.

Winnicott's ideas on holding (1953) were used to understand how ASWs use their self to build relationships with Adopters and emotionally 'hold' them. An analogy of the ASW's role to a parental role was drawn (Applegate, 1995; Winnicott & Kanter, 1997; Winnicott, 1956/1975): ASWs imaginatively elaborate in their minds the Adopters' parental capacity and the potential child that would fit them–this paves the way to imagining a potential match. Subsequently, ASWs support the Adopters' capacity to imaginatively elaborate and mentalize the child for themselves. Perhaps, the ASWs 'parental mind' for the Adopters becomes a 'grand-parental' mind for the imagined-matched-child (Dugmore, 2013; Imber, 2010). In parallel, the ASWs might use the authority of the paternal function (Kohon, 2005) to assert their professional power in the service of Adopters and children's well-being, seen in the second theme.

The third theme captured the importance of having minds not entangled in the emotional complexity of the matching process to help the ASWs' 'maternal' and 'parental' function. This provides a 'parental coupling' function which facilitates a mental space whence thinking from other perspectives rests (Klein, 1928; Britton, 1989). ASWs' emotionally arduous functions take place within the 'enormity of the matching process' (Sims, 2018, p.193) and the potentially complex professional network dynamics, captured in theme three. To provide a helpful interpersonal 'holding' for their Adopters (Applegate, 1997), it seems important that ASWs are adequately 'held' and attended to by their practice environments.

Surprisingly, the theme of loss did not appear in our interviewees' narratives. Loss is salient in the literature around adoption referring either to the loss experienced by prospective parents who choose adoption due to infertility (Hindle & Shulman, 2008) or in relation to the loss experienced by foster carers when children move on to adoption (Selwyn et al., 2014) as well as

the loss experienced by children themselves during these transitions (Boswell & Cudmore, 2017). When such difficult loss issues are left unresolved painful feelings might arise at later stages of the adoptive family life (Brodzinsky, 1997). It has previously been thought that there need to be significant considerations around what emotional work may be helpful to assist adoptive couples' experiences of mourning. For example, Cregeen (2022) proposes that the assessing social worker has to be 'sensitively alert to these painful losses' (p.240) to help assess whether sufficient grieving has taken place so that prospective parents are ready to become adopters.

The lack of engagement with thinking about the 'loss' in our findings poses a question about whether our ASWs could get in touch with it and if there is scope in their role to actively engage with thinking about feelings of loss with their Adopters. Perhaps, the complex emotional demands on our ASWs during the matching process made it difficult for them to apprehend the adopter's and children's experiences or to correctly estimate their sense of loss. This issue echoes ideas proposed by Boswell and Cudmore (2017) who highlighted this professionals' 'blind spot' whereby the painful loss that children experience when they transition cannot be acknowledged. These authors understood this as fuelled by the adults' (across the network) own struggles with intense anxieties related to attachment and loss in early childhood and how professionals and organisations have to mobilise defences against such loss. Besides, the demanding pressures of the matching task might push our ASWs to have to act and prioritise placing the child and giving their Adopters a new family, all the while having to hold the children's difficult feelings out of mind and thus replicating their earlier experiences of trauma and neglect (Sprince, 2008).

Implications for Practice

This is an important step in hearing from ASWs about their experiences of their role during the adoption matching. The findings reinforce ASWs using their whole paleta of soft skills as a source of information in building relationships with Adopters and cultivating communication in the professional network. We suggest that ASWs would benefit from specialised training, like mentalization-based training, to support their Adopter's mentalizing/imaginative capacity during the introductory and transition matching stages to assist their understanding of the complex needs of matched children.

Our findings alert ASWs to the importance of maintaining communication channels throughout matching using the triangulation offered by supervision and reflective spaces to comprehend potential network re-enactments. Sprince (2000) talks about Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists (CAPPTs) consulting to professional networks around Looked After and Adopted Children to help SWs 'to keep thinking and feeling [...] about the painful issues they

are trying to work with daily' (p.419). Exploring a major child protection case, Cooper (2005) argued that effective social care work is not possible if professionals do not have the 'capacity to experience and engage with intense emotional pain' (p.5). We propose that a psychoanalytically-informed consultation-based approach to networks, such as those offered by professionals like CAPPs, can support SW's thinking during the enormous moment of the matching. Psychoanalytic thinking can provide a robust theoretical framework to help ASWs reflect on their felt experience and support them to advance their understanding of the feelings that are engendered from their work. Key psychoanalytic concepts such as transference and countertransference (Etchegoyen, 1991) can aid ASWs to conceptualise their reported 'gut feelings'. This can give them insight into their own emotional tasks as well as the adopters' and the children's internal world in order to better inform the matching process. Further, ideas related to organisational defences, such as splitting and projection, can assist professionals to understand how networks act out or replicate children's earlier experiences of trauma and neglect (Conway, 2009). This has been proposed before as beneficial in reducing the risk of professionals' unthinkable emotional involvement and supporting them perform their role in a more informed and objective way. This is in the service of the families during the adoption transition (Boswell & Cudmore, 2014; Chuard, 2021; Sprince, 2000).

Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

This study shed light on ASWs' understanding and experiences of their role during the matching process which has not been explored before. The breadth and depth of the interview material were vast and so the sample was kept small to allow for in-depth analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020, 2021). Our study tried to capture deep meanings and nuances of the experiential aspect of the ASWs' role which adds ecological validity to the findings. The interviews were conducted online due to Covid-19 which made it accessible to participants but may have impacted the reflexivity of either participants or interviewers. Notwithstanding, the recordings allowed for consideration of participants' non-verbal communications during data familiarisation.

The study sample was distinct: participants were recruited from one LA outside London placing high-complex children, all had many years of experience but had varied roles within the service. This adds richness to our findings though may not represent the ASWs' experience of varied practice across the country (Dance et al., 2010). ASWs volunteering for this study might be those feeling confident reflecting on their practice. Further research can replicate this study with participants in different contexts to shed further light on the UK matching social work practice or deepen understanding by exploring specific aspects of the ASW's role.

Conclusion

This study aimed to offer insight into the role of the ASW during the arduous process of adoption matching. The themes, 'Beyond Hard Information: Use of Self', 'Emotional Tasks' and 'Communicating and Thinking Together', highlight that their role involves complex emotional functions within the context of intense external and internal (emotional) pressures. The understanding gained can inform practice around how ASW approach matching beyond box-ticking. Policies looking to improve practice quality should acknowledge the importance of resourcing SWs during the matching stages with soft skills and offer them emotional supplies through reflective spaces. This can positively impact the ASWs' experience and, consequently, benefit Adopters and children via more successful placements.

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Part 3: Reflective Commentary

Word Count: 3978

Reflective Commentary at the End of the Journey

From the beginning of the Doctoral training in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy, we knew we would have to write this 'Reflective Commentary' section towards the end of the journey. I think I always approached the thought of this task with some ambivalence in anticipation of the sentiment that the timing of the writing of this section would bear upon me–timing, namely, the 'end of the journey'. The Reflective Commentary was described as a more structure-free piece of work where we could reflect on the experience of the research component of the training within the context of the psychotherapy training. Or, else, what does it mean and how does it feel trying to be a researcher while learning how to be a child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapist? Or, maybe, it is the other way around...? I am not sure. Anyhow, this is what I will endeavour to do here.

