

In-between and beyond: moving images and finding families - using digital media in the adoption process.

Dr Maggie Grant

Research Fellow at 1) University of Stirling and 2) Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland

Address: Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, Faculty of Social Science, Colin Bell Building, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland.

Email: margaret.grant@stir.ac.uk

Professor Karen Lury

Professor of Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow

Address: School of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow, Gilmorehill Halls, 9 University Avenue, Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland.

Email: Karen.Lury@glasgow.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper explores the use of digital images as part of the adoption process. Based on a series of semi-structured interviews with adoptive parents, social workers and foster carers it explores the responses of these stakeholders and reflects on the value and affect of digital images as they are employed when a child is placed for adoption. The research reveals how the kinds of information ‘moving images’ can offer become significant, not just as introductory material for potential adoptive parents – operating within the ‘*in-between*’ space for the parent waiting to adopt and the child waiting to be placed – but as facilitating a virtual, ‘present-tense’ dialogue (*in-between* adopters, foster carers and the child) once a placement has been agreed. Another unanticipated revelation was the extent to which clips were valued *beyond* their instrumental use in these ‘in-between’ spaces and resonated within the future life narrative of the adopted child.

Keywords: adoption; digital video; life-narrative; moving images; reality effect.

Introduction: the adopted child as ‘in-between’

Any child might be understood to occupy the position of being ‘in-between’; for example, the child is ‘in-between’ infancy and adulthood. However, the child who has been ‘put forward’ for adoption clearly amplifies this sense of ‘in-between-ness’. The very term ‘put *forward*’ as a way of describing the decision that a child needs an adoptive family, implies a spatial transition, from ‘here to there’: from their current care context, most commonly their foster family, to their (potential) adoptive family. Additionally, these children are also ‘in-between’ temporally as well as spatially; situated in the precarious now of their present - their current care context - they are looking forward (to potential futures and unknown families) while carrying with them their own history and losses; relating to their birth family, former carers and, for many, traumatic early experiences.

This paper addresses the significance of moving images, in the multiple dimensions of the adopted child’s ‘in-between’ as it is facilitated by digital technologies that capture and record moving images, such as digital cameras, tablets and smart phones. Based on evidence from a series of semi-structured interviews with social workers, adoptive parents and foster carers, we reflect on the use, value and risk attached to the creation of short amateur films of children as part of the process of adoption in Scotland. We also reflect on the expected and unexpected affects of these films, as reported at different points in the adoption process.

Audio-visual materials are used in adoption work in a range of different ways. In intercountry adoptions, for example, video clips of the child in their country of origin are one way that information is shared as part of the pre-adoption health assessment, to show the child’s physical characteristics (height, visible indicators of medical conditions), milestones and interactions with caregivers, although even in this context there is a risk that some video clips may be ‘more compelling than they are informative’ (Johnson 2019: 8). Audio-visual recording is also used to document and later analyse moment-to-moment interactions between children and their carers or adoptive parents, either in parenting support interventions or for research (Caron et al 2016). In this paper, however, our interest was in the use of audio-visual materials in the process of finding prospective adoptive parents for children.

The practice of using video clips as part of family finding work was first introduced in the UK, and particularly England and Wales, in the early 2000s, as technological developments and availability led to this becoming a viable option. Previous research, based on 50 video clips used on the erstwhile (restricted access) website of the national family finding service *Be My Parent*, identified that children whose profiles included a video clip received a third more enquiries from prospective adopters than children with similar characteristics who only had written information and photographs (Grant 2011). In England video clips are used widely and have become a standard tool in family finding work (Dibben 2018; Hardy 2017), having originally conceived as a way of helping prospective adopters to learn more about children who were likely to wait the longest for families, such as disabled children, and allowing social workers to consider a wider range of families as possible ‘matches’ (Cousins 2003).

In the UK, short video clips of children are likely to be shown and shared in a limited number of circumstances: by social workers with prospective adopters on an individual basis (for example, during a home visit), at Adoption Exchange Days - events where prospective adopters can meet and hear directly from social workers and foster carers from a range of agencies about children who need adoptive families - or on the Adoption Registers. Adoption Registers in Scotland, England and Wales provide information on the secure internet platform 'Linkmaker' about children who need adoptive families and adoptive families available to children. Access to this is restricted to social workers and approved prospective adopters. The circumstances where video clips are shared are when social workers are exploring a potential match between a child/children and prospective adopters who have been assessed and approved by a registered adoption agency or, in some cases, are well advanced through the assessment process. The sharing of audio-visual information about children awaiting adoption is approached with a degree of caution, although some exceptions occur: for example, a very small number of children have been featured in mainstream media during National Adoption Week (Bletchly 2017).

