

'Turning 40': a rapid review of experience, evidence, reflection, and the future

John Simmonds, OBE

Director of Policy, Research and Development, CoramBAAF

'Turning 40' is a phrase commonly used to mark a significant transition for many adults in their journey through life. It might be accompanied by celebrations on the one hand but also a level of concern that 'turning 40' brings the early stages of adulthood to an end and marks the beginning of a new phase. Whether this moment marks a recognition of the achievements of the earlier stages of adulthood in enabling and establishing a settled life can be a very significant question. Different individuals will define and have a view about this in their own specific way. For some, it may be experienced as a major test as they come to assess and reflect on the challenges, difficulties and perhaps failures of those years, accompanied by feelings of achievement, satisfaction and celebration or disappointment, loss and anxiety. At its best, it is probably a combination of the good and not so good, with a determination to learn the lessons of the past and to continue to learn and adapt into the future.

But the later years may also bring the awareness of decline, with the presence of health problems, a growing family and other challenges for both the individual, their own parents and other family members. Elliott Jaques, a Canadian psychoanalyst and social scientist, introduced the concept of a 'mid-life crisis' in 1965, although he added a few more years to its onset. Jaques proposed that the impact of the crisis may result in a range of mental health problems or other life stressors, including anxiety, loss and depression. Subsequent exploration and research rejected the notion of a mid-life crisis as a standard and predictable 'condition' brought on by age alone. For some individuals, the impact of age is significant, but the multi-dimensional context of that person's life is also highly important, and particularly the advantages and benefits that accrue to some and the risks, disadvantages and life stressors that impact on others. The interaction between the individual and the personal, social, economic, ethnic, cultural and religious circumstances in which they find themselves must be taken into account at each and every point in the life journey, including the importance of having access to support networks and resources that mitigate the stressors and risks.

The 40th birthday of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), now CoramBAAF, raises a related set of issues – celebration, achievement, change. Or disappointment, anxiety and remorse. There is no doubt that much has happened, much has

been learned and much has been achieved. But challenges continue, questions remain and uncertainty is all too familiar.

The 12 articles in this supplement (reprinted from *Adoption & Fostering* journal, 1980–2019) illustrate some of the most significant themes that have arisen over the past four decades.

Choosing a small number of representative articles from the 950 or so published to date was a challenging task. It was driven by a wish to be fair, representative and meaningful, but inevitably there were multiple reasons why in the end this came to be a personal choice. It probably would have been much more helpful to say ‘read them all and you will not be disappointed’ and of course that is still the case!¹

1. ‘ABAF in the 1980s’ by Tony Hall (1980 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857598009900106>)

BAAF was preceded by the Association of British Adoption and Fostering Agencies (ABAF) and the Adoption Resource Exchange (ARE), with the merger of those two organisations forming BAAF.

In an article written in 1980, Tony Hall, then Director of ABAF, explored the question: ‘What is the main aim for ABAF in the 1980s?’. He accepted that this was a difficult question to answer with a number of themes that needed to be brought together:

- to improve the quality of ‘substitute family care’;
- to raise standards of child care practice;
- to increase public and professional understanding of the issues involved in adoption and fostering;
- to influence the development of national child care policies;
- to provide services to member agencies;
- to train social workers and other professionals working with deprived children;
- to promote collaboration between child care agencies, and so on.

The last three words express a dissatisfaction with the list and result in Hall setting out what he advocated as the primary focus of ABAF: ‘to work with member agencies to promote better decisions about the future of children who are, or may be, temporarily or permanently separated from their families’.

The detail of this starts with the need to begin with a robust policy and practice framework for preventive care and for those children who come into care, and a safe return home to their family without indefinitely keeping them in care ‘in the vague hope that at some undefined and remote future date rehabilitation with one of the natural parents might be possible’. This builds on the research of Rowe and Lambert (1973) who identified the serious ‘drift’ in permanency planning for many children when they had not returned to their parent/s within six months of coming into care. Hall points to the urgency of robust, timely, evidence-informed and child-centred care planning as one of the critical issues that ABAF needed to focus on, including high quality professional practice. It was also recognised that services were being delivered not just by local authorities, but also by a range of service providers. This incorporates the voluntary sector, with a concern expressed at the intense pressure that these services were under from the significant changes to adoption resulting in

1. This supplement is a print, members-only publication and not for sale. John Simmonds’s introduction can be accessed on the CoramBAAF website, including links to the 12 articles discussed. Media copies are available on request from the Coram Press Office; contact Dominique.fourniol@coram.org.uk.

the rapid fall in children placed for adoption. These developments were linked to the modernisation of societal attitudes in respect of illegitimacy and single parenthood. There were also major delays due to economic constraints in the full implementation of the Children Act 1975 in establishing a comprehensive adoption service, which was not fully achieved until 2005 following the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Hall identifies the formation of BAAF as ‘an exciting and challenging one and an appropriate way of starting a new decade with the aim of creating a new organisation with the structure and capacity to tackle the rather different tasks of the eighties’.