This long journey has, at times, been for me primarily a 'psychotherapy training', at times a 'doctorate' and, recently, more often a 'doctoral training'. The alternation between these titles perhaps captures something about the process of experiencing and getting to grips with this intricate learning process as it unfolds.

Journey of 'Knowns' and 'Unknowns'

Embarking on this journey brought me right back to being a child and learning how to climb mountains. I remember vividly an experienced hiker teaching us how to persevere and preserve our physical and psychic resources for the journey towards the top of the mountain, as the route is long and full of surprises. Once you get to the middle, you realise that the distance is double what you had imagined. This memory had also come to my mind intensely, and then recurrently over the course of years when I first started working as a researcher at the university where I completed my first bachelor's degree in the field of Human Nutrition and Dietetics: research resembles a hike; the end of the journey is never what and how you thought it would be when you started.

So, a few years later, I am joining the Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy Doctoral training. Having had some experience in research, albeit only quantitative and in a different field, the research component of the doctorate was not the most stressful part at the beginning. Research at the time felt like a task easier to tackle, probably due to some felt familiarity. Undertaking the research projects–conducting a service-based research project (Audit), producing a fictional research proposal as an oral presentation in small groups, attending a monthly Journal Club and taking a written exam at the end, felt reassuring. In parallel, it also felt that I gained significant new knowledge as, through these components of the course, I acquainted myself with

the research field of psychotherapy and the challenges related to research on psychoanalytic psychotherapy with children and adolescents described by Henton and Midgley (2004). Moreover, taking the research modules while doing psychotherapy work provided a chance to explore in an applied way the debate within the psychotherapy field between day-to-day clinical-based practice with complex cases vs. evidence-based research advocated by authors such as Rustin (2003) and Fonagy (2009) respectively, but also to reflect on my personal understanding of and position within this debate.

An aspect of this debate I believe played out for me experientially in the Journal Club and psychotherapy research seminars as some of the topics discussed sparked heated debates and stirred up mixed feelings in the group. There seemed to be a predominant sense amongst the trainee's group that research, especially quantitative, felt remote from clinical thinking. I found myself feeling frustrated as there was anxiety about whether the research component could feel integrated with the clinical component of the training for me. Being someone who was more at ease with research at the time, I felt an intense sense of confusion and deep alienation; on many instances, I had a disquieting worry that I might be lacking some capacity for the so-called 'clinical thinking' in me since I did not perceive these two parts to be so far away from each other or mutually exclusive. I worried that my previous studies and work in a more positivist field would not allow me to be able to move into a space of psychoanalytic thinking and experiential learning.

Meanwhile, I was also grappling with the first year of clinical learning in the service where I soon realised that what I did not know was what this arduous route would really feel like. Entering the child and adolescent psychotherapy field and working in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the NHS, not in my native language, made me feel out of my depth and often inept. Despite being somewhat familiar with psychoanalytic texts, the demand to now take in and comprehend theory in a different way, applying this to everyday practice in a therapy room with families and young people alongside personal analysis – that was a challenge of a different order. It necessitates a unique, personal, and experiential way of learning which feels like it is always happening post-hoc.

At the time, I had to complete an audit project in my service informed by commission-related inquiries regarding the referral pathway for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Going through case notes to collect data for this project provided an opportunity to get a sense of the challenges of working with high-need, complex cases within the often not-straightforward reality of holding a large clinical caseload in a Generic CAMHS service. This project brought home to me the possibility of employing research skills and a way of thinking in the service of clinical

understanding and efficient clinical practice. In parallel to conducting this audit, I was engaging with psychoanalytic literature on ASD as I had started a psychotherapy case with an adolescent boy with a recent diagnosis whom I struggled to understand and connect with in the therapy room. Current literature on ASD in the field of psychotherapy has also moved to more integrative models regarding the body and the mind. This concurrent process of engaging in multi-layered psychoanalytic understanding and approaches to practice alongside reviewing ASD case files and engaging with numbers for audit purposes was enriching for my thinking. It also tapped into my anxieties and, I think eventually, facilitated an amalgamation of different ways of understanding and paradigms of thinking. Going through this process, thus, instilled some trust in the clinical-research approach and process of this doctoral training.

Whirlpool of Uncertainties

Before finishing the emotionally strenuous first year it was time to choose between three broad research projects. One of the research projects was placed within a service I happened to have worked in as a Research Officer prior to entering the training. Hence, it felt natural that this project instantly became my first choice. In retrospect, I believe that in wanting to take on that project I wished to keep a connection to my previous colleagues but, also, I needed to keep hold of things I felt familiar with amid the whirlpool of uncertainty often swirling me around in the clinic.

I was not allocated that project, which made me feel hurt and somewhat unheard at the time. Instead, I was given a project that fell under the research area of adoption. The idea that I would engage in a research area I was not familiar with increased my anxiety regarding the amount of learning to be done and work to be tackled within the next year(s). Additionally, the second year of the training journey started with a sense of clinical work and demands rapidly increasing. Therefore, it felt a bit like hiking up a steep, rocky trail, while trying to balance holding a plate with many new things on; all quite bewildering.

In parallel, I had a feeling of loss regarding my initial research choice and my 'imagined/fantasised research project' shed a shadow on what was really on offer for me, perhaps similarly to feelings of loss in not having a biological child described in the work of Selwyn et al. (2014) with adoptive families. The flexibility of the expectations of the prospective adopters about the child they are matched with allows for a connection with the actual child, and, therefore, relates to better adoption outcomes (Farmer & Dance, 2016). Likewise, I needed to allow myself to see the potential of the project I was allocated to if I were to enjoy it, instead of dwelling on not having been given what I had imagined.

In our initial meetings with the research collaborator, we were presented with the possibility of analysing data quantitatively to explore three different research questions. These were based on data collected from 112 adoptive dyads 12 years before with two subsequent follow-ups. Following some thoughtful discussions in our small supervision group, I chose a project that would be looking at adoption matching. I was presented with a dichotomous variable capturing the social workers' approach to matching–specifically, 'project-matching' vs 'paper-matching'; this, I would explore in relation to adoption outcomes. However, the dataset itself created some twofold challenges. On one hand, the data were extracted from case files so some variables appeared not to be well-defined. On the other hand, despite having been introduced to the research areas and what the datasets were comprised of in terms of data and variables, it took a considerably long time to have access to the dataset itself. It felt frustrating that we had been given directions on what to research, but were not 'allowed', as it felt then, to lay eyes on the data. Notwithstanding, the idea of doing quantitative research seemed to drive me away from the opportunity to use and interweave psychoanalytic thinking in the project.

This period felt frustrating and infantilising – I felt muddled in the uncertainty about the shape of the project and its potential yet stuck in feeling bound to need to please the 'adult'-research collaborator and to 'honour' the quantitative dataset, being the good 'child'-student, I had been trying to be. Approaching the research proposal presentation in the second-year winter workshop, I had little sense of progression and an all-encompassing feeling of not having a clear idea of how my research would look like, what sort of data were available, and whether the provisional research question(s) I was given resonated to current social work practice in the adoption field. There was much uncertainty about how we would proceed and whether this could be made into a viable and meaningful project.

