

Adopting Minds: Working with the Internal, Family and Systemic (IFS) issues in adoption

Sally Wood and Fiona Tasker

Affiliations

Dr Sally Wood

c/o Dept of Psychological Sciences
Birkbeck University of London
Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX
Independent Consultant Family Therapist
email:sallybwood@btinternet.com

Dr Fiona Tasker

Reader in Psychology
c/o Dept of Psychological Sciences
Birkbeck University of London
Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX
email: f.tasker@bbk.ac.uk
<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/psychology/our-staff/fiona-tasker>
preferred pronouns: she her hers

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Introduction

Professionals working with adoptive families frequently find themselves addressing issues that arise from the relational challenges facing those families (Mooradian *et al*, 2011). Understanding the nature of family processes is critical in enabling the development of effective support for both adopters and the children they adopt. In so doing, it increases the likelihood of stable and secure placements that meet the needs of the child and the hopes and expectations of adopter/s (Selwyn *et al*, 2014). Adoption in the UK primarily focuses on children aged under five who are in local authority care as a result of abuse and neglect, where they cannot safely return to their birth parents or other family members. Adoption marks a new start for children who need a ‘forever family’, but this typically results in the experience of separation and loss for the child, whether this is from family members or foster carers (Boswell and Cudmore, 2014). Adoptive parents are often encouraged to get into a new routine quickly (Selwyn *et al*, 2014) and allow their child or children to settle in with them before meeting the wider adoptive family (Tasker and Wood, 2016).

There are a wide range of motivating factors that will influence prospective adoptive parent/s when deciding to take the first step towards adoption. How these factors are influenced is a very gradual and individual process, as prospective adopters become more familiar with the detail of adoption and specifically those children who need to be adopted. Exploring this process needs both time and resources. Following approval, there will also be the impact of the reality of the placement of an individual child or children and the impact this may have on the adopter/s experiences and expectations. Very little research has focused on the detail and process that underlies this. However, the anxieties that might accompany being a “super-parent”, or other beliefs and expectations prior to a child being placed, are common. As with the typical route to having a child, the reality of the arrival of the child must be acknowledged as a combination of the joy and excitement the child brings, as well as potentially creating a range of risk and stress factors and questions about whether this was the right thing for the adopters to do (Foli *et al*, 2017). Many other issues may then arise over time, as the adopter/s get to know the child and the child gets to know them. One aspect of this may include the arrangements to facilitate contact between the child and their birth family, whether this is through direct or indirect forms of contact (Jones and Hackett, 2012). Maintaining contact and establishing some form of relationship with birth family members can be complicated, and especially so when this includes relationships between full, half, and step-siblings (Monk and Macvarish, 2019).

In this paper, we put forward a framework for working with the Internal, Family and Systemic (IFS) issues in adoption, for thinking about the transitions to adoptive parenthood. Our framework, grounded in a systemic perspective, recognises the complex and dynamic interplay of the intrapsychic and interpersonal forces that impact upon prospective adopters, the child, their extended family systems, and the professionals who are involved in the process. One of the most enduring contributions of systemic theory has been the view that wherever individuals are faced with resolving challenging issues, the primary focus should be on the interpersonal as opposed to the individual, therefore avoiding potentially “fault-finding” approaches (Dallos and Draper, 2015). Thus, systemic thinking offers the possibility of a compassionate view of interpersonal experience in the context of a

supportive/problem-solving relationship. However, it is also important to note that this systemic framework has been criticised for ignoring the internal world of the individual child or adult (Tickle and Rennoldson, 2016). In developing a model that integrates both psychodynamic and systemic factors, we want to maximise the opportunities that can result in providing more effective support to adoptive families.

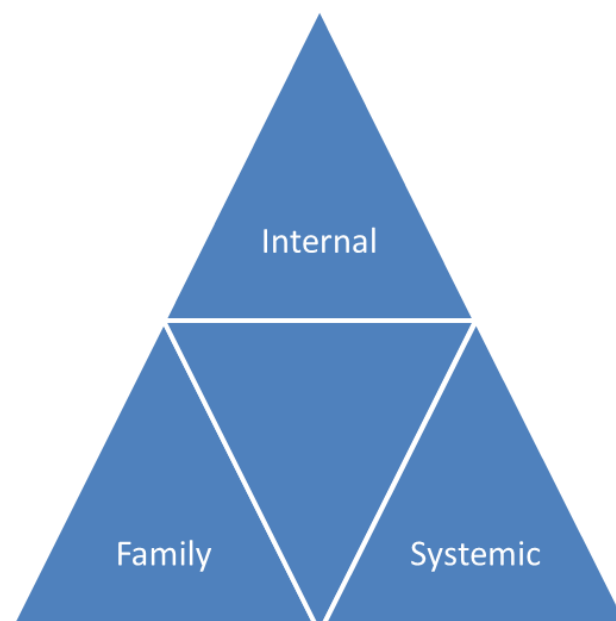
The IFS Framework

The Framework is made up of three factors (see Figure 1):

- First, there is the internal world – what is going on in the mind of the individual, thoughts and feelings and in turn, how this determines behaviour
- Second, there are family factors – what influences how the family forms its relational world and manages the wide range of issues that are a part of family life from the intimate and personal to the practical.
- Third, there is the systemic context of community and the beliefs, expectations and requirements that are associated with this and that determine both individual and family life.