There are multiple issues that could be addressed in exploring what was achieved over the following 10 years, as Hall notes, but of course there is the wider question now of this being the last 40 years. This special anniversary supplement provides an opportunity to explore, reflect on and learn what the system currently does well and what it does not. And given the planned for review of the care system by the Government, that could not be more timely.

2. ‘Child protection: Have we lost our way?’ by Margaret Lynch (1992 –

<https://doi.org/10.1177/030857599201600405>)

Over 40 years, one of the key factors to have become deeply embedded in children’s services is the recognition of child abuse and neglect and the emergence of the priority in establishing child protection services. Given the prominence of this set of issues now, the pathway to that recognition began in the 1970s with Kempe’s naming of ‘battered baby syndrome’ (Kempe, et al., 1984). In 1992, Dr Margaret Lynch gave a presentation to the BAAF Medical Group AGM entitled ‘Child Protection in Europe’. This was the 25th Hilda Lewis Memorial Lecture and as such provides a timely link with both Kempe and colleagues and how the child protection concept and system had evolved over 25 years to become embedded in law in England and Wales in the Children Act 1989. The lecture was published in *Adoption & Fostering* in 1992. One of its key messages is a recognition of the long-standing identification of children being maltreated, including sexual abuse, back as far as the 1850s. However, these historical concerns were commonly responded to with denial, laying blame on the children themselves, or resulted from a significant misunderstanding on the part of those who named the issues and identified the evidence of abuse.

Lynch pinpoints a number of key factors that influenced the development of the Kempe concept of ‘battered baby syndrome’ to that of a more robust and widely accepted societal recognition of the extent of maltreatment – both the specific nature of abuse and neglect and the numbers of children who experience that maltreatment. But at the same time, she identifies an emerging set of views that are seen to be discouraging. The first of these is the prioritisation of managing child protection risks rather than the universal provision of child and family welfare services to mitigate these. Prevention should be the priority, with investigation of the substantiation of harm robustly in place, whatever that might mean on an individual child-by-child basis. There are undoubtedly serious challenges in aligning prevention and support services with an investigative process that is likely to raise suspicion and distrust on the part of the family and fear of the attribution of blame. When families struggle in the care of their children, they need to trust any professionals they engage with in exploring the issues they are dealing with. Of course, in some situations, the urgency in protecting the child is the primary concern and that must be the priority. Lynch also raises concerns about the development towards decision-making and service delivery moving from ‘the balance of probabilities’ towards ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ – a much higher threshold

and one that does not lend itself easily to be focused on being supportive, where exploration always depends on a combination of what we do and do not know. Lynch continues with the exploration of a system that has become driven by ‘imported’ experts rather than local practitioners, procedural compliance rather than professional judgement, and a focus on assessment rather than the provision of therapeutic support, and many more. There are further connected issues with a final overarching need to establish a ‘dialogue with the community’ in order to establish ‘shared goals and objectives’. Lynch’s article is 28 years old and reflects her professional experiences in the years that preceded that time. Could she have written this in 2020? I fear the answer to that is a significant ‘Yes’.

3. ‘What kind of permanence?’ by June Thoburn (1985 –

<https://doi.org/10.1177/030857598500900407>)

Thoburn’s article, as with Lynch, draws on a paper presented at a BAAF residential seminar, ‘Planning into practice: social work with children and families’ (which were usually held in Swanwick, Derbyshire). The concept of permanence had become a core concept in child placement, with Thoburn drawing on her own research (Thoburn, 1980; Thoburn, Murdoch and O’Brien, 1985) in her presentation. She sets out her view that those matters that must be considered in relation to permanence for a child in care are very similar to those issues that need to be considered for a child living at home with their birth parents. The association that ‘permanence equates with adoption’ Thoburn expresses as ‘particularly sad’ and quotes a supportive paragraph from the Parliamentary Select Committee on Children in Care:

There is at the moment considerable confusion over the significance of the search for permanence in a placement. It should not have become a synonym for adoption. The search for permanence, in our view, could be accomplished in many ways including custodianship, long-term fostering, or even in some circumstances a stay in a residential home or, of course, rehabilitation with a child’s natural family.