This approach is in contrast, for example, to the United States, where the sharing of information in public spaces about children who need adoptive families, including audio-visual materials, is far more widespread, and where organisations routinely feature photographs and even videos of children, including in some instances teenagers, on publically accessible websites (Howard 2012; Samuels 2018). In the United States, it has been argued that intercountry adoption agencies that share information publically on the internet, such as photographs and names of children awaiting adoption, breach the child's right to privacy and that public 'photo-listing' practices place children at risk of exposure to 'individuals who inappropriately fantasise about children' (Chou et al 2007: 30). However, the circumstances in which video clips are used in Scotland are far more limited, and mirror the ways in which other written and photographic materials were already being shared.

The research undertaken here was in response to the practice of using moving images in the adoption process across Scotland, where video clips are used relatively infrequently and take up by agencies has been inconsistent. At the time of writing, eleven of 90 children (12 per cent) on Scotland's Adoption Register and seven out of 50 children (14 per cent) featured at the most recent Adoption Exchange Day had video clips as part of their profile information made available to prospective adopters (Scotland's Adoption Register, 2019, personal communication, 30 September).

The ambition with this project was two-fold; firstly, to identify what kinds of filming were already taking place and to understand how effective it was seen to be, and secondly, to provide evidence to support social workers and carers who wanted to employ moving images to aid the process of finding adoptive families for children in their care (Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland 2018). We do not address this topic from birth parents' perspectives, although we suspect that audio-visual materials could also be used more widely in facilitating connections between adopted children and birth family members, and there is some evidence of this in previous research (Neil et al 2013).

In this essay, we focus on the experiences of the current practice and reflect on the way in which moving images, which we had initially thought would be confined to the introductory function of these short films/clips, actually emerged at various stages of the child's

experience, during and beyond the emotionally charged, ambiguous, ‘in-between-ness’ when the possibility of a particular child and prospective adoptive parent(s) becoming family remains uncertain. The essay therefore explores how a number of different kinds of moving images (digital media/video clips) feature within the past, present and future of the adoption process. Thus, we reflect on the future-oriented aspects of these short films (the realised and unrealised ambitions they represent and encourage); the precarious and contested present that they inhabit; and finally, the added value of their images and sounds for the child as they provide an anchor or pivot for their life stories (see Brookfield et al 2008). Specifically, we are interested in the affective qualities of moving images – what they mean to those involved - and how the emotive impact of these sequences can be understood and appreciated within a wider context in which the over-sharing of information in the digital era is rightly a matter for concern.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with twelve interviewees: five adoptive parents (from different families), five social workers and two foster carers. The adoptive parents had all seen a video clip of the child(ren) whom they went on to adopt, and most had seen videos of other children during the process of being matched. The social workers and foster carers had all been involved in making video clips for children awaiting adoption. To understand the making and using of video clips at different stages of the adoption process, we chose to explore the issues from the perspectives of these three different groups rather than, for example, comparing the experiences of adopters who had or had not viewed video clips.

Interviewees were identified by adoption agencies (local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies) originally contacted via their membership of the Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland. Foster carers and adopters were initially contacted by their social workers. All participants were sent an information sheet about the project and gave informed consent to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio-recorded.

Prior to the interviews, the researchers attended an Adoption Exchange Day to observe the range of audio-visual (AV) materials used and exhibited by adoption agencies about children for whom they were seeking adoptive parents. This allowed the team to observe the content and exhibition practices of moving image material as it was already taking place. These observations helped inform the interview schedule by familiarising the researchers with one context in which agencies show, and adoptive parents watch, video clips.

In the semi-structured interviews, we explored the contexts in which interviewees had made or viewed video clips, their experience of making or viewing video clips, their perspectives on what was useful, what could be improved, how video clips compared to other sources of information made available to prospective adopters during the process, and how the video clip(s) had influenced adopters’ decision making. Interviews generally lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; we then used thematic narrative analysis to investigate the stories shared by participants. This analytical approach enabled us to explore events (how video clips were used, displayed and viewed), and how participants situated

these events in relation to the wider story of the child's adoption (Reissman 2008). Although language was not the primary focus of inquiry, we paid attention to how participants' ordered their accounts, and some examples of language choice or metaphor are highlighted below (Floersch et al 2010; Reissman 2008), along with the emotive responses of participants. The analysis drew out different dimensions of temporality, and the ways in which digital images of a child captured at a particular point in time may relate to the past, present and future. Emerging themes and examples were discussed and agreed by the two authors, drawing on their respective knowledge of film/media and adoption social work.

As this was an exploratory study, the findings presented below offer a snapshot of this group of participants' perspectives situated in a particular time and place. In the account below, we focus on four particular areas: first, risks and responsibilities; then the role (or potential role) of video clips as prompts for imagining the future, in creating dialogue during the period of transition into adoption and their value and limitations as records of past events.

Using video clips in finding adoptive families for children: risks and responsibilities

When a child is put forward for adoption they are accompanied by a range of discursive and descriptive materials. The first materials prospective adopters are likely to see is a written profile based on social work records and sometimes, dependent on the child, medical information. In most instances, the profile will also include one or more photographs or snapshots of the child or sibling group. At a later stage, the timing of which is dependent on the individual case worker or adoption agency, prospective adopters will also be given access to more detailed written records, such as the Child's Adoption and Permanence Report.