The IFS framework is designed to be an aide-memoire to help adoption social workers support adoptive parents prior to and during the placement of the child/ren. It acknowledges the importance of the thoughts and feelings that are present in an individual's mind, what happens when individuals communicate and interact with each other, and the impact that this has in the context of learning about adoption, being assessed as an adopter, a child being placed for adoption and all that follows this. The processes that drive this are complex, drawing on experiences from the past, the issues to be addressed in the present and the anticipation of the future. In the briefing that follows, we explore the considerable challenges for adopted children arriving into a new family, and the adjustments and adaptations that those parents have to make to encompass the reality of adoptive family life.

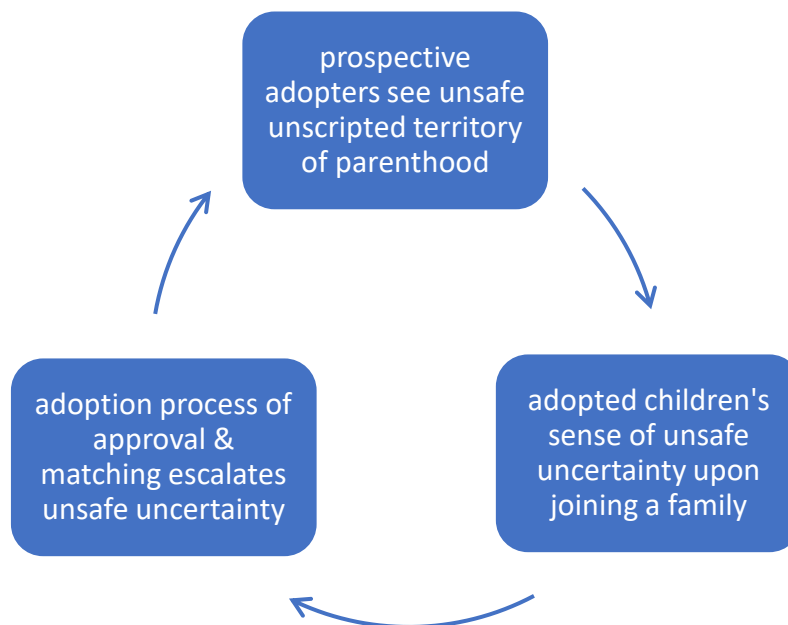
Figure 1: The IFS Framework



Plunging into parenthood: adoption as an experience of “unsafe uncertainty”

Mason’s (1993) concept of “safe uncertainty” provides a helpful perspective when exploring the issues faced by adoptive parents before and following the placement of a child. Mason’s concept originates from his observations of families starting psychotherapy, where they can feel extremely anxious, resulting from the issues that they are struggling with and the troubling feelings this stirs up (unsafe certainty). This is then followed by the challenging process of finding workable and acceptable solutions to those problems (unsafe uncertainty). Mason argues that in addressing complex individual and family issues, the optimal way forward is to move to a position of safe uncertainty: feeling safe enough to meet the challenge through being supported by professionals or others, and being open to improvising and exploring the possibilities wrapped up within the uncertainty. In Figure 2, we show how adoption can be positioned within Mason’s cycle of unsafe uncertainty.

Figure 2: Adoption as a cycle of “safe uncertainty”



The uncertainty faced by adoptive parents and their newly placed children is encapsulated in the question: what will family life be like – can we cope, and have we done the right thing? Both the adoptive parent/s and the child in their own way will hope for the best, but may fear the worst. How this will be experienced will vary from individual to individual as they have come to make sense of the world around them, including those issues that are unresolved or that make little sense – and age and experience will be important parts of what influences this. There may be high-stake hopes, but also fears of it all going wrong. Emotions can veer from exhilarating excitement through to a disturbing sense of danger. These powerful feelings can, in turn, overwhelm a more thoughtful and thorough exploration of the issues and potential solutions available to them. One of the most critical factors in managing this is the availability of support, and particularly for the capacity of adoption support

workers to co-create with adopters a “safe space” for exploring the detail of these challenges.

Where the adoption process creates the feeling of “unsafe uncertainty”, this can result in heightened emotions and stress. These feelings may also impact on other people, including professionals. In the development of a working, supportive relationship, finding a way of appropriately recognising these heightened and conflicting emotions, however challenging and unresolved they may be, can help to create an important sense of being “held in the mind of another person”, in a similar way to that of being physically held in the arms of another person. Fonagy and Target’s (2006) mentalisation-based therapy focuses on providing an enquiring, thoughtful, respectful and open-minded approach to help individuals or families to think through each other’s experiences, thoughts, feelings and points of view (Midgely *et al*, 2018). We propose a similar reflective approach both before, during and after the placement of a child.

The internal worlds of the adopted child and adoptive parent/s

At the point at which a child is matched with their prospective adopters, the state of mind of the parent/s-to-be meets with the mind of the child. For many adopted children, their subjective, inner world has been disrupted by separation, loss, neglect and abusive experiences. How this comes to influence the development of their inner world and in turn, their response to adults who plan to become their parent/s is complex. It is likely to be strongly influenced, by the fear, anxiety and avoidance that results from their direct experience of family life but also their capacity to re-learn as a result of new experiences.