Noting the issues of ‘drift’ identified by Rowe and Lambert (1973), Thoburn expresses concern that there was not adequate investment and development in preventive and rehabilitation services as set out in the Children and Young Persons Act 1963, where section 1 states:

It shall be the duty of every local authority to make available such advice, guidance and assistance as may promote the welfare of children by diminishing the need to receive children into or keep them in care under the Children Act 1948.

The article continues to set out the various options with 16 ‘routes’ identified in all. Identifying the right placement for each individual child is the challenge, but these must be driven by a set of core principles termed by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit (1973) as ‘psychological parenting’, defined by the child’s subjective sense of security and belonging, driven by ‘love’ and where the placement lasts until the child reaches adulthood and beyond – a ‘family for life’. The issues that needed to be explored in identifying the right placement for each individual child require a high level of professional skill and knowledge informed by evidence and access to multi-disciplinary perspectives. This is so for both the child and the family with whom they are to be placed. Thoburn notes (p. 36) that carers wanted:

. . . a consultancy service from a social worker who was basically a colleague sharing their frustrations and difficulties but also their joys and successes, and recognising their own exper-

tise and greater knowledge of detail: a sounding board off which to bounce ideas about how to solve a problem...

There are some important questions in this quotation for the current model that defines the relationship between social workers and the new family as largely supervisory. Thoburn identifies a range of problems that families face which need expert help beyond the kind of support that a social work 'consultancy service' might provide. This is so whatever the legal form and name of that placement – adoption being seen as the prime permanence option. This largely remains the case today with the formation of Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) and the establishment of the Adoption Support Fund, with a reluctance or a failure to integrate other permanence options such as special guardianship or long-term foster care. Support services need to be designed, available and delivered in a comprehensive model whatever the placement type.

4. 'The voice of the child in family placement decision-making: a developmental model' by Gillian Schofield (2005 –

<https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590502900105>)

The role of professionals in planning and decision-making for children, especially when it comes to identifying a permanent placement, is key. The focus of these plans is a combination of both life-preserving and life-enhancing issues. There are other adults who can, should and do play a significant part in this – the birth parents and birth family, the community, and over time a network of individuals, depending on the child's stage, age and circumstances. But as significant as these adults are or will be, the child must be seen to have a central role; this is summarised perfectly by the view that they must have a voice and their voice must be listened to. This duty and responsibility is set out in international treaties and in domestic legislation, particularly in England and Wales, section 1 of the Children Act 1989. In her article Schofield clearly and powerfully describes these as a set of principles, and argues that this must be informed by what we have come to know and understand from the evidence base from research on child development. Although this is introduced with the phrase 'At its simplest...' what follows is a rich and informative exploration that focuses on understanding 'the mind of the child, their thoughts, feelings and hopes for the future'. From a professional's perspective, this facilitates 'a more accurate assessment of the likely outcomes of different care plan options'. At the same time, Schofield reminds us that however professionals might approach working directly with children, they must remain sensitive to the potential of their actions or behaviour silencing the voice of the child. This is especially the case when children have experienced abuse and neglect and have become fearful of the risks that adults might pose to their safety and welfare. 'Striving to make sense of what their lives have meant to them and seeing the world through their eyes' is fundamental. Expertise must drive such practice but from the child's subjective point of view. From this point on, Schofield sets out a model of development that is comprehensive and has proved to be influential across the child placement sector.

5. 'Looked after and adopted children: applying the latest science to complex biopsychosocial formulations' by Carmen Pinto (2019 –

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575919856173>)

Pinto sets out some of the advances that have taken place in our understanding about child and adolescent development over the last 40 years, as various investigative methods have

become available that have been used in robust research studies to increase our understanding in both assessment and service development. At the same time, due to their technical detail and complexity, these developments are challenging to both understand and draw upon. The importance of engaging in such challenges is at the centre of Pinto's article when, as a psychiatrist in the National Adoption and Fostering Clinic, adopted and fostered children and adolescents are referred for help and the standard referral is typically framed as 'trauma and attachment issues'.

A case example is described of a 15-year-old adopted boy called 'Lucas' who had a range of long-standing and troubling issues, including challenging behaviour, inattention, lying, lack of empathy and poor emotional literacy. His birth parents were known to have a number of challenging issues themselves, both in child and adulthood, with his father involved in serious criminal activity and his mother diagnosed with a serious eating disorder. Both parents were addicted to heroin, which his mother continued to use during pregnancy at the age of 17. This was accompanied by all the well-known, high-risk issues for Lucas at and following his birth. To help address his addiction as a baby Lucas was placed with a foster carer and then at 10 months he was adopted. Pinto describes a wide range of serious physical, emotional, learning and behavioural challenges for Lucas in the subsequent years, both at home and at school. Autistic Spectrum Disorder became one named aspect of this and he was referred for 'attachment work' *because he was adopted*. He received intensive psychodynamic psychotherapy for five years. At the end of the therapy, Lucas said he would "rather have a spider crawl on my arm than go through this experience again".