This feeling of uncertainty and having to wait for what feels like a very long time is reminiscent of the experience of prospective adopters who have been introduced to the profile of a child as a potential match but then might not have access to more information or cannot see the child itself before the introductory meetings (Lewis, 2018; Selwyn et al., 2014). I can only begin to imagine that if I felt stuck between being uncertain about my 'matched' proposed research question and the wish to please or not disappoint, what levels of emotional struggles prospective adopters might go through during the highly complex and emotive matching process with a proposed child.

Project Coming Alive

Meanwhile, I started reading through the relevant literature to explore more in-depth the field of adoption matching, focusing especially on perspectives from social work practice. This literature in the UK alone was sufficiently voluminous and I felt outright stunned, trying to navigate my way through long government papers on adoption and unfamiliar social work datasets and research. Nonetheless, this provided more context to the data at hand and stirred up some productive thinking around the research questions. There was a sense of the information coming alive as research ideas were sinking in to illuminate aspects of clinical work; a refreshing feeling started to emerge, a sense that I was about to grapple with significant matters – reading about policies and research related to real professionals' practices and challenges that affected real children's lives. Gradually, the awakened interest in the research area of adoption social work instilled in me hopefulness about the potential usefulness and relevance of this project.

Importantly, there was an influence from my clinical work. The Generic CAMHS where I was placed does not have a local Looked After and Adopted Children (LAAC) pathway due to commissioning arrangements. Hence, I had not worked directly with LAAC but had work experience with children in Special Guardianship Orders or Kinship Care as well as many families with social care involvement. I felt the lack of experience with a population group that 88% of psychoanalytically-trained child psychotherapists in the UK engage with routinely (Robinson et al., 2017). Therefore, I became increasingly intrigued by reading and learning more about this area of work, the professional networks and the complex systems and processes around LAAC children.

Through reading the literature on matching in the UK, I was gravitating towards a qualitative project as it became increasingly clear from the literature review that there was a call for more exploration of the social workers' role in the matching process. There was a notable gap in the literature in terms of hearing social workers' own words and accounts of their experiences in this process. I was supported in supervision to pursue my explorative interest in a mixed-methods project. Hence, I started the third year with a refreshed interest in the idea of trying out a qualitative research project. This would also be a novel research method experience for me and one, I thought, would allow more creativity related to clinical thinking, emotional investment, and personal reflection in terms of my own contribution to the process.

Emerging Formulation

A mixed-methods project was promising as the combination of quantitative and qualitative data would enrich the analysis of the subject of how social workers approach adoption matching.

Thereafter, the process of formulating the mixed-methods project was long and often cyclical. In research supervision, we screened the dataset deciphering what available variables we had from the collected data but struggled to identify how the data could be used to explore the proposed quantitative research question – most variables were dichotomous, not well constructed and some of the measured concepts around social care processes and adoption outcomes seemed vaguely operationalised.

Meanwhile, my literature review led me to think more about the debate within social work practice around the objective and subjective ways of making social care decisions (Hanna & Mcroy, 2011, Meiksans et al., 2015, Zeijlmans et al., 2017; 2018; 2019). In parallel, there were plenty of accounts from social work practice about how emotionally draining and personal the work with traumatised children can become (Roy, 2020; Sims, 2018). Formulating the qualitative research question was an intricate process of articulating questions in response to the identified gaps in the existing research literature informed by my interest and personal experience.

As far as I understood, the wider literature on the adoption of social work highlighting the challenges in the field felt pertinent to my contact with social care professionals in the service. My experience was that there was wide variability in social work practice and in the quality of how social workers engage with their work with the families and the professional network. For example, I had worked alongside professionals who were extremely invested in the families they work with, or others more emotionally detached often resulting in a lack of joined-up thinking. Moreover, the discourse used and the approach of clinical thinking some social care professionals have been trained in also seemed to vary significantly. Notwithstanding, the intensity of the emotional states aroused in professionals working with traumatised families and children had been part of my own clinical experience and engagement in multi-agency work. I became increasingly interested in understanding how social care professionals manage their heavy caseloads while grappling with the emotional experience of the families they work with when many do not have a comprehensive theoretical framework of child development, clinical supervision, or personal analysis to support their psychological thinking and relationally informed practice (Simmonds, 2010; Roy, 2020; Winter, 2019).

This personal interest undoubtedly shaped the formulation of my research project. In hindsight, this interest in how professionals with no specialised mental health training make sense of their experience and how they use their emotional skills to inform their practice was possibly sparked by my diverse professional background. Specifically, I had been a professional who had worked closely with people over a long-time and, though dedicated, had not always had the theoretical

framework to understand or skillset to manage the intensity and complexity of the emotional aspects of that work.

Eventually, the provisionally formulated qualitative project moved away from the initially proposed quantitative project. Following much consideration, we decided to only keep the qualitative strand of the research. A mixed-methods approach seemed, at this stage, imposed, and the threat of a disjointed, rather than a comprehensive, project was looming over.

Research and Clinical Work Interface

Collecting, analysing, and interpreting the research data was a painstaking process which entailed much thinking, organising, revising, and adapting. This process was arduous on both a practical and an emotional level from the ethics application, to recruiting adoption social workers, conducting the research interviews online during covid-times, transcribing, mastering new software and learning how to conduct coding for thematic analysis. Mostly, not having had much previous experience with qualitative research, I had to learn how to stay with the uncomfortableness of not-knowing what things mean, and how they will unfold. The most nerve-wracking aspect of this data analysis was not having a statistical criterion to show you whether what you have come up with is 'on track' – an experience perhaps similar to how a child psychotherapist trainee can feel when initially alone in the room with a child.

The entire process was also coloured by my theoretical orientation due to my own training in the 'Independent' tradition, heavily influenced by D.W. Winnicott's ideas, as well as my focal interest in the relational and emotional aspects of one's professional role. However, despite the psychoanalytic framework held in mind, there was an active attempt to conduct the qualitative project with an inductive bottom-up approach to check for the effects of my theoretical background in the process (Braun, & Clarke, 2013). The potential benefits, as well as challenges of psychoanalytically informed clinicians conducting qualitative interviews, were carefully considered by exploring relevant literature (Cartwright, 2004; Midgley, 2006).

My co-researcher and I used a semi-structured schedule for the interviews to hold a neutral position and avoid affecting participants' responses, though we kept observational notes during the online interviews. Nevertheless, the clinical approach to interviewing and listening to people's experiences was inevitably shaped by my clinical approach and skills. In conducting the interviews alongside my co-trainee conducting their doctorate project we had an opportunity to triangulate each other's observations and understanding of data. This collaboration proved to have provided a safe and useful space for fruitful reflection on the entire experience. During the

data analysis, the themes were continuously discussed with the research supervisor and co-trainee for ensuring and augmenting credibility.

Overall, the qualitative research process helped me develop new skills which are at the interface of clinical work and qualitative research methods: a process of learning how to endorse the ambiguity of the qualitative way of thinking, trusting the process instead of just trusting the numbers or the food chemistry or the human biology which I had previously been taught to exclusively trust. This learning experience provided the opportunity to reflect on the clinical and research stance of making use of myself and my skills in the interview and data analysis process to relate to and observe the participant/patient. Both in research and clinical practice, there is an attempt to create (co)meaning, informed by theory and experience, while also staying close to the words and the lived experience of the other. Reflecting and checking one's contributions to the process is an integral part of these processes.