Adopters also bring their own life experiences as these have become represented in their minds. These will influence their expectations of family life, and this is likely to have been explored throughout the various stages of the adoption process – sometimes explicitly, and sometimes simply glimpsed by professionals as part of the general presenting background. The internal worlds of parents-to-be are likely to be focused upon the much “longed-for child” that has evolved over a number of years. For prospective heterosexual adoptive parents, especially for those who have been unable to conceive birth children, there is likely to be a strong sense of “unsafe uncertainty” concerning the possibility of them ever becoming parents, perhaps after having had their hopes repeatedly dashed previously through infertility and repeated experiences with assisted reproductive treatments (Tasker and Wood, 2016). About three-quarters of the adoptive parents interviewed by Selwyn and colleagues said that they chose to adopt after experiencing fertility problems (Selwyn *et al*, 2014).

The anticipation of parenthood is likely to be formed through a different process for many LGBTQ would-be adoptive parents. In the Cambridge Adoption Study (CAS), gay male couples were far less likely than heterosexual couples to have seriously considered or tried to have a child via assisted reproductive technology (egg donation and surrogacy) prior to adoption (Mellish *et al*, 2013). However, around one-third of the lesbian couples in that study had previously tried to have a child via donor insemination. For LGBTQ individuals who chose adoption as their route to parenthood, uncertainty and anxiety were also evident when weighing up the possibility of experiencing discrimination and stigma along their journey through the

adoption process (Costa and Tasker, 2018; Wood, 2016). LGBTQ prospective parents usually carefully consider the likelihood of future children experiencing prejudice in their local neighbourhood or at school because of their family background (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016). Some of the LGBTQ prospective parents in Bergstrom-Lynch's study also contended with their own internalised homophobia: additional niggling but insidious doubts about their ability to parent outside of a heterosexual relationship.

In our study, six heterosexual adoptive couples were first interviewed upon being matched with a child or sibling group, and then re-interviewed six months after placement (Tasker and Wood, 2016). We found that initial feelings of “unsafe uncertainty” could be exacerbated by aspects of the adoption process itself. The couples were concerned that their desire to parent would not be realised because they could fail at any point in the adoption process: Would they be approved? If they were approved, would social workers find a child for them, given the number of eligible people wanting to adopt? Would the panel approve their match with the child? What would they think and feel when they met the child or children? What would they think and feel when a child or children were then placed? Would they be up to the challenge of parenting? During this intense period of assessment and placement, it is also important to acknowledge that the child's social worker and the adoptive parent/s social worker also bring their own thoughts and feelings as they work with the child and adoptive parents-to-be.

Children who have adoption as their agreed plan are very likely to have been taken into local authority care because of abuse and neglect. Their first experiences of “family” are likely to have been disturbing and damaging (Brinich, 1990). For example, Lindsey and Barrett poignantly described the changed meaning ‘of everyday concepts such as mother and father, daughter and son’ (Lindsey and Barrett, 2006, p.14). Children learn to distrust their parents and become fearful of their behaviour, and experience the absence of child-focused and child-sensitive responses. As a result, it will take time and experience before they can respond to their adoptive parent/s as people whose sensitivity and behaviour can be relied upon.

For adoptive parents, the experience of being treated with suspicion and distrust by newly placed children can be challenging. The emotional realities of abuse, neglect and abandonment experienced by many of the children who are placed for adoption are almost unthinkably painful. The contribution that therapists and social workers can make to helping adoptive families address the painful and disturbing thoughts and feelings cannot be underestimated, and needs to be explicitly recognised in every placement plan (Cooper, 2008).

Family factors

The transition to adoptive parenthood presents several intergenerational challenges that often do not receive the attention they need (McGoldrick *et al*, 2016). Firstly, there is the challenge of adding new family members (adopted children with their own prior family history) into their adoptive parents' existing set of family histories, which will be changed by the presence and inclusion of a new child or children. This will include the connected issue of forming a new family identity. Secondly, there are

the moment-to-moment challenges of family interaction involving care, concern, and responsibility that form the templates that create meaningful patterns and expectations of everyday family life (family scripts).

Family histories

Both the adoptive parent/s and their child/ren come together with differing intergenerational backgrounds. How these diverse family histories become integrated into a unified family tree is complex, given the varied meaningful narratives that both the adopted child and their new parents have developed over time. These issues have been identified in the importance of life story work for adopted children. The objective of such work is intended to provide the child/ren with a meaningful sense of their past, and particularly of their birth family and the reasons why they have been adopted. As important as this is, and indeed it is set out as a requirement in law, the construction and availability of life story work and life story books are often seen to be lacking in quality and availability. This probably reflects the professional challenge in working with children in a sensitive and helpful way, often with little support or training. But whatever might happen with life story work, the creation of meaningful narratives for each individual and for the family as a whole cannot be underestimated.

Over time, each family tree will grow with new people and new information added to its branches. Other branches may wither or be cut off as family history and circumstances change (Nicolson, 2017). Further, each strand of the narrative may contain gaps or discrepancies, and each of these may be kept more or less secret, articulated or celebrated. Re-telling these stories will indicate the ways in which a multicultural heritage evolves within the family as this becomes expressed through their identity, history and meaning (Torngren *et al*, 2018).