The termination of his therapy also coincided with a diagnosis of ADHD that resulted in the prescription of a high dosage of commonly used ADHD medication. At the same time, he was also assessed using the 'Autism Diagnostic Interview' but did not meet the threshold. Five years later, a further assessment was undertaken using a different measure, but again Lucas did not meet the threshold.

The complexity and challenge in providing a robust assessment framework and evidence-based interventions are clearly indicated with Lucas. The Adoption Support Fund is a very clear example of this. However, there remains a significant set of issues in developing a more up to date and evidence-informed framework for exploring the factors that impact on children's development. This must draw on our increasing understanding of genetic and epigenetic, pre- and post-birth factors, and the multi-dimensional interactions between these elements in the context of the relational world of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The developments in our understanding are significant but implementing them into practice has some way to go.

6. 'The right to be heard' by Michael Freeman (1999 –

<https://doi.org/10.1177/030857599802200408>)

Listening to the 'voice of the child' is a key focus in the development of Schofield's developmental model (as it should be) but the challenge in doing so is clearly set out in Pinto's case study. In 1998, Michael Freeman made a presentation at a BAAF Legal Group seminar in Liverpool titled 'Whose wishes and feelings? Hearing children's views on plans for their future'. His talk was later published in *Adoption & Fostering*.

Freeman approaches the issue of 'children's voices' from a legal perspective that is 'rights' focused. The article begins with a very powerful reminder that 'If rights are important moral coinage, then there are few for whom rights are more important than those at the bottom.'

And as uncomfortable as it is to say, children at the edge of care or in care are one of those groups who are undoubtedly at the bottom. Naming, protecting and enabling their rights could not be more important drivers in service provision and intervention, and this includes a focus on 'elements of emancipation'. Hunt (1990) is quoted in the article as recognising that rights are neither 'a perfect nor exclusive vehicle for such a loosening of bonds that individual, groups or communities find themselves trapped in'. As such, there needs to be an acknowledgement that 'rights flow downhill' (Federle, 1994) – in other words from the top, whether that is Parliament, Government, the courts or policy-makers. This is a powerful and disturbing challenge given the continuous evidence from historical child sexual abuse inquiries, the Windrush scandal, the hostile environment of immigration policy and actions, Grenfell Tower or 'Black Lives Matter'. Those affected by such events or circumstances are absolutely dependent on being heard and responded to by those 'in charge', with the added complication that those 'in charge' may be implicated in the causes of those events or circumstances.

The concept of 'competence' in law and legal proceedings is a significant issue when determining whether credence should be given to a child's expression of their point of view about the matter under consideration. This starts with the game-changing judgement that established the notion of 'Gillick competence'² as set out by Lord Scarman. A competent child is defined as an individual who 'achieves a sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to understand fully what is proposed'. In addition, the child 'has sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a wise choice in his or her own best interests'. Freeman notes that this definition is likely to rule out most children and most if not all adults, whether it be the day-to-day decisions they face or 'world changing' decisions such as wars, climate change or pandemics.

The issues arising from the concept of 'competence' are stark and can be linked to those raised by Lynch in the long-standing historical denial and then evolving acknowledgement of child abuse and neglect. Freeman develops his concern about the definition of a child's competence being linked to their capacity for rationality. He notes that the dismissal of children's capacity to be rational in the 'decisions' or 'actions' they take can 'trap them into lethal silence'. A disturbing example is given where an eight-year-old boy, Lester Chapman, responded 'rationally' to the continuous physical punishment he experienced at home by running away. When he was found, the injuries inflicted by his parents were assessed by the police doctor as 'trivial'. However, if the injuries had been inflicted on an adult, they would have been assessed as constituting 'grievous bodily harm'. The doctor's assessment was accepted by the social workers despite Lester's protests about being returned home and he was, as a result, sent back. Again, he rationally responded to the threats by running away only to be found dead, trapped in sewage 400 yards away from his home. Lester's actions to protect himself can be understood as a rational response to a continuous threat. He understood in a way that no adult seemed to be able to comprehend that he was in danger and if anything, it was the absence of rational competence on the part of professionals that resulted in a highly disturbing and tragic end.

In conclusion, Freeman argues that because an individual has rights does not mean that she or he will not make mistakes. Children need to be seen as social participants in the world that develops around them, including how they come to influence and be influenced by that

2. *Gillick v West Norfolk and Wisbech AHA* (1986) AC 112

participation. Competence and rationality are very limiting concepts, especially when they create an immovable sense that the child will have to wait until adulthood before they have the competence and rationality to fully exercise their rights.