Throughout this research project, I have not had direct experience working with children in care or who are undergoing the transition to adoption. This was at times challenging as I felt that having more experience in this field would enhance my understanding of data. At other times, it felt that I could engage with the data more freely and creatively. Nevertheless, the contact with the interviewees/social workers in this project has taught me a lot about the deeply emotional work they engage with during the matching and the challenges this can create. This process has informed my approach to collaborative multidisciplinary work and sparked my interest in working with the LAAC population and consultation work with social care professionals. I am now moving into my first post-qualification job in a LACC team feeling that this project supported the learning journey and finding my way in it, a bit more confident in having integrated new skills and knowledge along the way.

Hold me so I hold you, for us to climb up the mountain

(Proverb, my translation)

Having other minds to explore ideas with, I believe, has been a central element of learning in both the clinical and research components of this training. During the research project, I have felt immense support from working alongside my co-trainee during all stages of this research project while having our thinking supported in the supervision space. This experience of being contained in connecting and thinking together was very much alive in my mind at the time of data analysis. Perhaps, it also influenced my analysis of data from social workers; in particular, the 'Together' theme. Through my own experience, I might have been more inclined to pick up these themes in the words of my interviewees and incorporate this in my analysis of the social

work practice. For me, it would feel impossible to have gone through this creative, yet challenging, process of this research project and, indeed of this whole training, if I did not have other people and their minds to support me and widen my thinking and, eventually, my heart. Similarly, it did seem to me that for the adoption socials workers of my study their experience of thinking spaces with peers and in supervision was a pivotal one and this was reflected in their accounts.

Even though the research project involved a strenuous and uncertain process, the reassurance of the research supervisor alongside his openness, curiosity, and willingness to trust in my ability was an invaluable source of support for me. I felt that the supervisory environment, a bit like a holding environment (Winnicott, 1960), in which I was supported and valued allowed the potential space for this creative and 'spontaneous' project, derived from my interest rather than what was assigned to me, to emerge; this created the possibility of learning something truly new.

Last Thoughts as a Conclusion

Some of the benefits of having gone through the research process in parallel to the clinical training can only be experienced retrospectively, as during the actual experience of these four years it has often felt overwhelming and at times confusing. The initial quantitative project was possibly going to be more about matching and prediction of the outcome but through a non-linear route I choose more ambiguity and ended up exploring qualitatively and trying to make sense of 'experience'. In parallel to the growth coming from the clinical training and my personal analysis, this journey has been a fertile experience of entertaining different paradigms of thinking and ways of being. This has allowed a growth in confidence on both a personal and professional level. A constructive dialogue and negotiation between different 'discourses' (Leuzinger-Bohleber et al., 2003), but also parts of me, as to find my place in what Edginton (2013, p.269) refers to as 'the liminal space between research and clinical work' was opened and will, hopefully, continue to involve.

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Appendix I

Information Details

Information was provided to potential participants as part of the study recruitment process. Shared with interested participants alongside the participant information sheet (page below).

Example of Email communication

"Dear XXX,

I hope our email finds you well during these uncertain times.

We have been given your contact details by Dr XXX who has been collaborating with our research supervisor Dr XXX at the XXX as you expressed an interest in taking part in our doctoral research projects on adoption.

We would like to thank you for this.

As part of this research, we are interested in getting the perspectives of social workers working in the adoption field as we feel this is an area that hasn't been given enough attention in research in the past. We are specifically interested in social workers' experience of the matching process as well as information sharing with prospective adopters. We have attached to this email the information sheet and at the end of this email a summary of the themes we are looking to explore with you in the interview. If we agree to proceed with the interviews, we will also share by email the consent form.

Our plan would be to have an interview on Zoom and with your permission, audio record it. We anticipate this would take approximately an hour.

We are mindful of how busy you must be during this period and wonder when a convenient time might be. We have kept some Tuesday mornings open within the next few weeks as this is a day that we have dedicated time for our research in the training. Alternatively, we would be happy to consider other possible weekdays or arrange this for an evening or a weekend if that would be more convenient for you.

Please do let us know if you have any questions regarding any of the above. We would be happy to talk more before arranging the interview.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

XXX and XXX

Interview Information

In the first part of the interview, we are interested in getting your views and experiences of your role as a social worker during the matching process of a child to prospective parents. We will be asking you about positive experiences as well as challenges of the matching process from your point of view and ways that these challenges can be managed when working in the field.

In the second section, we are interested in getting an understanding of your experience of information sharing with prospective adopters (e.g., child's history and needs). We are also interested to hear about whether you feel there is some information that is more important either to share or not. Throughout the interview, we are keen to learn what works well in this process and some of the challenges you might face.

We will of course encourage you to draw upon particular cases that might come to mind that might help illustrate your thoughts and we would be interested in hearing about these. Please be assured that the details will all be anonymised and that you have the right to withdraw from the research at any point or not answer any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering.

Participant Information Sheet

Challenges and Information Sharing during the Adoption Matching Process: Social Workers' Role and Perspectives

You are invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Ask the researcher(s) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of this project? The research aims of this study are to explore and understand social workers' perspectives and experiences of the adoption matching process, including challenges of information sharing.

Why have I been chosen? An unpublished audit on adoption matches was completed between April 2003 and April 2005 (n=116) in [Name of County] Council (Name of audit author, 2007; unpublished). The results of this audit inspired and gave rise to the idea of the current research study.

Hence, you have been approached to take part in this study because you are either working or have worked as a social worker within the service. All social workers who have worked or are currently working in this team were considered as participants. This selection was based on convenience and there were no further excluding criteria.

Do I have to take part? It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in the project. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet and will be asked to sign a consent form that we will keep as a record. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you decide to withdraw you will be asked what you wish to happen to the interview you have provided up to that point.

What will happen to me if I take part? Social workers will be interviewed individually with a semi-structured interview.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, this interview will be conducted via video using an online platform and audio-recorded. We would encourage the interviews to take place in a quiet space that can also ensure confidentiality.

Once you have agreed to take part in this study you will be asked to sign a GDPR-compliant consent form. You have the right not to answer any questions and to withdraw up to 4 weeks following the interviews. You will have the opportunity to ask any questions by email or phone prior to the interview. This opportunity will also be provided again at the beginning of the interview.

The questions will invite you to share your views regarding two main areas. One area is related to information sharing during the adoption process. Specifically, you will be asked about practice and views regarding communicating child-related risk factors to adoptive parents. The other main

area will invite you to reflect on your role-related challenges during the adoption matching process.

The recorded interviews will then be transcribed and analysed using a qualitative approach (thematic analysis) to allow for an exploration of your views and experiences related to the researched area.

How will data be stored? It is important to let you know a few things about how data will be stored. Audio recordings will be securely stored in password-secured folders in Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF) drives until transcriptions are complete and verified.

Once the interviews have been transcribed, the recordings will be deleted, and all information stored will be pseudonymised.

Transcriptions of the interviews will be stored in AFNCCF-secured drives in password-secured files until the data analysis has been completed and the results are written up. Data will be deleted permanently by December 2021. An encrypted USB will be used if data transfer has to take place.

Consent forms will be kept separate from data in a locked cabinet in the AFNCCF until the end of data analysis. Consent forms will be safely destroyed in an AFNCCF confidential paper shredder.

Only researchers and the researcher supervisor will have access to the data. Data will be used for the purposes of this specific study and will be deleted at the end of the project (December 2021).