It is important to note that while family identity, history and meaning create a sense of stability and security, change is still inevitable. New experiences, challenges and opportunities happen – both those that might be anticipated or planned for and those that are not. Adoption is part of this. The standard route to having children is deeply embedded in basic biological processes in the context of the couple relationship. The belief is that this should be a stable and enduring relationship that facilitates both the pregnancy, the birth of the child and their development over time. At the same time, this standard model is often challenged by many possibilities – unplanned pregnancies, unstable relationships, health issues, premature births, and many others. The heightened expectations about having a baby and becoming parents can also be challenged by difficulties in feeding, sleepless nights, 24/7 care, and stress in the adult relationship, and the necessary adaptations and solutions that will be needed or discovered.

Most adults will not start with a plan to adopt, although that may emerge through infertility, an LGBTQ+ relationship, or being single. Adoption requires the identification of this as being a solution, followed by an exploration of what adoption might mean in reality: the children who have adoption as their plan, the processes in becoming approved, the reality of that experience, the issues from the past that are still present, the need to tell others – family, friends, employers, children, and the management of their positive and negative responses. How this is done, how to ensure that it is helpful and how to address the challenges that may result, create the

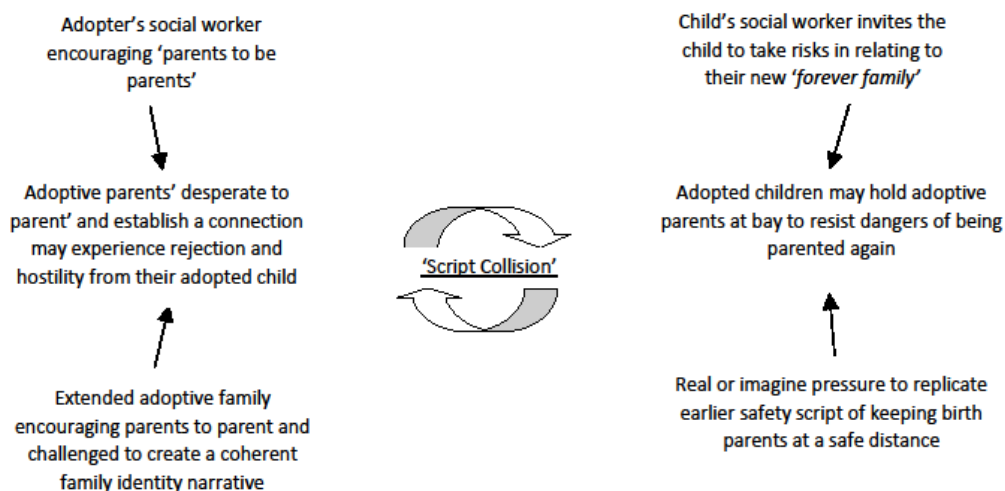
potential for both a new narrative that may be life-enhancing or life-challenging, with the consequences it may have for the family tree where it all started. And this may in itself be a fast-changing narrative, as different parts of the journey happen surprisingly quickly for adoptive parents, particularly with regards to the identification of named children who are then placed. This necessitates the rapid consideration of possibly very complicated birth family trees, including the different positions of any sibling relationships the adopted child may have.

Appreciating the amount of “wiggle room” in existing family narratives may help adoptive parents and their extended families to work in a new connection with the adopted child. What sort of kinship connections has the wider family been open to in the past? Some family trees may already contain adopted family members (Chater, 2011). Elsewhere, it may be useful to explore whether family members only recognise connection by blood or marital ties, or whether some family members have been more open to incorporating chosen family ties. Here, we suggest that it may be useful to encourage adoptive parents-to-be to draw their own family map to display a more flexible network than is usually depicted in a family tree format (<https://familymappingexercises.wordpress.com>). For example, networks of family relationships delineated by LGBTQ individuals may include “family of choice” members, and connections with those who are more than friends and have become family members (Tasker *et al*, 2020).

Family scripts

Family scripts are the often taken-for-granted templates of expectation and meaning giving recognition to the way families do things, and a rough guideline for showing close and caring family relationships through the conduct of family life (Byng-Hall, 1995). Family scripts enable interactions between family members and domestic life to run in a smooth and predictable fashion. However, while adoptive parents are likely to have gathered positive scripts of family interactions, children adopted from local authority care are more likely to have negative expectations of family life. Furthermore, adopted children may have well-developed family scripts designed to protect them from possible harm. Figure 3 shows the potential for cyclical family script collision between a parent and their adopted child.

Figure 3: Script collisions in adoption transition



In our initial interviews with heterosexual couples who were about to adopt, new adoptive parents-to-be were often keen to talk about the connections they hoped to make between the children, themselves and their own extended family (Tasker and Wood, 2016). Couples discussed how they would do some things the same, and some things differently, compared to their own parents. They also expressed concern about breaking the negative intergenerational cycles of the birth parents that might influence adopted children.

However, six months after placement, we found that some new adoptive parents struggled to parent effectively, as they became entangled in their adopted child's powerful intergenerational scripts of how family life worked or didn't work. These entangled family scripts were particularly evident when parents were also faced with the issues presented by siblings adopted together, who could, when distressed, activate negative or protective patterns of relating to each other and to their adoptive parents.

Furthermore, for some adoptive parents, attempts to establish a parental connection with their newly arrived children were not helped by tensions between adoptive parents and their own parents over how to manage the child's behaviour. Thus, it may be useful for adoption support workers to consider adoption preparation for extended family members too, so that they can support the new adoptive parents and children as family routines are established.