7. 'Contact between looked after children and their parents: a level playing field?' by John Triseliotis (2010 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857591003400311>)

The significance of the duty and responsibility to listen to the voice of the child could not be greater. For children in care, this is a challenging concept as they will typically have endured a set of troubling experiences with their birth parents and/or their family of origin that resulted in them coming into care. While many children will return home to re-establish and re-build their relationships, for those who have a permanence plan, that centres on an alternative family placement and the creation of a new set of relationships with all the uncertainty and complexity which this will bring. They will be faced with a number of issues that result from their experience of separation and loss, their thoughts and feelings about sustaining their relationships with their birth family and the resolution of thoughts or feelings arising from any abuse and/or neglect they have experienced.

John Triseliotis identified the emergence and recognition of questions of contact between children and significant others, and the need to resolve them, in the 20 years before his article was published. He noted the lack of evidence that enables 'a coherent and empirically based theory and guidelines' to drive best practice. As with Pinto's questioning of attachment as a core concept when it comes to understanding the emotional and behavioural development of children, Triseliotis raises similar questions when it comes to attachment as a driver for contact – 'there is much more to parenthood and child development than attachments'. He notes (p. 86) that:

Making judgements on the quality and nature of contact remains a mixture of art and science, possibly balanced more towards art ... There is also no script for parents on how to conduct themselves, what to do and what not to do, what to say and not say, and no guidelines for those supervising meetings on how to assess what they observe.

He contrasts the issues that apply to foster care, where the child's legal relationship with their birth parents endures, to that of adoption where the legal relationship is ended. As we know, the termination of that legal relationship does not by any means result in the ending of the meaning of that relationship to the child – far from it. But what this means for each child in each individual set of circumstances is a challenge to address. And this has now become a commonly experienced set of issues as the law sets out the possibility for a contact order in section 26 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.³ Social media has largely come to replace mediated contact by the adoption agency through 'letterbox arrangements'. Triseliotis acknowledges the issues raised in the evolving literature including the potential for contact in whatever form (p. 87):

... the strengthening of genealogical and physical identity; reassuring the child that the birth parent is well and continues to care; helping to assuage anxiety and possibly guilt; demonstrating love and affection; reducing feelings of loss and rejection; promoting a positive sense of self; and helping to avoid fantasising.

In conclusion, Triseliotis notes that his review ‘illustrates the difficulties of providing substitute care and the danger of unsubstantiated generalisations’. It shows that ‘while we have learned a lot in recent years, there is clearly much more to discover before we can be confident about what we do. BAAF’s work is clearly cut out.’

8. ‘The Adoption and Children Act 2002: a critical examination’ by Caroline Ball, (2005 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857590502900203>)

The duty to promote the welfare of a child in the adoption process was set out in section 6 of the Adoption Act 1976:

In reaching any decision relating to the adoption of a child, a court or adoption agency shall have regard to all the circumstances, first consideration being given to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child throughout his childhood; and shall so far as practicable ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child regarding the decision and give due consideration to them, having regard to his age and understanding.

As significant as this clause is, Ball notes that the significant delay in the implementation of the Act until 1988 created a serious problem. The model of adoption applicable when the Act came into law in 1976 had radically changed from its primary focus on babies who had been ‘relinquished for adoption’ to older children, children with special needs and those who had been maltreated. This included additional significant issues such as contact with birth parents and other family members, and the need for support services. Lowe (1997) is quoted in his recognition that ‘for many adoptive families, the making of the order, rather than being an end, is simply a very important milestone in a continuing process’. This also includes the lifelong impact of adoption into adulthood and its impact on identity and well-being. During this time there was also a major exploration of the need for modernisation of the primary legislation for children’s services, resulting in the Children Act 1989, implemented in 1991. The Act reinforced the need to modernise and align adoption with the principles underpinning the 1989 Act.

Ball identifies seven critical issues that structure the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and its alignment and amendments made to the Children Act. This is informed by research commissioned by the Department of Health or other bodies (Fratter, 1996; Howe, 1998; Lowe, Murch and Borkowski, 1999; Parker, 1999). Among the proposed areas to be amended were:

1. the welfare checklist;
2. the provision of adoption services by local authorities;
3. eligibility to adopt;
4. adoption by consent or through a placement order;
5. post-placement contact;
6. intercountry adoption and alignment with international protocols;
7. access to birth records and other information.