The inclusion or use of photographs at an early stage in the matching process is still occasionally understood to be controversial. For example, social workers in our interviews observed how practice has been changing in Scotland, including using video clips alongside written information and photographs to help introduce children to prospective adopters. One social worker, Helen, explained why she felt optimistic about these developments and the use of video clips:

I think we need to definitely be moving with the times and you know in [other social work teams] adopters wouldn't see a photograph of the child until they had been matched so we've moved massively since then [...] I honestly feel mainly positive but I think it needs to be good quality and we owe it to the children that we're family finding for to provide the best and most consistent kind of information about them to share with others.

Rhona, another social worker, noted the following about the use of photographs on 'Linkmaker'. Here she comments positively on recent changes in which photographs are now more commonly used than previously, emphasising the fact that doing so is dependent on 'trusting' potential adoptees not to be swayed by the (implicit) emotional impact of the photograph on their perception of the child.

I think things are changing quite a lot regarding adoption which is good because we used to only look at profiles or show pictures if we couldn't find families easily and

that didn't really sit with me. I thought you know [...] all children should be treated the same and given the same respect to find a family and all adopters should be given that same respect. [...] It's almost like the message was that we cannot trust an adoptive parent to make a rational decision if we show them a photo but we're desperate so we'll show you a photo hoping you don't make an irrational decision you know? And [...] I thought, well, we have to trust adoptive parents and they're not that shallow that they're going to agree a match on what child looks like.

Within the heightened context of the adoption process, the power of the visual – although here static – image is associated with a potential risk, and this risk is that the adoptive parents will act irrationally in response to affective cues from the photograph. These cues might relate, for example, to a perceived resemblance of the child to the potential adopter or to the apparent attractiveness of the child. These strongly felt but often poorly articulated responses are implicitly understood to disrupt the orderly and rational decision-making prompted by the written discourses that are otherwise provided (and, of course, controlled) by social and medical professionals. Indeed, in interviews, both social workers and adoptive parents described how the audio-visual images acted as counter-points to these written discourses. Adoptive parent Kevin, for example, observed:

I would say when you're looking at the paperwork because in sort of black and white on a black and white form you're still looking at that and the main focus is trying to make a decision about whether you are the right parent for this child and the difference I think it makes further down the line and the video had a big part in this was that all of a sudden it becomes less about adoption and our ability to be adopters and it becomes more about a child that's looking for a family.

From a positive perspective, the inclusion of a video clip is seen to balance out the information provided to the potential adopter, providing a bigger picture, as social worker Steph suggested:

I see it as part of the information exchange where everyone [social workers and adoptive parents] is making a decision. I mean people may come to different decisions obviously but the family also needs to have enough information if they're confident that they're making what's going to be a lifelong decision obviously so I see it as another type of information that you can share you know at that stage.

A similar view was echoed by a foster carer, Maria, who noted that video clips can provide a counter-narrative to the information shared via written reports:

I think it's probably good to get to see a bit of both. Things written down can look quite harsh and negative ... when you're working with a child often I find people are focussing on the difficulties they need to be working through and preparing people for, whereas you know you also need to see the real lovely boy.

Across a number of interviews, the descriptions suggest that video clips can help to shift the focus on to a specific child rather than an imagined version of a child awaiting adoption. At the same time however, the process is still associated with risk. As can be seen in the following exchange, the affective impact of images is seen as provoking an overwhelming and unanticipated response in a context in which the emotional stakes are already high.

Mark [adoptive parent]: we were very much of the impression that you know you go on to this database and it has all these profiles and these children that you can kind of go on and read about what they like and what they don't like what kind of home they're looking for what kind of thing and actually we were really quite shocked when went on there that there was photographs and videos. So we didn't think that there would be any of that and obviously when went on there and saw that was kind of a bit of game changer and [partner] actually couldn't go on there.

Karen [interviewer]: Why couldn't he go on there? Because he just thought

Mark: I think he just because he wanted them all [laughs]

It is therefore not surprising that the inclusion of moving audio-visual images in the adoption process is, in Scotland at least, far less common than the inclusion of photographs. However, as Mark indicates, he and his partner were aware of the emotional responses sparked by these moving images, and were able to contain and manage these emotions. This echoes Rhona's comment earlier about trusting that adopters can process and reflect on the full range of information provided rather than acting purely in response to affective cues. Indeed, it may recognise that these affective cues are a necessary or at least unavoidable part of any decision and that allowing these emotions to be expressed overtly – identified and discussed via the use of moving images – may actually be valuable in the ongoing dialogue between adopters and social workers in preparing for adoption.