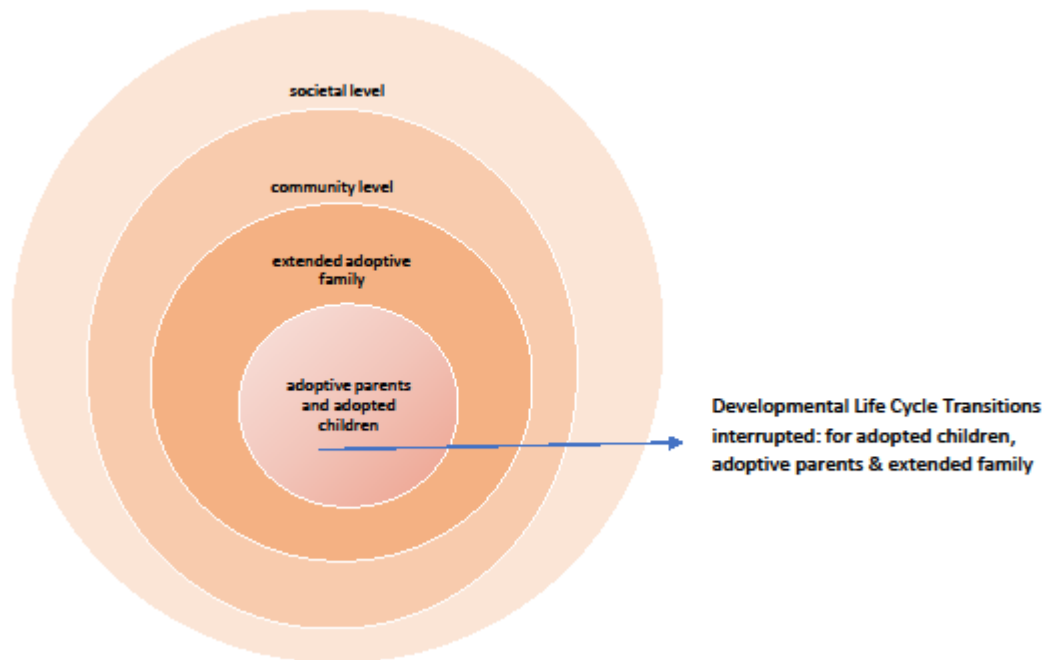
Systemic context

Adoptive parents have to navigate through the systemic context of parenthood (the networks and social systems surrounding families with children). In thinking about adoptive families in systemic context, we have adapted McGoldrick, Garcia Preto and Carter's Multicontextual Life Cycle Framework to assist in thinking about the different contexts surrounding families and the challenges that these present (McGoldrick *et al*, 2015). In our adapted model of systemic challenges, we can see influences at a societal and community level concerning beliefs about parenthood and the role of services, including school, with which adopted children come into contact (see Figure 4 overleaf).

At a societal level, adoptive parents and their children may encounter a disbelief that they are members of the same family because of the typical assumption of a biological connection between parents and children. This can be exacerbated by visible differences between parents and their adopted children. Even though other people may not directly raise questions about this, adoptive parents may feel that they have to volunteer information about their child and adoption to explain or justify their parentage. In our previous study, one couple described feeling acutely conscious about what other people thought when they took their children out (Tasker and Wood, 2016). The feeling of being under public gaze can get in the way of feeling secure in the ordinariness of family life. This may be mirrored at the extended family level when wider family members struggle to recognise adopted children as being a part of the family. Furthermore, close friends and extended family may also struggle to support the adoptive parents in their adaptation to family life, when the

challenges presented by adoption seem far removed from their own memories of becoming birth parents.

Figure 4: Systemic challenges for the adoptive family



The multi-dimensional issues of heritage in relation to ethnicity and culture, and then other emerging factors such as sexual and gender identity, are issues that parents-to-be may have started to think about when preparing to apply to adopt. Furthermore, Sales (2018) has highlighted social class divisions between birth families (predominantly working-class) and (predominantly middle-class) adoptive parents who, in comparison to working-class parents, often effortlessly seem to offer an “ideal child-centred home environment”. Yet these class divisions also may be challenging for children and adoptive parents and their children to manage.

The varied provision and difficulties for children of Black, Asian or Mixed-Ethnicity within the foster care and adoption system have been critiqued (Kirton, 2014; 2016). Selwyn and colleagues (2010) have emphasised the distinction between ethnicity and a broader conceptualisation of culture and heritage, encompassing language, religion, festivals, community practices, and food (Selwyn *et al*, 2010). However, Selwyn and colleagues found that the demands of ethnic matching presented to adoptive parents were often challenging when trying to think through how they might address and accommodate the multiple needs of the child/ren placed. The family might need some time to develop and adapt over time to ensure that the child’s needs are explicitly thought through and acted upon, particularly in relation to the development of the sense of a meaningful identity and sense of connection. Adoption support services need to facilitate an ongoing open dialogue and engagement with issues of ethnicity and what this means to the developing child and young person over time (Harris, 2014; Simmonds, 2019).