An Ethics Committee has checked the research project All research projects are looked at by an independent group of people, called a Research Ethics Committee, to protect your rights. This research has been reviewed and agreed upon by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Project ID Number: Ethics 0389/049).

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part? It is not anticipated that participating in this study will cause you any distress. However, we are mindful that this may occur. We have made sure to discuss in detail the design of the interview schedule with the research supervisor to ensure that the questions are sensitively constructed. Also, we would like to remind you that you do not have to answer questions if you do not wish to do so and that you have the right to withdraw your data up to 4 weeks after the interviews. All data will be pseudonymised.

If for any reason you do become upset during the interview, we will offer to stop recording, and only re-start the interview if/when you are ready to do so. You will have the opportunity to talk through the interview experience at the end of the session if you like. Should you feel that you need to talk further, you are encouraged to contact the research supervisor (contact details are provided at the end of this form). You are also encouraged to bring any professional and personal

issues arising from these interviews to your supervision or seek out other appropriate professional support.

What are the possible benefits of taking part? The study is voluntary and therefore will not be a paid one. We cannot promise that the study will have any direct benefits. However, we believe that you might find having a space to reflect on some issues related to your everyday practice beneficial.

You will also have access to a (pseudonymised) report of the results regarding your and your colleagues' views on practice and challenges related to your role as a social worker and views on information sharing. This information will also be made available to them, which they may find beneficial.

What happens if something goes wrong? If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated by members of staff, please contact XXX, the Principal Researcher, at XXX @ XXX . If you then feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you can contact the Chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee at ethics@ucl.ac.uk.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, please contact UCL in first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk. If you remain unsatisfied, contact the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Contact details, and details of data subject rights, are available on the ICO website at: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/data-protection-reform/overview-of-the-gdp r/individuals-rights/.

Will information about me be kept private? Interviews will take place in an encrypted virtual platform. Participation in the video call will require a unique password. Video recordings will be securely stored in password-secured folders in Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (AFNCCF) drives until transcriptions are complete and verified.

The transcription of the interviews will take place in the AFNCCF during which all names and references to places or other people will be pseudonymised. Once the interviews will have been transcribed, the videos will be deleted, and all information stored will be pseudonymised.

Transcriptions of the interviews will be stored in AFNCCF-secured drives in password-secured files until data analysis has been completed and results written up. Data will be deleted permanently by December 2021. An encrypted USB will be used if data transfer has to take place.

Names will have been replaced with pseudonyms and any other identifying information will be changed when transcribing and analysing data. Further pseudonymisation will take place were deemed necessary when writing up the results of this research for a thesis or further publication purposes to protect participants' confidentiality.

Data protection All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which takes over from the Data Protection Act in May 2018. Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this information sheet. The legal basis that will be used to process your personal data will be the provision of your consent on the consent form that will be provided to you. Data will be deleted by August 2023.

What happens next? Please discuss the information above with others or ask the researchers if you would like more information. You can keep this information sheet to look at whenever you need to. If you decide to take part, you will need to give consent (on a written form) before you do the interview.

Researchers contact details

Name of Doctoral Student and UCL email - xxxx@ucl.ac.uk

Name of Doctoral Student and UCL email - xxxx@ucl.ac.uk

XXX (Research Supervisor): XXX @ XXX

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research project.

Privacy Notice

This note is to outline what we do with the information that you share with us as part of this project and your rights regarding our use of that information. These rights are as set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which takes over from the Data Protection Act in May 2018

This research project will hold the following data on you:

1. Here you need to outline any data you will hold about that individual (personal data – name, age, address), consent forms, questionnaire data, and anything else.

Under the "General Data Protection Regulation" you have rights with regard to your personal data, including:

- The right to know who is using your information.
- The right to understand what information is being collected and how it is being used.
- The right to correct incorrect records
- The right to request that data is removed/deleted
- The right to request that data be held but not used unless necessary
- The right to a copy of your data in a useable format

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families is collecting and processing the data from this project. We will not be moving any information, outside the EU and will ensure that it remains safe at all times.

We will look after the data for a period of 6 months until they are pseudonymised by the end of the project in August 2023. After this period, data will be securely destroyed. If you have any worries or questions about our research, the data processing, or your involvement in the project please contact:

Clinical Research Tutor & Supervisor:
XXX, PhD, email: XXX

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, & School of Life and Medical Sciences, Faculty of Brain Sciences, Division of Psychology and Language Sciences, UCL

Appendix II

Consent Form

Project title: Challenges and Information Sharing during the adoption matching process: Social Workers' Role and Perspectives

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation that was already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

By signing this form, you are agreeing that:

- You are happy to take part in the study
- You understand that we will use your responses to questions to inform doctoral research projects. This will be read by people outside of this research; however, no information will be used to identify you or any family you worked with.

Please initial each box if you agree with the statement:

1. I have read the notes written above and the information sheet and understand what this project involves. ☐
2. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. ☐
3. I consent to my interview being audio recorded and understand that the recordings will be stored anonymously, using password-protected software, and will be used for training, quality control, audit and specific research purposes. ☐
4. To note: If you do not want your participation recorded you can still take part in the study. ☐
5. I consent to the processing/use of my personal information for the purposes of this research project. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation. ☐
6. I understand that it will not be possible to identify me in any publications. All data gathered in the study will be stored anonymously and securely. ☐
7. I agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in this study. ☐

Participant Name	Signature	Date
Researcher	Signature	Date
Researcher	Signature	Date
Supervisor: Dr XX	Ethics number: 0389 049	

Appendix III

Interview schedule

Warm-up

Explain a little about being interested in hearing their perspectives and experiences from working in the adoption field as it seems that what social workers say/think about their role in the matching process and information sharing is missing from current research.

We have done some initial analyses of data coming from adoption matches made in Northamptonshire during the period of April 2003-April 2005; preliminary results showed some interesting aspects of matching and information sharing so we thought it would be interesting to hear your views/thoughts on them.

We are going to start with some generic questions, we will then think more about the matching process and then move on to information sharing. Sometimes particular cases might come to mind that might help illustrate your thoughts and we would be interested in hearing about these. Please be assured that the details will all be anonymised.

If there are any questions that you don't feel comfortable answering, please do just let us know.

How long have you been working as a Social Worker in the adoption field?

PROMPT*:* When did you qualify, and where have you worked? How long in adoption? How long within this particular team?

Could you tell us a little bit about the set-up of the team you are working in now, and your particular role within the team?

Part A: Matching

In the first part of this interview, we are interested in getting your views and experiences of your role during the adoption matching process between a child to prospective parents

1. What do you have to take into account when considering a parent-child match?
2. How do you understand your role during the matching process?

   PROMPT*:* Do you find your role changing in different cases? Has this role changed since you started working in the adoption field?)
3. Preliminary findings from the data we mentioned above suggest a positive link between social workers' original confidence in the match with placement stability/success. We would be interested to hear whether this fits with your experience.

4. Can you think of a particular time when you felt things worked well during a matching process?

PROMPT: What do you think helped? Why do you think it worked well?

PROMPT: I wonder whether other things work well from your point of view in the matching process?

5. Can you think of a particular time when a matching process was very challenging for you?

PROMPT: What happened, how did you manage?

PROMPT: I wonder whether there are any other major challenges that you have had to manage during a matching process?