The perception of risk is further amplified by concerns about data protection - with a fear that images may inadvertently record information, such as the name of the child's current school on a sweatshirt or tie, that might result in the child or their location being identifiable - and by the way in which images also magnify the sense in which the child put forward for adoption becomes a commodity (Samuels 2018). Although in the UK, adoption agencies do not charge for their services, nevertheless, the use of images inevitably reinforces the sense in which the child is being advertised and marketed to a pool of prospective adopters. In the contemporary context of social media, where the proliferation of (self)-promotion via images on different internet platforms (such as Youtube and Instagram) is aligned with the indiscreet nature of audio-visual images, the very real and specific vulnerability that may relate to the visualisation of looked after children in the process of adoption is understandable, if in our view, perhaps over-cautious.

In those specific circumstances where looked after children cannot live with their immediate or extended birth family, and an alternative permanent family is needed, under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 20, 'the state has a responsibility to provide alternative care.' In doing so, some level of risk is inherent in sharing information for family finding purposes. Careful consideration of how, where and with whom that information is shared helps to mitigate those risks. A proportionate and necessary approach in sharing information will take account of the child's Article 16 'right to privacy'.

The child also has a right to know what records are kept about them and their right to have access to those records. The practice guidance that was developed alongside this research addresses adoption agencies' responsibilities related to the secure and confidential storage of children's records, including video clips created during the family finding process, and

children's right to access their adoption records at age 16 (Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland 2018). More broadly, as will be discussed later, video clips record additional information about a child not easily captured in words or still images, which may contribute to life story work and children's 'right to develop an understanding of their identity as an adopted person' (Doughty et 2019: 1). The practice guidance also emphasises that in making the decision about sharing information 'the overwhelming consideration should be the views of the child, which may change and therefore need to be reviewed throughout the process' (Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland 2018: 7), in line with Article 12 that 'every child has the right to express their views on matters that affect them, and for these views to be taken into consideration.'

Looking forward: video clips as imaginative prompts

At the start of the project we had anticipated that most videos would be introductory in nature, created by social workers, keen (or as suggested, 'desperate') to place children. However, it quickly emerged that in several instances, introductory videos were only used once a match between the prospective adopter(s) and child had already been more formally agreed, although before face-to-face meetings between the prospective parents and the child had taken place. Thus the introductory aspect of the film was not necessarily the film's primary function. Rather it could provide powerful but supplementary information, allowing prospective parents to imagine how their future with the child would be.

One adoptive parent, Mark, described viewing a video with his partner on Scotland's Adoption Register. Although this was not the child they went on to adopt, the video clip served as a way of moving from the assessment part of the adoption process to thinking more concretely about a child joining their family:

I remember the first time we went on there was a video of a little boy and then he was making the foster carer make breakfast and that was the first video that we'd seen and that kind of stuck with me that that was quite we were like, oh god, these are little people like that, I think that was the first point where like okay this has just got really real.

Here, Mark vividly describes the affective impact of the video, its reality effect (the '*really real*') and how important this may be for adopters during the often long process of adoption, where potential parents may have been preoccupied or focused on meeting requirements and may have lost sight of the real child that they will be taking on as a life-long commitment.

Another adoptive parent Heather, discussed how she and her partner engaged with a video that had been initially made as an introduction (in part because the child had complex medical needs) but actually served as supplementary information and reassurance for both parents, after the initial matching process had been completed.

I think well we'd been on this massive long journey to parenthood and this was gonna be our child it was kind of the only connection we had with him. [...] we had three or four photos and this video, and video shows you so much more about someone's personality and all of that doesn't it?

Watching the young child and his carers negotiate his additional needs was pivotal for Heather and her partner's sense of how their future might be with the child, giving them a sense of what 'they were getting into'.

I could see that he literally had no attention span [laughs]. You know more so than would be normal for a child of that age [...] And also because he had an oxygen tank at the time um which it was about 25 metres long the tube that was attached to his nose so yeah it was just watching how he moved around with that, that was quite good for giving us our additional technical information of like, because we were starting to wonder how were we gonna manage.

Here the introductory clip allows the parents to imagine or look to their future with the child (or, '*how were we gonna manage*'). When parents and children are caught in the limbo of their anxious present (of which more below) the introductory video's function is not always or strictly introductory, but a vehicle through which parents may imagine and plan for a future with the child they have already committed to. Emma, Heather and Mark, for instance, all commented that they had watched these short clips 'countless times' in the period before their children were settled with them permanently. As Emma notes:

We watched it loads of times and then we recorded it so we could watch it on our phones you know and all that sort of thing ... we watched it over and over.

The clips' value as imaginative prompts during this in-between period was not diminished even when the children had changed since their appearance on the video – for example, by the time Heather and her partner had adopted their young boy he no longer required the additional oxygen. Reflecting on the value of moving images, Heather comments on the difference between a snapshot and the video clip:

I don't know there's just something about it that it's moving because a photograph's just a snapshot and it could be any moment in time and I've been thinking about photos that I've taken since where he looks a little bit happy and sunny in the kind of photo and I think 'oh my god that was a horrendous day'. You know so it's not always truthful a photograph is it, but you could see he was stumbling over he was having a wee temper, I think that was quite useful as well to see how the carer dealt with his frustration.