Ball concludes by quoting a statement from a previous article (Ball, 2002, p. 195):

If the Government is to meet its target of increasing the numbers of children adopted from care, and if, crucially, those adoptions are to have a chance of succeeding through being inclusive in nature and well supported professionally and financially for as long as necessary, the Act will have been worth waiting for.

She then reinforces this message in her 2005 article (p. 105) where she writes:

Just as many of the previous provisions have been informed by research evidence, so will rigorous research into practice under the new statutory framework be essential to inform future developments.

It should be noted that such a research programme was commissioned by the Government and then published (see Thomas, 2013).

9. 'Early years adversity, adoption and adulthood: conceptualising long-term outcomes' by Alan Rushton (2014 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575914553363>)

The significance of research informing and guiding policy and practice cannot be underestimated. However, there are also serious challenges in the way that research evidence is formulated, designed and delivered to responsibly and effectively guide policy and practice. The outcomes for children placed for adoption is one critical aspect of this – their safety, welfare, development and achievements compared to children who are brought up by their birth parents or children in other forms of family placement such as foster care or kinship care. There are also the longer-term issues, as adoption is a life-changing intervention with a lifelong impact. The multiple factors that might be taken into account in pursuing such objectives cannot be underestimated.

The British Chinese Adoption Study was based on a group of girls who had been cared for in Hong Kong orphanages in the early 1960s. They were not in fact orphans but had been 'abandoned to be found', by their mothers who had fled from China to Hong Kong as refugees. A project was established in the 1960s to arrange for 100 of these girls to be adopted into the UK. Information was available from the original initiative that allowed a research project to be established to follow up these women who were then aged from 42 to 53 years. The key question was how to meaningfully and responsibly assess the current position of each of these individual women, to link this to their early experiences and to compare it to other women in the same age bracket who had been adopted in different circumstances or those who were raised in their birth family. Rushton summarises this as:

- What constitutes an adequate conceptualisation of adult psychosocial outcomes?
- Which are the most salient means of assessment and relevant measures for adults in mid-life?
- Are there undetected differences that distinguish those who had an orphanage and adoption history from those who did not?

Some important contextual factors need to be recognised. Firstly, 72 per cent of the girls were under the age of two by the time they were placed for adoption. Secondly, the orphanage care was of a reasonable standard when compared to many such institutions, notably those in Romania. However, this did not or could not include the availability of a carer in the orphanage who was able to develop a personal relationship with a child where they were consistently available and child focused.

The assessment of the women was compared to findings from a group of women from the general UK population who were within the same age range of the Hong Kong women and adopted or brought up in their birth families. This was enabled by the National Child Development Study of 1958.

The Study used a range of well-established assessment tools to explore physical and mental health, adult life experiences and achievements, life control and satisfaction, self-esteem, the quality and significance of relationships, ethnicity and community connectedness and personality. Overall, Rushton states that ‘No significant differences (between the three groups) were found on our chosen means of assessment.’ However, it is also acknowledged that the detailed research interviews with the women strongly indicated a wide range of issues that resulted from exploring, explaining and settling their origins, their birth family and their birth family’s circumstances, their experience of being raised disconnected from their ethnic and cultural origins and the reworking of these issues into adulthood. This then returns us to questions about the sensitivity of standardised measures for specific population cohorts and specific research questions.

10. ‘Transracial adoption in Britain: politics, ideology and reality’ by Ravinder Barn and Derek Kirton (2019 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857591203600304>)

One of the most important questions to arise in the development of child placement is the significance of the child’s history and heritage in identifying a suitable match between the carers and the child. As adoption changed from the consensual placement of babies to the exploration and implementation of its use for children with special needs, older children, and those from minority ethnic backgrounds, fundamental questions were raised about the importance of identifying the child’s history and heritage and placing them in a family who reflected that history and heritage, and what the term ‘reflected’ might actually mean. These issues are not by any means confined to adoption and are equally relevant to children in foster care (Fitzherbert, 1967). However, the permanent, life-long nature of adoption has raised the prominence of these questions.

Barn and Kirton identify a specific initiative that focused on the placement of children from a minority ethnic heritage: the British Adoption Project established in 1975 (Raynor, 1970). The Project placed 53 children with a minority ethnic heritage, mostly with white families. Three evaluations of these placements (Gill and Jackson, 1983; Jackson, 1975; Raynor, 1970) paint a positive picture of these children’s development and progress at three stages – pre-school, pre-adolescence and adolescence. Commentary on these studies identified the findings as seriously flawed (Barn, 1993; 2000; Kirton, 2000; Small, 1984). One small-scale study (Tizard, 1977) found that in the families who cared for a group of ‘mixed parentage’ children living in white communities, the young people were experiencing major problems as they tried to negotiate relationships with other children, very few of whom could identify with any of them. This had been a difficulty for many of the women, who, as adults, took part in the British Chinese Adoption Study discussed above.