6. Tell me a bit about the emotional challenges of decision-making during the matching process considering especially the context of tight timeframes in adoption.

PROMPT: Is there anything you can think can be done differently in terms of practice?

Part B: Information sharing

In the second part of this interview, we would like to get an understanding of your experience with sharing information about children and their history with adoptive parents.

Preliminary findings from the data suggest a link between some of the factors about the child and their background and the placement stability or success of the placement (such as the number of prior placements if the child has been harmed by parents, and behaviour problems). By stability, I'm thinking about whether there are serious challenges for families within the adoption placement rather than just placement breakdown.

1. From your experience, what do you think are the significant factors that can impact the stability of the placement?
2. We are interested to understand whether and how these "risk factors" are communicated to adoptive parents?

   PROMPT: Are there aspects of the child's history you would always share? What are these? Any you might not share?

3. Can you tell us about information sharing with the prospective adopters in your team/ when you were in the team?

PROMPT: Whose role is it? How do you share this information? Is there a particular time in the adoption process?

4. Are there ever/other things that get in the way of being able to share all of the information? (e.g. challenges as a profession/ in the adoption process/ system that you face?)
5. Can you tell us about a time when it has been challenging/ difficult for you to share this information/ information about a child's history?

   PROMPT: What do you think made it difficult? What do you think the major challenges are in sharing the information? Why might it be hard to share the right information?

6. A recent survey by adoption UK in 2019 found 27% of parents felt the information shared was not thorough or factually correct. I wondered if you had any sense of why it might be that adoptive parents feel like that?

   PROMPT: examples? time, difficult information as professionals to read, carers not understanding the information

7. Can you think of a time when the parents might have felt that they didn't have enough or the right information? and this having had an impact on the placement?

Closing

Is there anything else that we've not covered that you feel would be useful to share?

Thank you for taking part!

Appendix IV

Example of annotated transcript

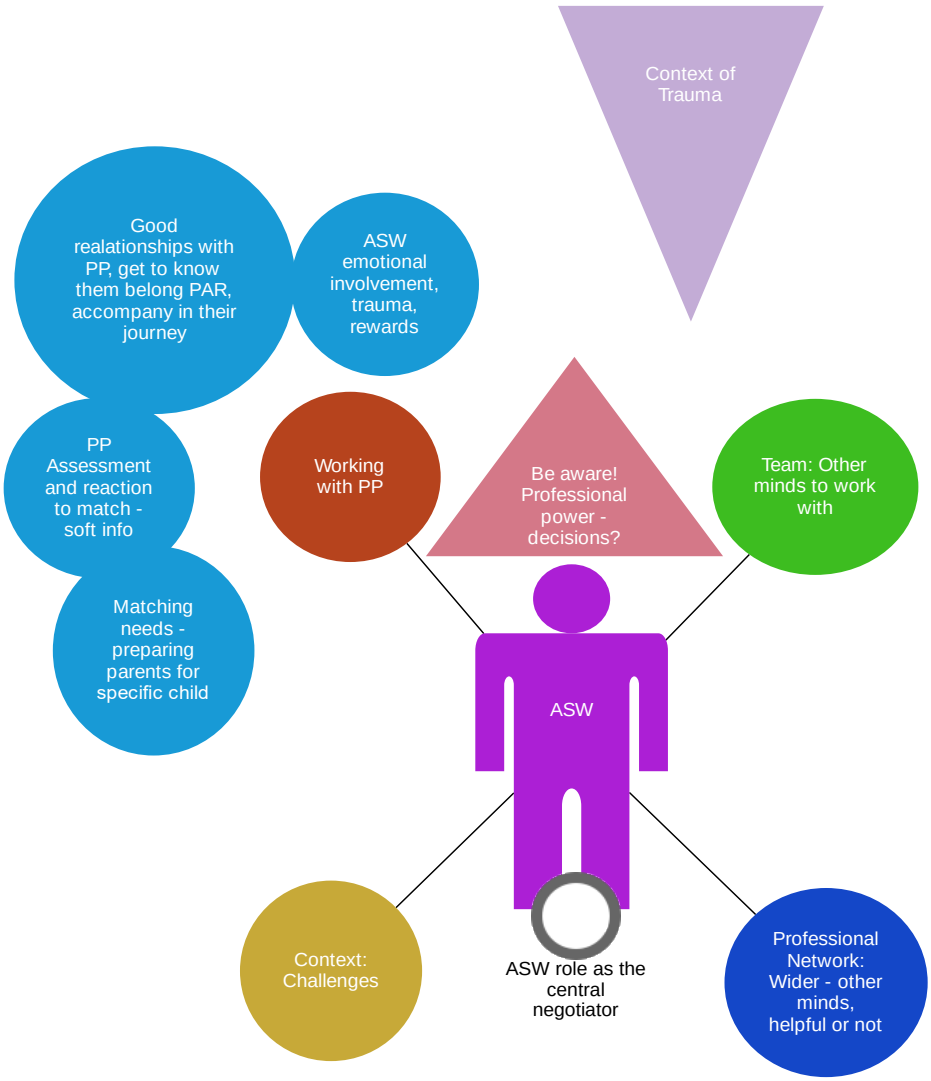
	SW1:	
131	Being a child social worker and a parent social worker is different,	Child comes first for parent social worker
132	and it isn't....because, ultimately, the child comes first, so I am	
133	supporting my parents. So, my role now is very heavy in terms of	Supporting and listening
134	parents' support, you know, I really spend a lot of time	
135	listening, umm... And you know I guess it's that... yeah...	
136	SW 1: yeah so.... [exhales]	
137	It's not necessarily about offering them tools, it's, I think it's about	Accepting when prospective parents find things difficult, showing them empathy
138	that kind of that acceptance about how difficult things can be	
139	sometimes and that empathy for that and... Just just being with,	Being alongside prospective parents, being with them
140	being alongside them, you know, which is really important?	
141	But I think that, in terms of all the decisions and all the things I do,	Decisions and all is about the child first
142	it's always about the child first, so....	
143	I'm really sorry [disruption of few seconds due to noise from guinea	
144	pigs in the room]...	
145	Ummm. And then, other than that, my role now, I would say is	Building good trusting relationships
146	about building trust and good and good relationships with people.	Need for transparency with prospective adopters
147	It's about, and about transparency and it's about the support that	Support
148	you give people. Because that carries them the whole way through.	Building good trusting relationships for the journey
149	You've got to establish really good relationships with people,	Prospective adopters feeling trust and safe to say that they feel shit
150	people need to feel that when they're in you know dire straits, that	
151	they can call you and say I feel really shit. And I don't like them at	
152	the moment, I feel... you know, they did this to me, and I feel like	Prospective adopters feeling supported by safe space to verbalise painful