Here Heather clearly articulates the sense in which the video clip, as a short sequence of moving images is not just 'any moment in time'. As a short narrative, the sequence of moving images provides a sense of its own time and a wider context and this underpins a greater confidence in the moving images' veracity. As Heather observes, 'it's not always truthful a photograph'. As we will suggest below, the reality effect of *moving* images is a key aspect of their value in this context, which in this instance provides an opportunity for the parents to witness how their child's real behaviour might be managed in the future - as they anticipate and observe how they could negotiate that 'wee temper'. (For details of the 'reality effect' as it relates to actuality or documentary moving images see Nichols [1992] and Kavka and West [2004]).

Transitions, limbo and video clips as dialogue

Children and adoptive parents both experience the adoption process as one filled with anxiety and anticipation (Boswell and Cudmore 2014; Grant et al 2019). The present within this process is the period after matching and before the child moves to live with the prospective adopters, and in this period of waiting, as suggested above, clips that were initially intended as introductory are often watched repeatedly and allow parents to anticipate and imagine a future with the child.

In some instances, however, a different category of video clip facilitates a present-tense virtual dialogue between the potential parents and child. Our interviewees revealed how some adoptive parents, foster carers and children produced responsive video clips within this transition phase: clips that would be exchanged between adoptive parents and carers while both parents and child waited for the decision making processes that would allow the child to be relocated to be completed. The impact of these ‘response clips’ and the sense in which they provide a seemingly present-tense relationship is dependent on the para-social qualities of video as an audio-visual medium that is easily reproducible, immediate and intimate (see Horton and Wohl 1956; Silverstone 1994; Giles 2002; Marriott 2007; Rasmussen 2018). As an adopter explained, recalling the period directly before her son joined their family:

We had another response video, which was the cutest thing in the world because [...]the foster carer filmed him sitting on a beanbag with a biscuit watching us on telly, so we got a video with us on his telly with us watching him. [transcriber notes: ‘sounds particularly emotional in a joyful way here’]. That was about a week before he was moving in, she was showing him the video to say ‘look at this’ and do the preparation for moving and basically these people are gonna turn up at your house next week, don’t be freaked out, and they’re called Mummy and Daddy you know so that’s a big thing for her to do.

Although there remains a sense in which the participants here are all still looking to or preparing for a future that is yet to come, the looped nature of this virtual dialogue – where the child who is watching their potential parents on television is filmed so that the parents can then watch the child watching and responding to them – is facilitated by the digital origin of these moving images, which allows for their relatively easy reproduction and transmission by non-professionals. The clip’s similarity to and presentation on television allows these clips to adopt the formal qualities of television as an aesthetic form - as a domestic medium, television is characterised by features such as direct address, and an emphasis on the ordinary and the everyday. This enables a mode of communication that is distinctively accessible, intimate and immediate. The immediacy of the moving image – where it is always apparently ‘happening now’ is further amplified by these particular sequences’ intimacy and relevance for their specific audience as the events depicted appear to be ‘happening for me’ - that is, for the child or for the parents.

This kind of exchange provides a clear sense of a medium specific temporality within this emotionally volatile transition period. Of course, in this in-between, or present-tense limbo where the child and parent must wait, the only available or appropriate interaction between child and parent has always been through some kind of mediated communication or virtual

exchange. Previously, such communication might have been restricted to letters or introductory booklets made by prospective adopters that included photographs and sometimes the recorded voice of the prospective adopters, for example, reading a bedtime story. The value awarded to the ‘response video’ by our interviewees reveals how important it is that these are images that *move*, for while they are obviously a record of an event that is now in the past, each time the video is played (in the viewer’s presence) the events depicted appear to be happening again and apparently happening *now*. A photograph, as a still image, could not work in this manner. The recorded voice, while no doubt important, will be isolated in terms of context without the expression, mannerisms and visual cues underpinning the emotions of the speaker. The response video as an audio-visual moving sequence therefore offers all participants the potential to experience a present-tense exchange that offers a more complete ‘time and time again’ in which the events, conversations, singing, tears and ‘hellos’ unfold as if they were in the present. Again it is the performative, aesthetic and emotive aspects of the moving-image sequences that are significant. In these instances, the digital clips orientate individuals towards one another, allowing or preparing them for a particular kind of embodied intimacy.

Looking back: life story narratives and shifting perspectives

The process of adoption creates a very distinct sense of being in-between for the child: in-between homes, in-between families and in-between the before and the supposed ‘happy ever after’ of the adoption narrative. As we have suggested, moving images can provide different individuals – children, foster carers, social workers and potential parents – an opportunity to look to the future and also to relieve anxieties in the present. However, as Gupta and Featherstone (2019: 3) observe; ‘As one adopted person put it, “the adoption feeling” is an on-going feature of one’s life. This can encompass feelings of loss, rejection and something being missing as well as anger.’

In this final section we want to explore the significance of digital moving images for the after-wards of adoption and how they may have value within the lived experience and in the on-going identity building of the adopted child-teen-adult. In these instances, moving images can be seen to provide a significant and affective anchor to their past for children who may otherwise have little to remind them of this crucial stage in their lives.