Selwyn and colleagues have suggested that adoption support workers and adoptive-parents-to-be could together construct a tailored support plan regarding the child's cultural identity, which includes an acknowledgement of both ethnicity and cultural history alongside an awareness of the reality of racism, prejudice and discrimination. To develop multicultural competence in families, we suggest that it is important to include preparatory work with parents-to-be in exploring similarities and differences within the family in terms of ethnic and cultural heritage, and what they think these may come to mean for their adopted children. Divac and Heaphy devised a useful acronym to keep multicultural competence in mind with respect to Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Abilities, Culture, Class, Ethnicity and Sexuality (the Social GRRACCES) (Divac and Heaphy, 2005; Burnham, 2013).

Identifying how issues of multicultural similarity and difference have been addressed within the extended family network can be a helpful step in giving parents-to-be confidence in addressing problems that might arise after placement. For example, in a mixed race or mixed ethnicity family, parents and children may be particularly conscious of risks of racism and stigma and other associated matters. Identifying issues of multicultural similarity and difference might be addressed as an extension of the family mapping exercise described previously. Facilitating this discussion with parents-to-be can help to identify sources of support, not only within the extended adoptive family but also in various communities to identify various narratives and support to draw upon (Selwyn *et al*, 2010).

Coming to terms with the difference between the adoptive family and other families, and also differences within the adoptive family is likely to be an issue for LGBTQ adoptive parents. LGBTQ parents-to-be will have thought a lot about how to prepare themselves and in turn their child/ren when exploring and understanding the significance of their individual identities (Mellish *et al*, 2013). For adoption support workers, exploring these issues with parents-to-be is important and could include facilitating access to the experiences of adoptive families with linked or similar sets of experiences (see Brown *et al*, 2018; de Jong and Donnelly, 2015).

At the community level (in Figure 4), the awareness and assumptions of individual institutions and organisations, such as schools, health services, and community groups, may be more or less supportive of adoption and its wide-ranging connected issues. For example, neighbourhoods and communities may be more or less diverse and open, and in turn supportive of difference, including those related to adoption. This may be reflected in the ways that services such as day-care centres, nurseries, schools and leisure facilities are available and the ways in which they operate. These issues are equally relevant in relation to adoption services, where the quality and availability of support exists beyond individualised support services. Tasker and Wood's study identified that prior to being approved, adopters felt that they were about to take on a huge responsibility, with a mandate to "get it right" for children who had experienced significant adversity. For example, the experience of discussing children's profiles in group sessions with other would-be adoptive parents might result in couples feeling that they were a part of a "high-stakes competition", with the consequent stresses this could bring.

Making a case for the "best of what one has to offer" as prospective adopters, while simultaneously acknowledging the many uncertainties involved in parenting, is a

challenging demand for adoptive parents to encounter. The concept of “safe uncertainty” is especially important in addressing these complex issues. Uncertainty is “normal”: finding ways of putting uncertainty into words can be seen as the critical next step towards exploring workable solutions, which are the next. Nevertheless, the systemic challenges of adoptive parenting will inevitably re-introduce uncertainty, not only in the early stages, but also these may re-occur in varied forms at later points. Adopted children will continually enter new environments as they grow and develop, with a wide variety of new issues needing to be revisited (represented by the Developmental Life Cycle Transitions arrow in Figure 4). For example, Gorham (2006, p. 302), reflecting on her experience as a transracially adopted person, spoke about going ‘through school with racial impunity, mainly because I was oblivious to it. I hadn’t been primed to expect it by my parents, nor given means to defend against it’. She described how her parents ‘just loved me as their child, not as a colour that might be discriminated against’. Gorham’s experience highlights the importance of both preparing and supporting transracially adopted children and young people to find a way through these important and challenging life cycle transitions. A further example was described by some of the lesbian and gay adoptive parents in the Cambridge Adoption Study, who were already thinking ahead to their child’s transition to secondary school when children were likely to feel the need to explain their story to a whole new set of school friends (Mellish *et al*, 2013).

Case illustration: Working with future parents prior to adoption

It is important to look at how adopters can be helped to achieve a sense of confidence in their capacity to parent prior to having children with significant needs placed with them. The IFS approach has been helpful in preparing adoptive parents-to-be because it offers a framework for support work by keeping in mind the three areas of adoption complexity. The three basic concepts of IFS can help adopters to imagine and explore what may be going on in the adopted child’s mind, while also thinking through the family factors and systemic challenges that might contextualise their own dilemmas. In turn, the clarity achieved by working through the IFS of adoption can reduce the sense of “unsafe uncertainty” and hopefully replace it with a more helpful sense of “safe uncertainty”. In the following case example, we explore how John and Sue worked through their doubts and uncertainties prior to the arrival of six-year-old Amy, who was placed with them for adoption.

John and Sue had tried to have children themselves, but without success. The couple then tried various fertility treatments, and again this was not successful. Whilst attending their fertility appointments, Sue had spoken to her older sister (Joanne) and then her mother, who had both been supportive. Sue’s parents had encouraged Sue and John to try again with another round of treatment, but John and Sue felt that they could not do this. Joanne and her wife Katherine had been very supportive when Sue and John decided to explore adoption, and had introduced Sue to a friend of theirs (Abbie) who was herself adopted as a toddler. All of Sue’s family thought that Sue and John would be ideal parents, since they were great with Joanne and Katherine’s kids and often babysat their young niece and nephew. John’s family had always been more distant than Sue’s family and were completely taken aback by the news that John and Sue were planning to adopt. Nonetheless, John’s parents had slowly come around to the idea of an adopted grandchild.