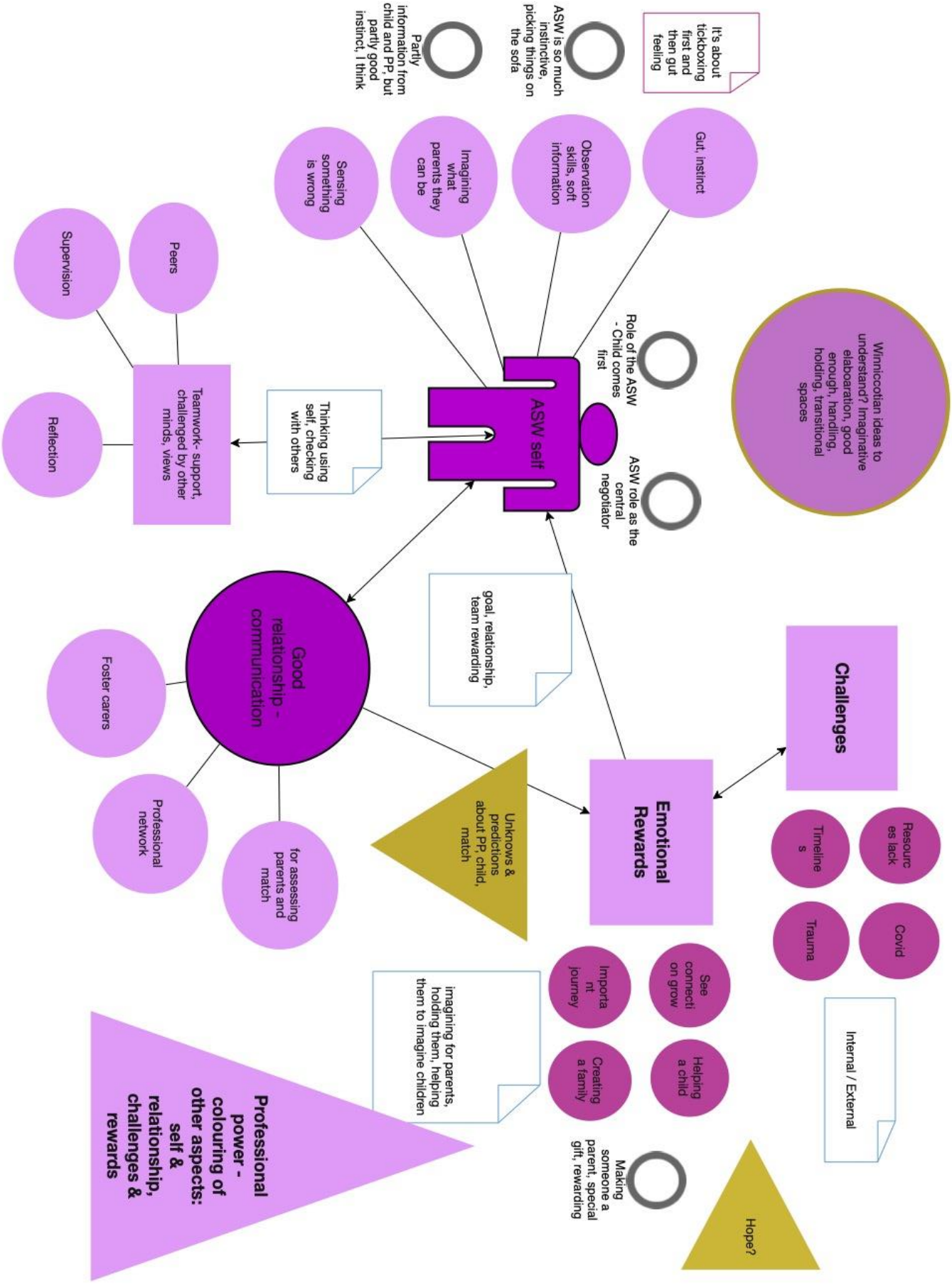
153 154 155 156 157 158 159	this, they don' want to you know you don't. To be able to verbalize things that are really deep, and you know horrible feelings. You need to feel that you can do that in a really safe space, so I think it's really important to...So, yeah, I just think my role is about building strong relationships with people where they feel that they can actually tell me the things that really hurt the most.	feelings in relation to the child

Appendix V

Concept Maps

Examples of Concept Maps at different phases of data analysis created with NVivo 1.4.1 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 1999-2021). The final Thematic Map depicting the captured Themes and Subthemes is sided in the results section of the research.




It's about tickboxing first and then gut feeling
Gut, instinct
ASW is so much instinctive, picking things on the sofa
Observation skills, soft information
Partly information from child and PP, but partly good instinct, I think
Imagining what parents they can be
Sensing something is wrong
Winniccotian ideas to understand? Imaginative elaboaration, good enough, handling, holding, transitional spaces
Role of the ASW - Child comes first
ASW role as the central negotiator
ASW self
Thinking using self, checking with others
Supervision
Peers
Reflection
Teamwork- support, challenged by other minds, views
goal, relationship, team rewarding
Good relationship - communication
Foster carers
Professional network
for assessing parents and match
Unknows & predictions about PP, child, match
Challenges
Emotional Rewards
Resources lack
Covid
Timelines
Trauma
Internal / External
See connection grow
Important journey
Helping a child
Creating a family
Making someone a parent, special gift, rewarding
Hope?
imagining for parents, holding them, helping them to imagine children
Professional power - colouring of other aspects: self & relationship, challenges & rewards

Appendix VI

Example of an audit trail in the form of codebook for Step 3 of Phase 4 of data analysis generated by NVivo 1.4.1 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 1999-2021).

Codes\\Phase 4 Developing and Reviewing Themes\\Step 3 Developing Themes\\Role of the social worker code

Name	Description	Files	References
A. Relationship			
11. Good relationship - listen, support, trust, safety to say the horrible things	Adoption SW offering ongoing therapeutic support beyond adoption order Adoption SW working with families long term Adoptive SW offering support which feels a combination of SW and therapeutic support Adoptive SW's role – not working closely with children, focus on parents ASW being humane and helping parents know that everyone will be doing mistakes Good relationship with PP becoming hard when things get difficult Important to support the adopter's network to understand what children's needs are Accepting when prospective parents find things difficult, showing them empathy Not exactly like offering them tools Spending lots of time listening to prospective parents Building good trusting relationships Feeling responsible for adoptive adults Need for transparency with parents Prospective adopters feeling able to verbalize horrible feelings about the child Prospective adopters feeling trust and safe to say that they feel shit SW support is always ongoing	4	25
18. Keeping the hope	ASW believing in the match and sharing this hope Need, hope, last chance SW holding the hope so that parents can also hold hope, believe that they can do something helpful for these children	1	3
5. ASW holding, handling to prepare emotionally PP	ASW managing the practicalities, timescales so PP do not worry ASW trying to be one step ahead to prepare PP of reality of living with child, ups and downs Handling PP practically, holding emotionally, joy and	2	16

Name	Description	Files	References
	disappointments ASW checking in with PP in every step		
7. Supporting PP through their emotional journey, managing up and downs	Accompanying PP to their emotional journey ASW helping PP manage their ups and downs PP emotional journey highly charged Role of adoptive SW – being alongside PP	3	14
8. Managing unknowns, speculations and predictions	Adoptive SW role to also make predictions - difficult ASW assessing whether PP can manage uncertainty, Unknowns ASW not sure what child would suit PP, uncertainty Child's behaviour not known before - unknowns Human led, so many variables and unknowns Many unknowns in child's history - predictions Not the whole story for a child Occasions where the needs of the child are not well-known Speculations, imagining, going beyond the written info	4	22
Good matching is about open communication		3	4
B. Matching			
1. Matching - Soft information, gauging, observing, instinct, gut	ASW feeling, imagining, a match is good - confidence, physical appearance and fit ASW imagining whether a child would fit, knowing their PP ASW is so much instinctive, picking things on the sofa - Using observations and own feelings to understand what's happening Confidence, tick box and soft info, checking Partly information from child and PP, but partly good instinct, I think Soft information, gauging and professional power to make decisions	3	35
14. Matching child's and parent's needs, knowns, and unknowns	A good match is not going to work if child's and PP needs are not well known, understood ASW would feel worried about making a match they don't feel confident about ASW wouldn't not make a match if they did	4	37