Both social workers and adopters referred to the use of video clips as a tool for helping children to understand their histories. In one of our interviews, a social worker, Rhona, who was revisiting a family that she had previously been involved with to explore placing another child, reflects on the value of this kind of clip for a little girl who was adopted nearly four years previously. The adopters told her the child had just watched the video clip again the previous weekend.

It’s actually helped her develop a narrative for her life story through watching the video ... she’s six now and she came into her family when she two and a half and she still watches it and she’s like at one of the bits she was seeing Mr Tumble or she was laughing and you hear me laughing and I just say ‘oh what a wee cracker you are’ and she loves that bit and you know all the validation ... [H]er Dad has said this is my

favourite bit and you know she gets all excited like ‘Dad, Dad, is this still your favourite bit?’ It’s just become hugely significant.

The qualities of the moving image – its apparent veracity, repeatability and accessibility, making it meaningful or readable whatever the age of the child – make it highly significant in this act of remembering. This remembering however, is always in itself present tense, and is never finished and is not always, necessarily unequivocally happy. As Brookfield et al suggest of photographs, moving images are ‘important not simply as mementoes of the past or in terms of what they directly depict, but rather as the anchor point for a range of potentially contestable and contesting narratives of the past, which simultaneously project possible futures’ (2008: 485).

Like the photograph, the digital clip’s value emerges here as a prompt for a conversation that looks back, a legacy of sorts: something that is remembered and reviewed not simply by the child but as part of a shared narrative with others. As the little girl asks, ‘Dad, Dad is this still your favourite bit?’ she is looking for validation not so much over her own past but in its (re)telling. If, as Brookfield et al suggest, ‘the status of the story that the adoptive parents are called on to tell *about* the child’s past is self-evidently incomplete and more obviously an exercise in merging fiction with bureaucratic fact (e.g. in the form of case files)’ (2008: 476, original emphasis) then the video clip has particular kind of resonance. On the one hand, it appears and feels very real - an attribute applied by several of our interviewees – on the other hand, its ability to capture spontaneous and possibly unanticipated (re)actions (such as laughter) which would normally be left out of factual accounts of the child, mean that its function is less documentary - about the real - and more performative, in the sense originated by J.L. Austin and employed later by Judith Butler (Austin [1955] 2011; Butler 1988) The performative attributes of the clip refer not just to the capture of a performance by the child (the ‘wee cracker’ originally performing perhaps for the camera) but the viewing and sharing of the clip as a performative act. The vivid and compelling nature of the clips when (re)viewed in the after-wards of the child means that they escape a purely illustrative function (that was how you looked like then) and can act as an anchor for a performative dialogue between the father and child (‘Dad, Dad...’) where the identity of the child is confirmed and validated.

Of course, this uninhibited pleasure in reviewing the past is not shared by all adoptive children. As Heather comments, her son regards the earliest video they have of him with embarrassment:

He just looks at it and goes ‘ugh who is that baby?’ [laughs] that’s you! That’s when you lived at your foster carer’s and he goes ‘that’s so embarrassing’ [laughs] he thinks its really weird because I think part of it is that he struggles really with his connection to that part of his life as well, because it does form part of his life story and that’s always hard for our kids to confront that part of their past, he has a lot of questions, but it’s almost like yeah he externalises it and sees it as a different child.

This too is a familiar response from many children to earlier images of themselves and this kind of embarrassment is not unique to the adoption process or to the adopted child. However the specific embarrassment felt here by the little boy may be in part because he feels that the images reveal a less than auspicious history, one where, implicitly (and actually) he was less able than his peers (‘that baby’). As Heather also explains, it may also be related to the video’s

inclusion of other individuals who are now strangers; the foster carer and social worker captured in the film are no longer in touch with the family and therefore cannot be claimed or identified comfortably by the child.

This reminds us that the resonance and significance of moving images for any individual adopted child will be bound by their particular circumstance, by the context of viewing and that however rich these audio-visual sequences may be in terms of contingent detail, they cannot provide answers to all questions, concerns and fantasies the child may have about their identity. They are evidence but that evidence is partial and open to mis-identification and interpretation; as Heather suggests, 'Maybe it's one for when he's a bit bigger and he's going through his identity in detail.' This looks forward once again, to a (re)viewing of the film, suggesting that these clips retain their value, serving as an opening to the past. This opening does not determine that there will only be one narrative told by the film, but that it may be used in many different ways and at different times by the child and his or her family.

This perspective reinforces the idea of adoption as a lifelong experience, with adopted people's views shifting as they pass through different life stages (Brodzinsky et al 1993; Triseliotis et al 2005). Within that timeframe, the introductory video clips we have focused on here – created at the time when agencies are seeking an adoptive family – are only one of a variety of potential digital methods. For example, life story work with young people might include activities such as creating soundscapes, recording interviews or even developing a 'podwalk' around places that have been important to them (Hammond and Cooper 2017).