Sue said, and John agreed, that they were “as confident as we could be” when the adoption assessment began, and they had been deeply moved when hearing about different children’s histories at profiling evenings. The couple were “thrilled to bits” when they were approved as adopters. However, as time ticked on, Sue and John became more concerned and uncertain that they would ever get to the “top of the pile” and have a child placed with them. Finally, they were informed that they had been matched with six-year-old Amy, who was a little older than they had envisaged and who had experienced significant abuse and neglect before she had been taken into care. Sue and John were initially delighted when it was agreed that Amy was going to be placed with them, and they quickly started to decorate their spare room in preparation for her arrival. However, Sue and John’s first meeting with Amy raised some concerns, when they experienced Amy as politely answering their questions but effectively blocking both Sue and John’s attempts to engage her in play. Amy clung nervously onto her foster carer’s hand, but also confidently bossed the foster carer around. John said that Amy had got her foster carer wrapped around her little finger, and listed all the fizzy drinks and unhealthy snacks Amy had been given during the introductory meeting.

During the pre-placement feedback session with Sally, Sue and John talked about their feelings about their meeting with Amy and the doubts that had arisen for them. The session proceeded with Sally acknowledging how difficult this must have been for the couple in experiencing the reality of a child in person, rather than what they had constructed in their imagination. This included questions about how they might develop their approach to parenting Amy and the challenges that they might be faced with when they needed to settle Amy following her separation from her foster carer. Sally explored the difficulty of addressing this conflicting and challenging set of issues as it involved each of them as individuals and in relation to each other: Sue, John and Amy, Sue and John as a couple, Amy and her foster carer, and all four of them together. Each of these relationships had created a range of thoughts and feelings in the minds of them as individuals, and then impacted upon their thoughts and feelings on their relationships with each other.

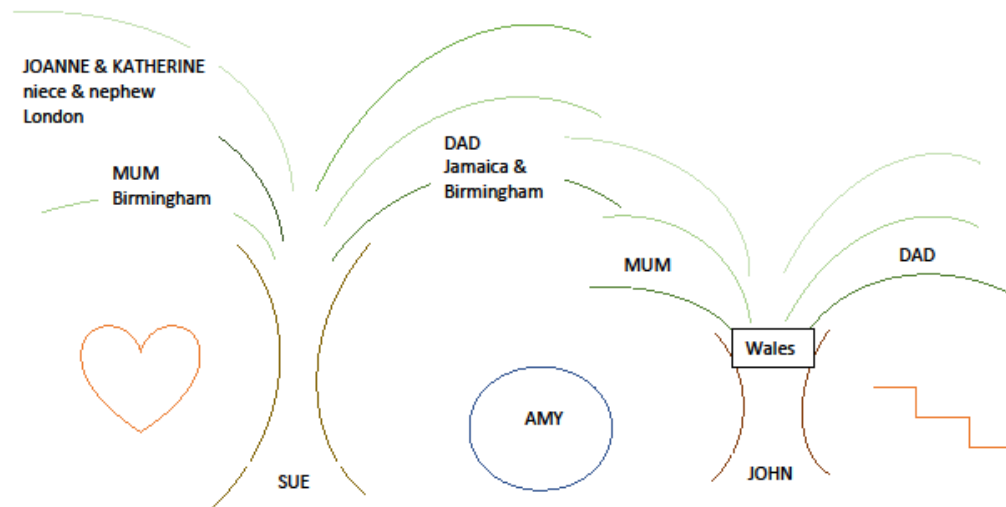
Sally said that she knew how committed Sue and John had been in taking the journey to adoption and the issues they had addressed along the way, including the stresses of not having a child through the “normal” route or IVF. Meeting Amy for the first time introduced a powerful reality check about the significance of what was about to happen. Sue said that Amy’s emotional reaction to leaving her foster carer and moving in with her and John left her feeling that she wanted to burst into tears. Sue then said she wanted to reach out and reassure Amy that everything was going to be alright but she couldn’t. Sue also wondered if she and John were “doing the right thing” in taking Amy away from her foster carer. John said he couldn’t understand Amy’s controlling response, given what they were offering her. He appreciated that Amy was upset, but thought Amy had a “funny way of showing it”. John then added that he thought that Amy needed a home with some discipline and structure to ensure that she ate proper meals and wasn’t just getting her own way all the time. Sally acknowledged that their individual but different responses were understandable and that they both needed their own space as well as time together to think about this.

Sally explored Amy's behaviour and what this might indicate about how she was feeling. Sally referred back to a previous discussion she had had before they knew about Amy and remembered that together they had carefully considered whether they could take on a child as old as Amy who might have a significant history of abuse. With Sally's help, the couple explored how Amy's feelings of vulnerability and anxiety might make her wary of Sue and John's attempts to get to know her. The couple came to understand that Amy's control of her foster carer might be linked to her anxiety about being separated from her foster carer, given the experiences she had had prior to coming into care. At the same time, there was a need to make sense of the information that they had gained from a meeting with the foster carer and Amy's social worker, in which Amy was described as a very quiet and obedient little girl whom the foster carer had found difficult to get to know. In discussing this, Amy's behaviour began to make sense to Sue and John when thinking that Amy, like other children who had suffered abuse, might usually seek to pass unnoticed to protect themselves, but then desperately try to take control when feeling unsure and anxious. Sue remembered that her sister Joanne's friend Abbie had told them that as an adopted teenager, she had sometimes had to work incredibly hard to stop herself from being overwhelmed by similar anxiety-driven control needs.

