



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



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ABSTRACT

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

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1. Introduction

The importance of direct work with children was reinforced in the UK in the *Children Act* (Department for Education and Skills, 1989) the *Adoption and Children Act* (Department for Education, 2002) and updated in the *Children and Families Act* (Department for Education, 2014a) which outlines expectations on adoption agencies to collect information on the history of children who are in the care system and those placed for adoption. The associated draft guidance (Department for Education, 2014c) specifically states that 'all children with a plan for adoption must have a life storybook' (3.10, p. 45). This draft guidance requires that life storybooks be given to the child and adoptive parents no later than ten working days after the adoption order (Department for Education, 2014c).

Life storybooks constitute both a *process* and *product* and are based on the premise that children in care often have gaps in their biographical memory, particularly if they have experienced multiple placements (Livingston Smith, 2014). Social work interest in life storybooks emerged in the 1980s in the UK with the seminal work of Ryan and Walker (Ryan & Walker, 1985) and practice interest and guidance materials have since proliferated (Hammond & Cooper, 2013; Harrison, 1998; May, Nichols, Lacher, & Nichols, 2011; Rees, 2009; Rose & Philpot, 2005; Ryan & Walker, 2007). Whilst there is a substantial amount of practice guidance, there is a dearth of research that supports the use of life

storybooks (Gallagher & Green, 2012, 2013; Livingston Smith, 2014; Shotton, 2010; Willis & Holland, 2009) particularly related to perceived efficacy of the intervention (Baynes, 2008; Quinton, Rushton, Dance, & Mayes, 1998; Rushton, 2004). The centrality of narrative in children's biographical meaning-making and the role of life storybooks in facilitating identity development are the focus of this paper which reports interview data collected with 20 adopted children and young people.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Life story work and life storybooks

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

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

Whilst there is no research that has demonstrated an association between life story work and positive outcomes for children in care, there is research that has drawn attention to the negative impact on children and their adoptive families when life story work has been done badly or where children do not have a good understanding of their early lives (Selwyn, Meakings, & Wijedasa, 2015). Looked-after children and young people also report the importance of understanding the reasons why they came into care (Children's Commissioner, 2015). Current research suggests that 75% of children who go onto be adopted in England have been maltreated (Selwyn et al., 2015) and this sometimes results in long term trauma with associated risks for maladaptive psychological and biological development (Cicchetti & Banny, 2014). Having a coherent narrative of adverse experiences has been associated with recovery from trauma and PTSD (Adshead, 2012) and, conversely, not having a coherent account is associated with being less able to respond sensitively to one's own children later in life (Kaniuk, Steele, & Hodges, 2004) as well as later mental health problems. The way coherent narratives are created for children in care is through life story work and the development of a life story book, which, it is argued, contributes to identity construction (Cook-Cottone & Beck, 2007; Loxterkamp, 2009).

2.2. Narrative identity

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

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

Given the ubiquitously reported poor outcomes for children in the care system (Jones et al., 2011), it could be argued that enabling a strong sense of identity is crucial for this population to avoid later mental health and other socio-emotional problems, including poor educational

outcomes and offending behaviors which are significantly worse in the English looked after population than the general population (Department for Education, 2013).

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

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

Narrating the self, however, is something that children need to learn to do over time and have opportunities to practice and, it is argued, that parent-child conversations about events and emotional responses to events are crucial in building children's narrative skills and capabilities (McAdams & Janis, 2004). There is also evidence that the ability of attentive listeners being able to confirm personal stories and agree with particular interpretations of events also links strongly to an individual's ability to retain this information in long term memory (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Moreover, the listener has a role in the co-creation of the stories, as personal narratives are 'entangled' with those of other people (Welbourne, 2012, p. 81). These are essential features of narration that children in the care system are unable to experience with birth family members (as perpetrators of abuse and neglect) that can help them to process and make sense of their story. Memories are often disrupted and partial, littered with gaps in knowledge or traumatic events that prevent the child engaging in telling themselves or anyone else a coherent account of who they are and the "journey" they have taken in becoming the person they are. Whilst foster carers, social workers and adoptive parents might be able to fill this gap, they require accurate pre-care information in order to undertake this important work (and this is often not available); such third party facilitation is also challenging if the memories are not shared by the adult concerned. It is also exceptionally difficult for adults to listen to children's stories of abuse – therefore social workers and foster carers who have little training in this area tend to avoid providing this listening role to children.

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

- (i) as not locked into stability nor drifting through constant change, but rather as something that is multiple, contradictory, and distributed over time and place, but contextually and locally held together;
- (ii) in terms of membership positions vis-à-vis others that help us trace narrators' "means of showing how identities, social relationships and even institutions are produced" (Baker, 2004, p. 164); and
- (iii) as the active and agentive locus of control, though attributing agency to outside forces that are situated in a broader socio-historical context as well as in the bodies and brains. (Bamberg, 2011, p. 9).

This poses huge challenges for life storybooks that are intended to mediate the children's gaps in memory, trauma, loss and replace the

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