Beyond the image: adoption as a lifelong experience

Just as adoption is not a simple 'happy ever after' panacea (Gupta and Featherstone 2019) for children, whose life stories include the people, events and experiences from their lives before and after they joined their adoptive families, video clips are not magical repositories of the truth that can answer all a child's questions. Instead we argue that audio-visual materials are one instrument that can be used to achieve a range of purposes within the process of becoming and being an adoptive family.

As well as helping social workers to share more of the 'really real' of the child in the present, video clips may help prospective adopters' imagine the future, and move from envisaging adopting *a* child, to anticipating becoming *this* child's adoptive parents. Using audio-visual materials, alongside other information, requires social workers to trust that prospective adopters can recognise and not simply react to the more compelling aspects of what a video clip shows or obscures. It recognises that emotional responses are a necessary and indeed an inevitable feature within the adoption process. The ability of moving images to represent and evoke the inarticulate elements present within communication, such as the subtle cues of body language and gesture, or the qualities of sound and voice, mean that they can act as more than supplement or illustration to the official documentation related to the child. Given that these materials are shared with adopters only at the point where they have completed a lengthy process of approval (or are close to doing so) and where they have committed to taking on the lifelong rights and responsibilities of parenthood, with all the additional tasks that adoption involves on top of ordinary parenting, this does not seem unreasonable. It may aid the task of 'matching' in David Quinton's use of the word, where matching children and adopter(s) is not an event but a process, and so is not 'primarily a matter of finding adopters who have the capacity to meet needs' but rather 'the process by which adoptive parents *come to meet* the

needs of adopted children' (Quinton 2012: 100-101; original emphasis). This process relies on assessments and support that evolve along with the needs of children and adopters.

Beyond this, video clips can help children to see a version of their past, which then may become part of their present, acting as a prompt for re-telling stories and seeing oneself through other's eyes, or in re-framing their past lives. This may then influence their future by shaping their understanding of how they came to be who they are. Adoption challenges normative concepts of family as people bound by biological links and, as a result, adopted people have additional aspects that need to be taken into account in understanding themselves and their origins. As Brodzinsky and colleagues observe:

Adoptees have a particularly complex task in their search for self. When you live with your biological family, you have guideposts to help you along. You can see bits of your own future reflected in your parents, pieces of your own personality echoed in your brothers and sisters. There are fewer clues for someone who is adopted. (Brodzinsky et al 1993:13)

This idea is not new, with research reaching back several decades that recognises and normalises adopted people's curiosity about their origins (McWhinnie 1967; Triseliotis 1973; Triseliotis et al 2005), and the task of adoptive families in acknowledging, without pathologising, the differences in how their family was formed and the resulting questions adopted children are likely to have (Kirk 1964). As noted earlier, video clips can provide only a partial picture of a child's history, as recorded at a particular time and in a particular place. But for a child who is adopted, they may offer, if not a guidepost, then at least some clues which may be meaningful in themselves or as a starting point for important conversations.

There are limitations. Unlike photographs or letters, video clips are unlikely to have written annotations that may, both in content and in the affective nature of handwriting, prompt recollections and reflections and provide further information. Technology also continues to develop, and has already reached the point where the format in which some video clips are stored or the equipment required to access them is becoming obsolete or expensive to maintain. As noted earlier, however compelling these audio-visual sequences may be, the information they provide remains partial and incomplete.

Adopted children's interest in and preoccupation with questions about their origins and pre-adoption lives vary: they may desire or seek out information at different times, and with different purposes in mind, or they may never chose to seek additional information beyond that which is readily available. But if being adopted is, for some, in Brodzinsky and colleagues' words, a 'lifelong search for self', where a sense of being in-between resonates well beyond childhood, then audio-visual clips and the glimpses of a child they provide may aid this search.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the University of Glasgow for funding this research. In addition, our research draws on work to produce a good practice guide for social workers, which was funded by Big Lottery Awards for All Scotland. Thanks also to colleagues at the Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland, Dundee City Council and the project Advisory Group.