Sally then asked about Sue and John's family and whether they had any views on the introductory visit. Sue said that her mother had phoned up immediately after the meeting with Amy and had been very sympathetic, as well as helpful. Sue's mother had reminded her of how Sue's cousin had been very difficult to please when she came to stay with them, when Sue's aunt had had to go into hospital. However, Sue also said that her mother's phone call had come at the wrong moment, because she hadn't really had a chance to talk to John about how the meeting had gone. John said that he'd just left Sue to deal with her mother. When Sally asked whether John had spoken to either of his parents about meeting Amy, John said that he had called them later. John relayed that his parents had been sympathetic, and that his father had said that John and Sue would clearly "have their work cut out" with Amy.

Sally, Sue, and John then discussed the ways in which each set of parents had been supportive of the couple, and considered how these conversations represented the different ways in which Sue and John had been brought up. The couple then focused upon the messages they had come to value from their childhood, what they valued in each other, and the differences they each found difficult in respect of their in-laws. Sue said that she appreciated the practical, organised way in which John approached things, and John reciprocated by citing Sue's ability to show warmth and compassion. Sally then asked the couple to note this on the family tree that they had drawn in a previous session with her (see Figure 5). Sue drew a (warm) heart for her family and a series of (practical) steps for John's family next to the intertwining trees they had drawn previously. The couple then agreed that these were the strong factors rooted in both of their families that would help them in learning to manage Amy's challenging behaviour.

Figure 5: Sue and John's family map



Sally suggested that Sue and John explore the issues beyond those of their and their family's thoughts and feelings, particularly the issues of the adoption agency and the professionals involved in placing the child. Both Sue and John said that they were concerned that the challenges they faced in developing a relationship and parenting Amy might be interpreted as "poor parenting" on their part, and that the social workers might come to a view that they were not "good enough" and then stop the placement. The couple also said that they were concerned that if they did adopt Amy but she didn't settle quickly, then they would have to keep explaining who Amy was and why they had adopted her. John added that this might be even more obvious because Amy was Mixed Ethnicity. Amy's birth mother was White British and her father was of Black African heritage, from Nigeria. Sue shared her mixed heritage with Amy, since Sue's mother was White British and her father came over on the Windrush from Jamaica. John and his parents were White British, from Wales. Originally, both Sue and John and Sue's family had seen their mixed heritage background as a very positive advantage. Sally reminded the couple of a previous adoption preparation session when they had discussed ethnicity and cultural heritage, and talked with Sue and John about their experience and their concerns about being more visible and vulnerable to prejudice as a mixed ethnicity family. Sue said that compared to what attitudes had been like when she was growing up, things were very different now, especially in the area of London where the couple lived. Sally acknowledged that there were a wide range of issues to be thought about and that this would take time. John added that since they had last met with Sally, he and Sue had talked more about Amy's Nigerian Muslim background and realised that neither of them felt they knew enough about what this might mean for Amy.

Sally acknowledged the diversity of backgrounds and added that it was important to recognise the different experiences that Amy, Sue and John brought into forming their family. Sally said that she agreed with John and Sue that it was very important to think more about Amy's background and the implications of this when moving forward. Sally agreed to approach Amy's social worker to gather further information and ask the questions that John and Sue had thoughtfully raised, and they agreed that they would think more about this next time they met. Sally also added that the

openness Sue and John demonstrated in exploring these issues reinforced the couple's capacity to think sensitively about Amy's perspective and was strongly indicative of what they had to offer Amy.

At the end of the session, Sue and John said that they felt it had been very helpful to be able to put their feelings into words without fear of being criticised or found to be at fault. While their anxieties about Amy's placement were not completely resolved, they did feel that they had moved from being very worried about going ahead to feeling that Amy's placement had challenges and risks, but that this would be balanced against all the opportunities that would be brought by her placement with them. Exploring the three factors that make up the IFS of adoption had helped them to realise that adoption was a complex meeting of minds influenced by internal worlds, family factors, and the social GRRACCES of systemic challenges.

Conclusion

Adoption presents professionals with complex challenges in working with children who have had a range of experiences that has resulted in them entering care, having adoption as their agreed permanency plan and then being linked and matched with prospective adopters. Our IFS model combines three sets of core issues in understanding and exploring the issues that may arise – the internal world of experience for each individual that plays a part in this process, the family factors involved, and then the systemic challenges of adoption. Our integrative approach to adoption invites both practitioners and adoptive families to hold in mind both systemic and psychodynamic factors when considering the complex transition to adoptive parenthood and family life. We hope that the exploration and application of these factors for every child, prospective adopter/s and newly formed adoptive family will help move from a position of "unsafe uncertainty" to one of "safe enough uncertainty". In so doing, children and adopters should find themselves in a stronger position to explore, enable and reflect on their respective and joint experiences in a helpful manner, to open up ways to create workable solutions to what are often complex and demanding problems. The creation of a meaningful script that enables the family to come together in both their day-to-day, month-on-month and year-on-year experience could not be more important in establishing a meaningful sense of life-long security and connection.

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