Name	Description	Files	References
	not feel confident about it As many similarities as possible in match child and PP, to be right Assessing-matching needs Assessment of PP must be very thorough especially in terms of the match Narrative of the child too triggering for adopters Assessment of Prospective adopters- particular parent with particular child Adopters- sense-making of the narrative of the child Sitting with, making sense with the narrative of the child ASW discussing match with child SW, professional network ASW role to match child's needs with what is known about PP Bringing together CPR and PAR to see if this child, adopters' dyad could be a good match Discussing matching, similarities between child and PP Discussing particular's child's needs in relation to parents identified needs Having concerns about child story too close to home to prospective adopters' background wouldn't rule in or out necessarily Knowing the child through info, photos, not working directly Matching as an area that is sometimes not given enough focus, things being overlooked Matching as part of the role of the ASW Really going into detail in comparing the CPR, PAR reports Really knowing the child's and PP needs, experiences and vulnerabilities can help a good match Role of adoptive SW – really familiarizing yourself with the background of the child		
16. Unfit match and saying no	Challenging PP about match if ASW feels it might not be for them Match that seems like a not good fit – sense of thinking not having really been though about Profound sense of unfitness in a match - must be wrong SWs saying No to unfit match When match	3	10

Name	Description	Files	References
	doesn't go well, huge emotional impact		
3. Preparing PP for specific children, information helping PP imagine	A. Giving PP loads of information to prepare them: Assessing SW preparing and supporting prospective parents on what children's traumatic background means ASW thinking about children being hypervigilant because of the trauma Helping PP understand child beyond written info Preparing PP with all the info for the child Wanting to help parents be prepared but worried that if they get too overwhelmed, they might say no to adoption B. Hard to imagine for PP how it will be living with these children: Experience of living with trauma in your house, hard to imagine for some PP, or what this will trigger for them Hard for PP imagine how it will feel like before they experience living with these children Helping PP to think how having a child as part of their lives How to prepare PP about how difficult it will FEEL PP feeling overwhelmed by info and not being able to believe, take in what they hear PP having to survive extreme states with these traumatized children – violence, rejection, extreme behaviours Preparing PP to imagine how living with these children in their home will be Really thinking of how being an adoptive parent of these traumatized children would feel like To help parents imagine what these behaviours that are known might look like in everyday life, how things related to children's past might be played out with PP so that they can feel ready C. PP capacity to think about the child beforehand: Assessing PP's capacity to think about the child before meeting them PP able to fantasize about having the child - mentally having the child in their home	4	45

Name	Description	Files	References
	PP initial attachment to child prior to meeting them, they have worked it out PP pushing through in challenges - able to mentalize for child, attachment D. Challenge, ups and downs ASW preparing PP about the highs and lows, the extreme difficulties of adoption at the beginning Challenging PP to prepare them Things not being black and white – more complicated E. Mentalizing - Sharing info in CPR but also going beyond written information Assessment beyond paperwork - helping PP start thinking about child ASW and Child SW working together to help parents think about things Helping PP understand their internal world Encouraging PP to really remember and understand info about child, CPR Helping parents to think about child's specific needs in terms of own history Sharing beyond the report – speculating on how things were for child to help parents think through things child SW reading beyond the lines, imagines, putting their experience to work, imagining, using gut feelings		
4. Initial Match - connection	Initial connection very important, not scientific Initial connection, the something more btw PP-child vital Initial connections to the child good and healthy Initial connections, strong positive feelings to the child sometimes getting on the way of taking in info about the difficulties Lack of initial connection of PP to child, breakdown. PP not sure about what child would suit them till they see profile, imagining the baby, gestation period	4	60
4A. Checking Initial reactions of PP to match, encouraging honesty	ASW giving opportunity to PP to be honest about if connection to child ASW not considering the quality of PP-child initial connection ASW observing reactions to initial match suggestion, soft information ASW saying no to PP, holding them back even though initial connection	4	28

Name	Description	Files	References
	Encouraging PP to be honest about their feelings for match If just love was enough PP start building connection from before meeting child Sensing PP's reaction to match - good or wrong		
4B. Initial fit as good predictor, more important than box ticking.	Initial connection very important, not scientific Initial connection, something more btw PP-child vital Initial connections to the child good and healthy Initial connections, strong positive feelings to the child sometimes getting on the way of taking in info about the difficulties Lack of initial connection of PP to child, breakdown PP not sure about what child would suit them till they see profile, imagining the baby, gestation period PP initial connection, attachment to child more important than tick box	3	22
4C. Initial fit, meant to be	Initial connection important, sense of a family Initial connection to child upon match because of similarity, connection Meant to be, something that cannot be voiced PP seeing physical similarities on the child upon matching when seeing the profile picture Sometimes it just fits - physical appearance and habits, meant to be	4	10
ASW role as the central negotiator		1	2
C. Assessing and getting to know parents			
12. PP own history, reward, and challenges in assessment	Adopters' PP own history Honesty from PP in assessment Parent not going where child is, wanting specific child Thinking about where PP come from to adoption PP experience assessment as very positive or very intrusive	4	63

Name	Description	Files	References
13. Skills in assessment, honest	ASW explaining how assessment will be to PP from day one Skills in assessment of PP - being open and truthful	1	2
15. Assessing or preparing biological children	Assessment of PP through biological children Preparing PP and biological children about what's coming, not 9 months	1	6
2. Getting to really know PP beyond PAR, soft info	Assessment of PP beyond the form - understanding how they think about child ASW is so much instinctive, picking things on the sofa Using observations and own feelings to understand what's happening Getting to know PP beyond hard information on paper, PAR Getting to know PP, identifying with their hopes, dreams, strengths Good relationship with PP to know how they will manage Good relationship with PP to know what would suit them How will Prospective adopters manage difficulties without support PAR –	4	41
9. Assessment of PP - info on practice	info on practice Practicalities, panel, procedures. Assessment of prospective parents informing the needs and areas of vulnerability	4	20
D. Emotional tasks			
6. Child comes first	Knowing about child story crucial to creating identity What is right for the child guiding SW's decision	3	3
ASW job about finding a family		1	1
E. ASW emotional involvement	ASW Bearing Trauma coming from everywhere: Bearing Trauma in Adoption and hold on to hope - having to hold, digest, think and communicate the unthinkable trauma coming from both child's and adult's history. Just get on with trauma, nothing protective Bearing to think, hold, digest the unthinkable ASW identifying with PPs: Getting to know PP, identifying with their hopes, dreams,	4	52

Name	Description	Files	References
	strengths but also getting pulled into not thinking objectively ASW own history experiences and biases: ASW coming into the field for own reasons, Using their own experiences and emotions to understand and help PP but also having to check their own biases Feeling strong, difficult emotions on the journey Helping create new families very rewarding: Seeing new family's connections growing, very rewarding, giving parents a child, making someone a parent unique		