References

- Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland (2018), *Using video clips in finding adoptive families for children: a practice guide*, Edinburgh: AFA Scotland.
- Austin, J.L. (2011), *How to do things with words: the William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bletchly, Rachael (2017), 'Alfie, 6, finds his 'forever' family as he reveals he's found a loving home a year after featuring in adoption campaign', *Mirror Online*, 15 October 2017. Available at: https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/alfie-6-finds-forever-family-11348362?ICI=FB_mirror_vid. [Accessed 3 October 2019]
- Boswell, Sophie and Cudmore, Lynne (2014), 'The children were fine': acknowledging complex feelings in the move from foster care into adoption, *Adoption & Fostering*, 38(1), pp.5-21.
- Brodzinsky, David M., Schechter, Marshall and Henig, Robin Marantz (1993). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*, New York: Anchor.
- Brookfield, Helen, Brown, Steven D. and Reavey, Paula (2008), 'Vicarious and post-memory practices in adopting families: The re-production of the past through photography and narrative', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 18, no. 5 (2008): 474-491.
- Butler, Judith (1988), 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (4): 519-531.
- Caron, EB, Weston-Lee, Patria, Haggerty, Danielle and Dozier, Mary (2016), 'Community Implementation Outcomes of Attachment and Biobehavioral Catch-up', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 53, pp. 128-137.
- Chou, Shihning, Browne, Kevin and Kirkaldy, Melanie (2007), Intercountry Adoption on the Internet, *Adoption & Fostering*, 31(2), 22-31.
- Dibben, Elaine (2018), 'Adoption: knowledge and practice hub', *Community Care Inform*, 28 February 2018, available at: <https://www.ccinform.co.uk/knowledge-hubs/adoption-knowledge-and-practice-hub/> [Accessed 3 October 2019].
- Doughty, Julie, Meakings, Sarah and Shelton, Katherine (2019). Rights and relationships of children who are adopted from care, *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 33(1), 1-23.
- Floersch, Jerry, Longhofer, Jeffrey. L., Kranke, Derrick and Townsend, Lisa (2010), Integrating thematic, grounded theory and narrative analysis: A case study of adolescent psychotropic treatment, *Qualitative Social Work*, 9(3), 407-425.
- Giles, David C. (2002), 'Parasocial Interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research', *Media Psychology*, Vol. 4:3, pp.279-305.

Grant, Margaret (2011), *Seeing the Difference? Using video profiling in family finding*. London: BAAF.

Grant Margaret, Whincup Helen and Burgess Cheryl (2019) *Perspectives on kinship care, foster care and adoption: the voices of children, carers and adoptive parents*, Research report for the study 'Permanently Progressing? Building Secure Future for Children in Scotland', Stirling: University of Stirling.

Gupta, Anna and Featherstone, Brid (2019), 'On hope, loss, anger, and the spaces in between: Reflections on living with/in adoption and the role of the social worker', *Child & Family Social Work*, online first edition: <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12674>

Hammond, Simon and Cooper, Neil (2013), *Digital life story work: Using technology to help young people make sense of their experiences*, London: BAAF.

Hardy, Ruth (2017), 'Adoption family finding: tips for writing a child's profile', *Community Care*, 11 December 2017. Available at: <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2017/12/11/adoption-family-finding-tips-writing-childs-profile/> [Accessed 3 October 2019]

Horton, Donald and Wohl, R. Richard (1956), 'Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance', *Psychiatry*, Vol. 19:3, 1956, pp. 215-229.

Howard, Jeanne (2012), *Untangling the Web: the Internet's Transformative Impact on Adoption*, New York: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. Available from: <https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/publications/untangling-the-web-the-internets-transformative-impact-on-adoption/> [Accessed 4 October 2019]

Johnson, Dana (2019), *Adoption Advocate, no 131: The Role of Pre-Placement Medical Review in Contemporary Adoptions Setting Expectations, Assessing a Child's Needs, and Supporting Successful Family Formation*, Alexandria, VA, USA: National Council for Adoption.

Kavka, Misha and West, Amy (2003), 'Temporalities of the Real: Conceptualising Time in Reality TV' in S. Holmes and D. Jermyn (eds.) *Understanding Reality Television*. London: Routledge. pp. 136-154.

Kirk, H. David (1964), *Shared fate: A theory of adoption and mental health*, London: Collier-Macmillan; New York: The Free Press of Glenco.

McWhinnie, Alexina M. (1967), *Adopted Children: How they grow up*, London: Routledge & Kegan.

Marriott, Stephanie (2007), *Live Television: Time, Space and the Broadcast Event*, London: Sage.

Nichols, Bill (1992), *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Quinton, David (2012), *Rethinking Matching in Adoptions from Care: A Conceptual and Research Overview*, London: BAAF.

Rasmussen, Leslie (2018), 'Parasocial Interaction in the Digital Age: An Examination of Relationship Building and the Effectiveness of YouTube Celebrities' in *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, Vol 7:1 pp. 280-294.

Riessman, Catherine Kohler (2008), *Narrative methods for the human sciences*, Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.

Samuels, Julia (2018), *Adoption in the Digital Age: Opportunities and Challenges for the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Silverstone, Roger (1994), *Television and Everyday Life*. London: Routledge

Triseliotis, John (1973), *In search of origins: The experiences of adopted people*, London: Routledge.

Triseliotis, John, Feast, Julia and Kyle, Fiona (2005), *The Adoption Triangle Revisited*, London: BAAF.

Authors

Dr Maggie Grant

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4077-5890>

Research Fellow at 1) University of Stirling and 2) Adoption and Fostering Alliance Scotland

Address: Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, Faculty of Social Science, Colin Bell Building, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland.

Email: margaret.grant@stir.ac.uk

Professor Karen Lury

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3634-6965>

Professor of Film and Television Studies, University of Glasgow

Address: School of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow, Gilmorehill Halls, 9 University Avenue, Glasgow G12 8QQ, Scotland.

Email: Karen.Lury@glasgow.ac.uk