There is significant tension at the heart of these issues and they have been recently reignited by the death of George Floyd in the USA, resulting from almost nine minutes of significant pressure being placed on his neck by a police officer. The rising up of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ campaign across the world has reinforced the truth of the presence of continuing institutional and structural racism alongside that of micro-aggressions (Sue, et al., 2019) and unconscious bias (Benson and Fiarman, 2020). The last 40 years or so have seen challenge after challenge to these issues and they run through the specifics of child placement, whether it be the child’s right to have their history and heritage respected and promoted throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood, their right to have a family for life whatever the le-

gal order that enables this, and their right to express their views and be given a voice. Barn and Kirton conclude their article with a series of core steps (p. 130):

1. It is imperative upon social workers to ensure that a balanced approach is taken in the adoption of minority ethnic children and that crude matching is avoided.
2. It is important that a range of supportive measures are taken up to obviate the need for minority ethnic children to enter care.
3. To seriously explore varied possibilities including kinship, guardianship and foster care as valid options to achieve permanency.

And finally, they note that (p. 130):

Unless and until politicians and policy-makers begin to understand the nuanced nature of permanence and stability for minority ethnic children in care, simplistic and popular notions of transracial adoption as a 'one glove fits all' strategy will prevail. Such a notion is not only misguided, but it prevents the development of other possible solutions.

11. 'Looked after children: Can existing services ever succeed?' by Michael Little (2010 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857591003400202>)

Little sets out a powerful, if disturbing, challenge to the care system that focuses on its purpose, design and outcomes. At the timing of writing, we expect the Government to fulfil its earlier commitment to undertake a further care review. There are no details about its scope, purpose or intended outcomes but Little raises some highly relevant questions.

The first is the fundamental issue that will always be addressed in the design of any intervention: 'Do no harm.' Interventions often have to balance the harm caused resulting from specific health conditions that may be life limiting and life threatening against the known risks and uncertainties that may accompany the intervention. These issues are typically addressed in the ethical protocols that accompany the trialling of the intervention and the discussions that happen when it is approved and is being recommended to an individual as an appropriate move. Little makes comparisons with the framework that leads to children coming into care, either at the request of the parents or under the mandate of the local authority in their power to remove children in specific circumstances when they are 'at risk from abuse and neglect'. The protections associated with such interventions are framed in law, and when it comes to forceful removal of children are addressed through the due process of the law in the administration of justice. The overarching question from this is whether there is an open question about the balance of benefits and risks when it comes to each individual child in both the short- and longer-term outcomes. And there is no straightforward answer to this question that is not much better than 'it depends' or 'really we don't know'. But it is also important to acknowledge that there are similar levels of uncertainty when trying to predict the outcomes for any child where there is never a doubt about them needing to come into care.

Children's services have an overall set of objectives to protect children from harm, to promote and facilitate their health and development and to enable this to be delivered primarily through the equivalent of a family life when this cannot be with their birth family. Within this, there will be the specific issues of physical, emotional and behavioural health and well-being, learning and education, and a positive sense of identity that enables social connectedness and engagement. However, Little identifies that the systemising of children's services has led to the development of four primary deliverers of services: those that apply to

children with special educational needs; children involved in criminal activity; children with mental health problems; or those who are at the edge or in care due to abuse and neglect. He notes (p. 136) that:

... it appears to be largely accident that propels the carriage of a needy family down one of four separate sidings ... Unfortunately, what happens at the end of each line differs considerably, so children with similar problems end up getting different kinds of help.

The issue linking these four different groups of children and their families is the impact of economic, employment and housing disadvantage determined by structural and regional inequality, including minority ethnic heritage, with consequential factors such as poor physical health and mental health, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol misuse and criminality. While it is by no means certain, generational factors may also play their part. In fact, all of these issues are probabilities rather than absolute determining factors, even if the probabilities are on the high side.

Linked to these challenges, Little explores some of the evidence about the impact and consequences of the care system. These are challenging questions to answer because the possible influencing factors are broad. There is robust evidence about children who are placed for adoption, because they are typically under five and their placement plan does not prolong uncertainty. Stability of placement is very high, but we also know that the impact of maltreatment in the early years still makes a large number of those children at high risk of a range of developmental problems. Foster care is more problematic to evaluate because the child can come into care at birth and up to 17. Their plan evolves over time, can change dramatically and cannot guarantee permanence despite this being a required objective and expected outcome. Some children do well and others not so well. What determines what is difficult to predict with any degree of certainty, and that includes identifying the balance of protective and risk factors that run through each individual child's experience of care. The overarching question is the degree that the design and delivery of children's services and the control that the state exercises in that is the opposite of the ways in which families manage their journey through life. At one level this is small scale, with typically the parent/s in charge and carrying the uncertain responsibility of making this work reasonably well. The relational world is core and is made up of the routines, the unexpected and the resolution of everyday issues. There is no State supervisor and it is accepted that neither should there be. The State cannot be a 'good parent' if it can be a parent at all (Bullock, et al.; Thoburn, 2006).

12. 'Looked after children: Can existing services ever succeed? – a different view' by Ian Sinclair (2010 – <https://doi.org/10.1177/030857591003400203>)

Sinclair accepts that Little's challenge is not necessarily an action for change agenda, but rather a series of significant questions that need to be explored. The ethical challenges that Little raises about the care system being a large-scale experiment without ethical approval do not identify the place of the law and the courts in ensuring that what the State does or does not do is driven by the principles of justice. The related issue of ensuring that any intervention must ensure that it is fully compliant with the duty 'to do no harm' is in Sinclair's view not addressed in detail, although he acknowledges that the range of poor outcomes for children in care and leaving care is well known in general and specific terms. He also notes

that the care system is not one used by the ‘better off’ in society, who find other ways of addressing family crisis, emergencies and risks.

More specifically, Sinclair challenges Little’s analysis of the structure of service delivery when he says ‘universal provision is good but that does not mean that specialist or targeted provision is bad’. Any decent system of care must try to serve the needs of the many without neglecting the few who have more complex and expensive needs. This is equally true when Sinclair examines Little’s criticism of the complex and haphazard development of services. He points to the advantages of principles such as ‘the welfare of the child is paramount’ becoming touchstones where issues arise that need resolution on a case-by-case basis. There is a strong and unchallengeable argument that services should be designed and delivered on the grounds of ‘what works in what circumstances’. Consequently, Sinclair sets out a list of core issues that need to be addressed (somewhat modified by myself):

1. A robust, evidence-based focus on ensuring that the system is driven by the concept of ‘permanence’. Child, adolescent and adult development clearly identifies that there is no alternative model in establishing the conditions in which children thrive to that of a stable, secure and committed family life.
2. Adoption is the clearest model, but has to negotiate the reality that this generally only applies to younger children where the current legal framework is satisfied that the child should be adopted ‘where nothing else will do’.
3. A more robust exploration of the use of kinship care and the conditions that enable and facilitate kinship placements, particularly with the availability of Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs).
4. The development and support of foster care as a permanence option where this meaningfully becomes the child’s family that is not dependent on State approval for routine matters such as sleepovers, haircuts, school trips or teacher meetings and feedback. There is also the need for a resolution of the issues of the child’s move into adulthood when this, for most, is a period where there needs to be maximum but age-appropriate ongoing support.
5. Giving the child a voice over both routine matters and more significant issues such as school, relationships with birth family members and the development of a sound identity that tells them who they are in a subjective, meaningful narrative.
6. The operation of the system needs to reflect the complex range of individual factors that result from the age of the child, their family circumstances, the reasons they came into care and their individual health, development, well-being and any specific special needs they may have.
7. The need to train and support carers whatever their status in relation to the child – adoption, kinship care, foster care or residential care.
8. The need for a skilled and knowledgeable workforce that is confident to work directly with children and adults in a sensitive, empathetic, non-judgemental and evidence-informed way. As a part of this, they must be treated with respect and valued for what they do.
9. The use of research to ensure that there is a consistent approach in addressing complex challenges when families find themselves in serious difficulties. This must reflect individual circumstance and not be dependent on where a child or family live.
10. Learning from experience. The care system has a lot that it has both delivered and is

committed to. It does not need a complete redesign but the facilitation of open and constructive discussion followed by sensitive, supportive and deliverable services.

There is so much to reflect on from these 12 articles – and what about the rest? *Adoption & Fostering* has played a significant part in the development of what we know, understand and do. That is very clear. But there cannot be any complacency in this. We have a duty and responsibility to children and young people, to their birth families and to the carers who step into a large hole to provide the love, commitment, insight and understanding of what they need. CoramBAAF's flagship quarterly journal has a continuing role in that commitment, as the last 40 years indicate.

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In preparing this article, I read a new text drafted by Roger Bullock which explores the historical issues in relation to vulnerable children and the differing views that informed how these children were seen and responded to. The article discusses in much greater detail the significance of these issues beyond the last 40 years and is available on the CoramBAAF website at <https://corambaaf.org.uk/bookshop/adoption-fostering-journal>.

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